PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2001–02

COMPRISING PERIOD
7 May 2002—16 May 2002

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7 May 2002

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2001]

FIFTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 385**

SIXTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2001-2002

House of Commons

Tuesday 7 May 2002

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

NHS Trusts

1. **Mr. James Plaskitt** (Warwick and Leamington): What changes he plans to make to the system for auditing spending by NHS trusts. [52772]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): All NHS trusts are currently subject to an annual external audit of their financial statements by independent auditors appointed by the Audit Commission. That will not change, although a new commission for health care audit and inspection will be created from the current functions performed by the Commission for Health Improvement, the value-for-money studies of the Audit Commission and the private sector health care work of the National Care Standards Commission. I expect the new commission to be in place, so that it can audit NHS performance, by 2003–04.

Mr. Plaskitt: How will my right hon. Friend strike the right balance between ensuring that everyone who uses NHS services can see the benefits of increased investment, and not impeding professional choice or adding unnecessary bureaucratic burdens?

Mr. Milburn: As my hon. Friend suggests, if people are putting more money into the national health service, it is important that they see what they are getting out of it. The truth is that, at the moment, we have a fairly bureaucratic and fragmented system of inspection. That system has evolved in the past few years, but because it is fragmented it weakens inspection. We have an opportunity to combine in a new, strengthened system the integrity and independence of all the various organisations that contribute to regulation not just of the NHS but of the private sector. That system will make the issue of where the money goes and how performance is improving much more transparent to the public.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): Does the Secretary of State accept that Mrs. Drew, a constituent of mine, would welcome a thorough audit as soon as possible of the spending of Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals NHS trust? On 19 April, she was interviewed by the oncology department consultant in the hospital's new unit, which was opened in February. Unfortunately, she was informed that she has cancer; she was also told that she must be treated at North Middlesex hospital, in Edmonton. Although the new unit at Chase Farm is fully equipped to provide her treatment, there is no funding, and North Middlesex hospital is the only alternative to provide her six-month treatment. When such mismanagement is revealed, how can she have faith in the Government's claim that they are providing services for patients?

Mr. Milburn: I have every sympathy with the plight of the hon. Lady's constituent, and if she cares to write to me, I shall look into the matter. However, she might be aware of the horns of the dilemma that she and her hon. Friends now face. She says that she wants more investment, but she voted against it a fortnight ago.

She cannot have her cake and eat it. Does the national health service need more investment, or not? Our answer is yes; what is hers?

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): My right hon. Friend will know that the vast majority of hospitals have excellent accounting arrangements and offer exceptional value for money for the NHS system. Some, however, have been unable to meet the Government's strict requirements, and have had to be franchised. How is the franchising process progressing, and when will the Dartford and Gravesham acute trust, in particular, receive some news on when the process is likely to be completed?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is aware of the good work being carried out in his local hospital, as well as some past problems with its management and organisation. As he says, a franchising process is under way, and I hope to finalise it before too long. In all parts of the national health service, it is very important that, where there are persistent problems with performance, poor management and lack of organisation, they be dealt with. Every part of the NHS deserves the best management because, as he knows, good management makes a huge difference.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is unfortunate that, although the audits tell us that money is being properly and legally spent, they offer no guidance on issues of policy? For example, how much extra does the provision of agency nurses, rather than ordinary ones, cost the health service? How much does the existence of hospices save the health service, given that 72 per cent. of the money comes from voluntary donations? Given that the NHS is not a profit-making organisation but a public body, should not the audit provide wider interpretations of what is happening, where money is being spent, how it could be saved, and the ways in which it has not been saved?

Mr. Milburn: That is precisely the idea behind our proposed new audit arrangements. Obviously, the new commission for health care audit and inspection will require legislation, and that will be a matter for debate in the House. The idea is that, for the first time, one organisation will be responsible for examining clinical standards throughout the health service; for considering performance issues, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) rightly described as important; and for considering where NHS money is actually spent—the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises. The public, who put money into the national health service, will therefore know where it is going and the results that accrue from it.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): Does the Secretary of State accept that any strengthened and reformed audit system should look at strengths as well as weaknesses? Will the new system be used to promote success, using the staff and the trusts that develop good and modern practices?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He knows as well as I do of the many examples of good practice in the NHS. Part of the function of the existing Audit Commission and Commission for Health Improvement, to which I pay tribute today, has been to highlight good practice as well as poor practice, so that others can learn from that. That will also be part of the new commission's function. We need to ensure that all parts of the NHS, and every patient, have high standards of treatment and care, and that taxpayers are assured that they are getting a good deal from the extra money going to the NHS.

Cottage Hospitals

2. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement on the future of cottage hospitals. [52773]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): Cottage hospitals continue to make an important contribution to the delivery of the NHS plan by providing care closer to home. We expect them to be key players in meeting our target of introducing an additional 5,000 intermediate care beds by 2004.

Michael Fabricant: I am grateful for the Minister's answer, which is typically feisty in support of cottage hospitals. The 5,000 beds may make a small dent in the 50,000 care home beds that have been lost since the Government came to power. The Minister will know that the future of the cottage hospital in Burntwood is in considerable doubt. Indeed, I wrote to the Minister of State on 24 January on that point, but he still has not replied to me. As for Lichfield, the Minister will know that on 15 May the Burntwood, Lichfield and Tamworth primary care trust will recommend the building of a new hospital in Lichfield. Will that new hospital be funded by a private finance initiative, which the local people and the primary care trust do not want?

Ms Blears: As the hon. Gentleman knows, extensive local discussion has taken place about re-providing excellent facilities for his constituents. The proposals are for a new community hospital with 52 in-patient beds, rehabilitation facilities, out-patient, diagnostics and X-ray equipment, a pharmacy, a minor injuries unit, a renal satellite dialysis unit and, I hope, a maternity unit—all under Labour. The hon. Gentleman asks whether the hospital will be funded by a PFI or by traditional procurement. He wants the money and the investment, so I am pleased that on his website he said that the Budget was good for the NHS. If that is the case, why did he not vote for it?

Jim Knight (South Dorset): My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the future of the cottage hospital in Swanage is secured, following the opening of a day surgery unit there in the past 12 months. However, the lack of decent, affordable public transport for patients and visitors—especially from rural areas—to that hospital remains a problem. What steps are her Department and others taking to improve that situation?

Ms Blears: My hon. Friend is right. Providing care closer to home means that patients and their families need to be able to reach facilities as quickly as possible. We have a project that is examining transport across the board to see how we can get people to out-patient and diagnostic appointments. Perhaps we need a revolution, with

consultants going to the patients rather than it always being the other way round. My hon. Friend makes an important point and we are on the case.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I support the case put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for cottage hospitals and their funding. Is the Minister aware that the Congleton and District War Memorial hospital was funded by subscriptions from people who paid a penny a week from their wages, that we have fought closure on more than one occasion, that the services at that much valued local facility have changed over the years and that local people want it to continue? Will she give her support to the health authority for the hospital to continue to provide services for all local people?

Ms Blears: I am delighted that the hon. Lady's constituents treasure and value that hospital, which is part of their NHS. It is important that we have a wide variety of services, including acute trusts and local cottage hospitals. As the NHS develops, so the role of cottage hospitals will become more important in providing recuperative care, day surgery facilities and a range of new ways of delivering services. That is why the new investment is important, together with the reforms, so that the hospitals continue to have a vibrant role to play. I am not aware of the specific details about Congleton, but I shall respond to the hon. Lady in writing. However, she must recognise that for her hospital to be maintained, she has to approve the extra investment going into the service.

Mental Health Services (Birmingham)

3. **Lynne Jones** (Birmingham, Selly Oak): If he will make a statement about funding for child and adolescent mental health services in Birmingham. [52774]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): In the past three years, we have invested some £85 million across the national health service and local authorities for child and adolescent mental health services.

Birmingham has received significant investment for those services during that time and has been allocated £549,000 from the West Midlands modernisation fund to develop an acute assessment unit due to open later this year.

Lynne Jones: May I thank my hon. Friend for the substantial increase in the resources that are now coming through for this vital service for children? Does she agree that it is not just funding that is a constraint but the desperate shortage of psychiatrists and other therapists? Furthermore, as my inquiries into the service provided by the Children's Trust in Birmingham seem to indicate, management is poor and protocols inconsistent. When the Commission for Health Improvement visits the trust in the near future, will my hon. Friend ask it to pay particular attention to those matters, especially in relation to the suspension of one consultant psychiatrist? She was able to manage her work load and keep waiting lists down so that the children did not languish on waiting lists for up to two years, as is the case for children in my constituency. Might I add that that is not the first suspension by the Children's Trust that has caused me concern?

Jacqui Smith: I agree that we need to address the issue in several ways. My hon. Friend is right to say that there is a challenge in recruiting and retaining the skilled staff that we need to provide child and adolescent mental health services. There is also a challenge, as she suggested, particularly in Birmingham, in managing resources effectively. Work is under way to build on the four new primary care trusts as localities for delivering child and adolescent mental health services.

Finally, we must also consider other examples. Solihull, near my hon. Friend's constituency, is reorganising the way in which it offers child and adolescent mental health services and considering in particular tier one, early intervention and ways in which other professionals can be used to help support children and families who have mental health problems. In that way, we can deliver a better service for my hon. Friend's constituents and throughout the country.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): What are the plans for the provision of secure units in Birmingham and elsewhere for severely mentally disabled and ill people, many of whom end up, quite wrongly, in prison?

Jacqui Smith: As I suggested in my first answer, the regional specialist commissioning group has allocated £549,000 from the West Midlands specialist modernisation fund to develop an acute assessment unit at the Park View clinic in Moseley, Birmingham, which is due to open later this year. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that, with young offenders, it is also important to ensure better joint working between youth offending teams and the child and adolescent mental health services. In addition, we are investing in mental health services in prisons and for young offenders so that they receive the treatment that they need when in prison in a way that has not happened previously.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Does the Minister also recognise that many young people with mental health problems never reach the health service? Often, in constituencies like mine, their problems arise from traumatic experiences overseas from which they have fled, and they report their concerns in schools? What work is my hon. Friend doing with the education service to ensure proper care for children and adolescents with mental health problems such as those?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is crucial that we work across the agencies in a better way than we have done previously. First, we shall include in the national health service framework for children work on standards to improve child and adolescent mental health services. We have recently worked with colleagues in the Department for Education and Skills on promoting mental health in early years and school settings. We are working with it on its programme on improving behaviour. In addition, we are funding, and will continue to fund, innovation projects that look particularly at how to get professionals such as health visitors, teachers and primary care workers working

together earlier so that we prevent the escalation of some of the mental health problems that my hon. Friend has outlined.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): In Birmingham, child psychiatrists do not have the nurses that they need—they are able to treat only emergencies. The waiting time for seeing a patient on the list is 18 months. At a time when the Department for Education and Skills and the Home Office are making announcements about the problem of disaffected youngsters, will the Minister explain what the Department of Health is doing about adolescents and children with mental health problems? Given that children and adolescents form 20 per cent. of the population, why does only 5 per cent. of the mental health budget go to services for them? Why do places such as Birmingham spend so much less than elsewhere? Is it not time that the Government dealt with the problem of child and adolescent mental health instead of cutting the money as they did last year? Last year, £10 million allocated for mental health was chopped out of the budget and sent off to other priorities. Is it not time that those services were given the priority that they deserve?

Jacqui Smith: In fact, the out-turn figures for 2001 suggest that, for child and adolescent mental health services, Birmingham was the second highest spending authority in the west midlands. Of course, the authority was able to spend that money because of the extra £85 million invested in child and adolescent mental health services by the Government. This year, there are plans to increase services in Birmingham: better services for 16 to 18-year-olds and better services for early intervention, so that the whole of Birmingham is covered. Once again, Opposition Members are willing to whinge about money, but they are not willing to vote for it.

Adoption

4. **Ms Meg Munn** (Sheffield, Heeley): What his policy is on extending the right to adopt to unmarried couples; and if he will make a statement on the technical and practical problems in incorporating such a right into the Adoption and Children Bill. [52775]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The Government's objective is to increase the number of children who have the opportunity, through adoption, to grow up as part of a loving, stable and permanent family. On Second Reading of the Adoption and Children Bill, I told the House that I believed that there should be a debate on adoption by unmarried couples. Since then, there has been a wide-ranging debate and during the passage of the Bill we have received many representations on the issue.

I understand that, last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) tabled amendments to the Bill to allow, for the first time, unmarried couples to apply—as couples—to adopt children. Given the different views on the issue on both sides of the House, and after carefully considering the representations that we received, the Government have decided to make consideration of my hon. Friend's amendments subject to a free vote in this place. Should they be passed, it is my intention to table further amendments in the other place to deal with any legal and technical implications.

Ms Munn: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. I am delighted to hear that the issue will be subject to a free vote. The proposal has support on both sides of the House and is likely to increase the number of adopters for the many children in care who need permanent families. Should the amendments be accepted—as I hope they will be—will my right hon. Friend ensure that there is a rigorous process so that the needs of the child are always paramount, rather than the needs or wishes of the adopters?

Mr. Milburn: I very much agree with my hon. Friend's assessment. Indeed, it is important that we understand, when considering the issue and the amendments—which I personally support—that they are simply about widening the pool of potential adoptive parents so that more vulnerable children, rather than being stuck in the care system, have the chance of the stable family life that adoption can bring. If the amendments are passed, it will be for adoption agencies and, ultimately, the courts to decide who is suitable to adopt. No one has a right to adopt. There is a rigorous assessment process and it would not change if the amendments were passed. Indeed, under one of the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, a couple wanting to become adoptive parents will have to prove not only that they can provide a loving family environment but also that they have formed a long-term, stable relationship. In the end, that assessment process will not be a matter for politicians—still less for Parliament—to determine; it will be for the courts to decide what is in the best interests of the child.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The Secretary of State will know that the new clause tabled in my name and in the names of many colleagues on both sides of the House is similar to the newly tabled amendments of the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe). I welcome a free vote as progress on the Government not giving their view on the matter. British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, which represents a coalition of relevant bodies in the interests of children, also recognises that concession. Having said that, does the Secretary of State agree that it is unfortunate that he has not been able to give full Government support for something that he accepts is in the best interests of children and provides for equality in this area? Liberal Democrats look forward to a time when there will be an opportunity to expand the number of people who can adopt children into suitable homes.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful—at least I think I am—for the hon. Gentleman's support. Let us remember that, during the passage of the Bill, we established a Special Standing Committee to look in depth at those issues and to take evidence from a variety of quarters. What the hon. Gentleman recognises, and what I recognise, is that there are many different views on this issue. Given the

sensitivities of the issue and the fact that there are many different views, it seems appropriate to have a free vote as the right way forward.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): May I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement today and thank him and the Minister of State for listening to the representations made from both sides of the House on this issue? Does he accept that the welfare principle—the duty to secure the best interests of the child—has been at the heart of the success of the Children Act 1989? Does he agree that our difficulty with the Adoption and Children Bill as drafted is that children's best interests would not be secured if those interests would be furthered by their being adopted by an unmarried couple?

Mr. Milburn: I agree with my hon. Friend's remarks. I am grateful to him for his consistent support on the issue and for the help that he has given to many organisations in taking forward their views on it. There is a simple principle here: it is not about extending the right to adopt to anybody, but about extending the right of more children to be adopted. Surely, if we can do that, and if we can make it easier for more children to be adopted, to form part of a stable, loving family environment, that is precisely the right thing to do. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House will feel able to lend their support to the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): The whole House will acknowledge that we should congratulate all adults who step forward wishing to adopt children, which must be a better option than the alternatives. In saying—rightly so—that the interests of the child are paramount, will the Secretary of State confirm that the stable, loving environment about which he talks must, in every situation, include a mother and a father? Will he confirm that that is the kind of stable couple that he has in mind?

Mr. Milburn: The amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield refer to two-sex couples and same-sex couples. He is aware that, under current adoption law, it is perfectly possible not just for married couples to adopt but for single people, regardless of their sexual orientation, to adopt. In the end, my view is that the question of who is suitable to adopt is a matter for the courts to determine.

The fundamental principle that should always be uppermost in all our minds is whatever is in the best interests of the child. I do not believe that it is in the best interests of children to remain stuck in the care system. Despite the best efforts of foster carers or people working in local authorities or in the private or voluntary sector, far too many children do not get the best chance in life because they are stuck in the care system. It seems right and proper to me, at least, that we should make sure that not just some children but every child in our country has the best start in life. To do that, every child should have the opportunity of growing up in a stable family environment.

Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): We have only one opportunity in a generation to implement adoption law, and the last time was 1976. Children have waited too long, so it is vital that we get the legislation right. We must also remember that 19 out of the 20 professional and voluntary agencies that gave evidence to the Special Standing Committee supported the amendments that I tabled in Committee and that have subsequently been tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe). May I also praise the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), for her excellent work in taking the Bill through Committee?

Can the Secretary of State give any indication when the Bill is likely to come back to the House? Agencies are keen to move on, and not least of them is Medway council, which was recently offered beacon status for its work on adoption. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be keen to praise it, but can he give us a date for when the Bill will return to the House?

Mr. Milburn: It will be for the business managers to agree when the Bill should come back to the House on Report. Obviously, the amendments will be dealt with then.

My hon. Friend is right. Many representations on the issue have been made from inside and outside the House. Many Members on both sides of the House have signed an early-day motion, and Ministers have received many representations. The Special Standing Committee heard evidence from a variety of organisations and all right hon. and hon. Members have received letters supporting the general approach that will extend the pool of potential adoptive parents. Among them were organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardos, NCH Action for Children, the National Children's Bureau, British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, the Law Society and the Family Law Bar Association.

Inevitably, there will be debates on this issue, and rightly so. It is a sensitive matter that we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to get right. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will consider the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and give them a fair wind.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Given the House's concern for the well-being of children, we want to ensure that we get the legislation right. However, has the Secretary of State been made aware of recent figures that show that, when a child comes along, there is a higher degree of breakdown in relationships among people who cohabit? We must therefore be careful that children who have already suffered one trauma do not suffer another.

Mr. Milburn: I understand that and the hon. Gentleman's views on the issue. I am also very familiar with the statistics. When the hon. Gentleman has an opportunity to consider the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, he will see that they amend the Bill so that couples wishing to go forward as potential adoptive parents will have to demonstrate that they have formed an enduring, long-term relationship. However, that is not a matter for me or the hon. Gentleman to determine; it must be a matter for the courts to decide. If we can make it easier for more children to be adopted, that surely must be the right thing to do.

Waiting Lists

5. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk): How many people were waiting 13 weeks or more to see a consultant on *(a)* 31 March 2002 and *(b)* 31 March 1997. [52776]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): On 31 March 1997, there were 247,488 patients waiting 13 weeks or more for a first out-patient appointment. The figures for 31 March 2002 will be published shortly.

Mr. Bellingham: I am grateful to the Minister for that somewhat inadequate reply. Can he give me the figures for my local hospital, the Queen Elizabeth hospital in King's Lynn? Will he join me in congratulating all the staff at that hospital on the superb work that they do in serving the local community? They do an excellent job. However, is he aware that there are serious shortages of radiographers and radiologists, which means that people wait far too long for CAT and MRI scans? Serious nursing shortages are also building up, so what guarantees can he give my constituents that the extra money promised for the health service will solve local problems?

Mr. Hutton: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is important to keep the investment coming through to the national health service, but he and his hon. Friends have some explaining to do. They come here and talk about the need for extra investment but, when they are given the opportunity to vote for those resources to go the NHS, they vote against the increase. He should go away and rehearse his lines.

I accept that, overall, patients wait too long for out-patient appointments. That is as true in the hon. Gentleman's hospital as it is in hospitals in my constituency. I am glad to say that after many years of both in-patient and out-patient figures rising, they are now coming down sharply. He will have to wait until later this month for the latest figures, however, and I hope that he will be encouraged by them. It is important that the investment keeps coming through. That is the way to tackle the capacity problems that are a result of 30 years of underinvestment in the NHS. We have a plan for doing that; he is opposed to it.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Will my right hon. Friend comment on the fact that there has been a marked improvement in waiting times to see consultants in my region of Yorkshire and Humber? However, as one talks to hospital administrators, it is emerging that one of the side effects of the Coleman recommendations on training and on the continuous training of surgeons is the significant and growing number of surgeons who are suspended. Will my right hon. Friend look into that to see whether it is a national problem, because there is real concern in the Yorkshire region about it?

Mr. Hutton: I am not familiar with the problem that my hon. Friend raises. I will certainly look into it, however, and I am sure that he, like me, welcomes the progress on reducing waiting times in Yorkshire.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): The reason I voted against the tax on jobs was that I did not believe that the money would get through to pay for the nurses, doctors and extra beds that we clearly need at the Royal Berkshire hospital in my area or, for that matter, anywhere else in the country with a similar problem. If the Minister wishes to change my mind, will he promise us that the number of nurses, doctors and extra beds that the Royal Berkshire says it needs will be met immediately from the new money, so that we can clear the waiting list? Does he agree that the waiting list is far too long and that people are waiting too long in pain? Is he not really saying that he has no intention of appointing those nurses and doctors in the foreseeable future?

Mr. Hutton: I can only assume that the right hon. Gentleman is being ironic. He asks me to commit investment next year, but he and his right hon. and hon. Friends have just voted against such increases. He has no credibility in making that point in that way. I strongly believe that, in addition to the investment, we need to reform the way in which we organise and deliver health care, and that will be part of our approach. I honestly believe that the right hon. Gentleman needs to go away and think about his position more carefully than he has done since the Budget was published.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that more progress would be made in cutting waiting times if we ensured that consultants who are trained by the NHS and paid full-time by the NHS actually worked full-time for the service? What progress is being made on reforming consultants' contracts to ensure that that happens?

Mr. Hutton: I agree that it is right to follow the principle that those who make the greatest commitment to the NHS should get the greatest reward. We published our proposals, as my hon. Friend will be aware, to reform key elements of consultants' contracts in February of last year. Those negotiations are under way. We are making good progress in general and I hope that they will be concluded in the near future.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Do the figures that the Minister gave include the hidden waiting lists? Will he confirm the figure in the "Not the waiting list" report in *The Sunday Times* last weekend—that at least 250,000 people who are waiting for tests to determine the type of surgery or other treatment that they need are excluded from the Government's published figures? Does he think it legitimate for senior NHS executives to warn hospitals against "overstatement of waiting lists" and to order chief executives to keep certain people who are waiting for diagnostic tests off those lists? Given the National Audit Office exposé of hospitals fiddling waiting times last year and now this, why should anyone believe any figures produced by the right hon. Gentleman's Department?

Mr. Hutton: The figures are reliable. The hon. Gentleman is doing a disservice to the NHS by claiming anything else. The figures that he relies on to make his point about access to diagnostic testing and so on are collected in the same way as his party collected figures when it left office in 1997. There has been no change whatsoever in the collection of that data.

The hon. Gentleman and I may agree on one thing, however: it is important that we increase access to important diagnostic treatments and, in particular, to therapeutic treatments. That is why the NHS cancer plan includes, for the first time, an important commitment to reduce the waiting time for treatment, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to support that.

Cancelled Operations

6. **Mr. John Baron** (Billericay): How many cancelled operations there were in the last year. [52777]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): In 2000–01, the last full year for which data are available, there were 77,818 operations cancelled by the hospital for non-clinical reasons when the patient was due to be admitted for treatment.

Mr. Baron: I thank the Minister for that response. Given that there has been a 50 per cent. increase in the number of cancelled operations since 1997, what estimate have the Government made of both the cost to local government and the effect on council tax of their latest policy of fining councils for bed blocking in hospitals?

Yvette Cooper: Clearly, too many people are having their operations cancelled, but the most recent quarterly figures show that the number of cancellations is dropping and progress is being made. It is right that social services departments support the reductions in NHS delayed discharges, and that is exactly why they are getting a substantial increase in their resources—way above the increases that they got under Conservative Governments.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Does my hon. Friend make the connection between delayed discharges, cancelled operations and the fact that, in my constituency, Conservative-controlled Cambridgeshire county council is still spending only 85 per cent. of its standard spending assessment on services for elderly people?

Yvette Cooper: Obviously local councils that are not making the right decisions on delayed discharges will have to take responsibility for those decisions. That is why we are effecting reforms, as part of the Budget package. This is about investment and reform: investment that the Conservatives have decided to vote against, and reform that is essential to provide everyone with the incentive to improve NHS care.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Does the Minister expect that when the Government have increased the proportion of national income spent on health in England to the levels already prevailing in France and Scotland, the number of cancelled operations, waiting lists and other indicators of health performance will have reached French levels or Scottish levels?

Yvette Cooper: Waiting times and cancellations are already falling. Substantial improvements are already being made throughout the NHS as a result of the extra investment. The right hon. Gentleman really must join his party in making a decision on this. Do the Conservatives want the extra investment to go into the NHS to bring down waiting times and improve services for NHS patients throughout the country, or not? They have said that they want to see the improvements, but they will not back the investment that we need.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): May I support the Minister's efforts to reduce delayed discharges as a way of reducing cancellations? I draw her attention to the single most effective measure that is being taken in Milton Keynes to deal with delayed discharges, which is a single social care assessment protocol agreed by social services and the NHS. May I urge her to try to make sure that a national social care assessment protocol is agreed, so that all social services and NHS personnel throughout the country can work more effectively to reduce delayed discharges?

Yvette Cooper: Yes, and I can also say that considerable work is being done throughout the country to improve the co-ordination between social services and the NHS. That is part of a broader modernisation programme, including an £8.5 million programme by the modernisation agency to cut cancelled operations.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): The Minister will be aware that if an operation is cancelled at the last minute, it should take place within a month, but for 21 per cent. of patients that does not happen. Is the Minister happy with that state of affairs? If not, what is she going to do about it?

Yvette Cooper: That target was introduced on 1 April, and it will be addressed as part of the performance management framework throughout the NHS, including the work of strategic health authorities.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Given South Staffordshire's success in reducing the number of cancelled operations and cutting waiting times for cataract operations by using modernisation fund money to establish a cataract surgical unit, will my hon. Friend support places such as South Staffordshire in establishing orthopaedic surgical units to enable similar success in cutting the number of cancelled operations and reducing waiting times for hip and other joint replacements?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right; changing the way in which services are provided can make a substantial difference, particularly in the separation of emergency care from elective care, which is exactly why we are supporting a substantial number of new diagnostic and treatment centres that are being developed and invested in across the country.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): But those appalling figures for cancelled operations are not the whole story, are they? What does the Minister say to the trust which advises that

"if there is doubt as to whether admissions can be accommodated the following day, the cancellation should occur the day before",

as

"this will enable the Trust to deliver our target of NIL same day cancellations"?

Ministers have already been caught fiddling waiting list figures; how many cancelled operations are being hidden by that disgraceful tactic?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman knows that that is nonsense. The figures have not been changed; the latest quarterly figures show that the number of cancellations is falling. It is important, however, that we carry on making progress. The hon. Gentleman has to decide whether he wants to support additional investment for the extra beds needed to bring the number of cancellations down; the extra capacity that is needed; and the extra doctors that are needed. Or does he want simply to carry on cutting, as the previous Administration did?

Dr. Fox: Even by this Government's standards on evasive answers, that was fairly appalling. Let me give the Minister another problem and offer her a second chance. Given that bed blocking is one of the major causes of cancelled operations and that the Government's policy is to fine local authorities that have bed blocking in their areas, will she confirm not only that that will cost about £400 million, which will be passed on to the council tax payer, but that it will offer the ultimate perverse incentive? GPs in areas where there is bed blocking will realise that the best way to get patients into a local nursing home is to admit them to hospital, which will increase pressure on hospitals, worsen bed blocking and increase the number of cancelled operations. Will the Minister admit that that is the craziest of all the Government's insane policies on health, and will she stop doing damage now before it gets even worse?

Yvette Cooper: No; clearly there is an issue about delayed discharges, but the proportion of older people waiting to be discharged has fallen in the past few years. Additional investment is going in, and it is right that it should continue to do so, which is why the Budget included proposals for an extra 6 per cent. in real terms for social services, compared with less than 0.5 per cent. under the Conservative Government. The hon. Gentleman has to explain how he expects councils to tackle the issue of delayed discharges with the level of funding provided by the Tories, who year after year managed less than 0.5 per cent., which is pathetic. The hon. Gentleman's party is unable to fund the NHS or social services.

National Insurance

7. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): What estimate he has made of the cost to the NHS of the increase in national insurance contributions announced in the Budget. [52778]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I estimate that the changes to employers' national insurance contributions announced in the Budget will cost the NHS about £200 million in 2003–04.

Mr. Amess: I still think that we will have to scrutinise that figure carefully. Will the Secretary of State provide an estimate of the increase in national insurance contributions for senior house officers, ward sisters and consultants as a proportion of their average take-home pay? Will he explain carefully to the House of Commons how the increase will help recruitment and retention in the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: I have never yet met a member of staff in the health service who does not believe that the NHS needs more investment; the only people I have met who believe that are Opposition Members. I do not know whether or not the hon. Gentleman is mathematically challenged, but even if the NHS has to make £200 million worth of extra national insurance contributions, it is worth remembering that in the same financial year it will get an extra £5,500 million. Our party supported and voted for that, but the hon. Gentleman's party opposed it.

Derek Twigg (Halton): The message from my constituents is clear: they want a massive injection of extra funding in the health service, particularly in my area, where there are a lot of health inequalities. However, I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree to look at their concern that the extra money be spent well and efficiently and that the whole service should be better managed, particularly by getting management structures in place. Are the Tories not putting up a smokescreen to try to hide their policy of privatisation, not public funding?

Mr. Milburn: I know that my hon. Friend and his constituents, like most people in this country, want to see an expanded national health service. They want more of the national health service, not less. They want more doctors, more nurses, more beds, shorter waiting times, improved diagnostic services and a cut in health inequalities. My hon. Friend is quite right about that. The only way to bring it about is to get some reforms into the NHS and to accompany them with investment.

What my hon. Friend says about the Conservatives is right. Their strategy is based on the four principles of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). First, they say that the NHS is not working; then they say that it has never worked; thirdly, they say that it can never work—as a prelude to their real agenda, the fourth item, which is to get more and more people to pay for their own care. That is not the right way forward for health care in this country. What people want is a national health service treating people according to need, not ability to pay—a national health service with the right principles and the right level of funding.

Bob Spink (Castle Point): Is the Secretary of State aware that for Littlehaven's—a children's hospice in my constituency—the increase in the wage bill as a result of the national insurance contribution increase in the Budget will be well over £20,000, and that Littlehaven's is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions, topped up by a tiny amount of grant money through the NHS? Will he increase the money that the hospice receives to compensate it for the increase in national insurance contributions, so that it does not have to sack medical staff?

Mr. Milburn: I join the hon. Gentleman in at least one respect—paying tribute to the work of the hospice movement, not just in his constituency, but throughout the country. Hospices do a first-rate job of work. We want to strengthen the partnership between the national health

service and the voluntary hospice movement, and we want more NHS money to go into palliative care—not just into hospices, but into palliative care services more generally. That is what we want to see, and what we voted for. It is no use the hon. Gentleman coming to the House and complaining of lack of investment in the NHS or in his local hospices, if he is not prepared to vote for it. On two occasions in the past fortnight he has voted against more money for the NHS. That is what he should go and explain to his constituents.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): May I ask the Secretary of State a direct question? I fully appreciate the additional cost to the national health service of the increase in national insurance, but will he give me an assurance this afternoon that that will not prevent the Government, acting on behalf of the national health service, from encouraging the recruitment of additional midwives? I attended the Royal College of Midwives conference in Bournemouth last week, as did the Minister. There is a grave shortage in many parts of the country. If we are to provide maternity services of the quality that I believe we should, midwives are essential. Will the right hon. Gentleman assure me and the House that the increase in national insurance will not prevent the recruitment of additional midwives?

Mr. Milburn: No, I do not believe that it will. Already, the number of midwives is increasing, as the hon. Gentleman knows. He is also aware of the substantial commitment that we have given to expanding midwifery services. We expect an extra 2,000 midwives to be working in the NHS by 2004. Of course, that is partly a question of pay and making sure that people who are working very hard in the NHS are properly paid, but it is also a question of making sure that their working conditions and their working environment are right. So yes, I am confident that we will continue to recruit midwives in ever larger numbers in order to give women and families the sort of services that they deserve.

Social Services (Lancashire)

8. **Mr. David Borrow** (South Ribble): What recent discussions he has had with Lancashire county council concerning the provision of services for the elderly in Lancashire. [52779]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): I met leading members of Lancashire county council on 29 April, together with some hon. Members representing constituencies in the county. In addition, the social services inspectorate has been closely monitoring Lancashire county council since it was placed under special measures in February 2000. Following the publication of the council's proposals to close a number of its care homes, the SSI is closely following the work undertaken by the council to assess its current care provision and to consult on future strategies with the NHS, local people and other interested parties.

Mr. Borrow: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she is doing in that area. She is aware of my concern that the consultation document prepared by Lancashire county council, which recommends the closure of 35 care homes, does not include any analysis of the capacity of the voluntary or the private sector in Lancashire. I am sure that my hon. Friend will share my concern that on Friday last week the Galloway society for the blind in Penwortham, in my constituency, announced the closure in July of Howick house, a home for the elderly blind, which will mean that in a few months 20 elderly blind people will lose their home.

The home is currently losing £1,000 a week. Will the Minister undertake to consult to see whether anything can be done to preserve the very specialist care that is given to the elderly blind by the Galloway society for the blind in my constituency? Will she also ensure that her Department and the inspectorate take a very robust attitude to the document that the county council will eventually produce on long-term care for the elderly in Lancashire?

Jacqui Smith: I can assure my hon. Friend that the social services inspectorate is taking a very close interest in developments in Lancashire. I share his concern about ensuring that both the independent and voluntary sectors are fully engaged in any changes. Of course, that was the reason why the Government published the agreement—alongside investing £300 million in building up capacity and in reducing delayed discharges last October—which makes it very clear that we expect local authorities to work in their commissioning behaviour with the private, independent and voluntary sectors, as well as with their partners in the national health service, to ensure that we commission and develop the services that are necessary for older people.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): As the Minister is aware—when she is not adopting an ostrich-like approach to the problem—in the past five years, 50,000 beds have been lost across the whole long-term care sector. Is she also aware that, in the next five years in Lancashire, county council placements in the private sector will decrease by about 1,200—the number will fall from 1,860 to 600—and that 35 of the 48 council homes will close, with the loss of 700 beds? Given the pressures that that will cause in relation to placement of elderly people in long-term care, how will the Government's policy of using the stick rather than the carrot and penalising local authorities involved in delayed discharges be implemented? How will it help in tackling the serious problems that Lancashire faces with finding placements for the most vulnerable and frail in our society?

Jacqui Smith: Lancashire has already used the extra investment put in by the Government—not least the £5 million from the building capacity grant to improve services, including, for example, an 18 per cent. increase in the number of people receiving intensive home care. It is right that we build into the system incentives to ensure that our health and social services work together better, so that older people are not stuck in hospital when they would be better off in care homes, in their own homes or being supported in some other way in the community. That is why the 6 per cent. annual average real-terms increase in the next three years from which Lancashire will benefit will enable it to build the services to ensure that our older people have the right care, in the right place, at the right time. We are taking responsibility as a

Government not only for the policy that brings health and social services together, but for the investment that enables that to happen.

NHS Direct

9. **Mr. Tom Levitt** (High Peak): What plans he has to extend NHS Direct. [52780]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): Building on the very successful roll-out of NHS Direct, I expect the service to expand its capacity significantly over the next six years. By 2008, NHS Direct will be able to deal with more than 30 million callers a year. It will, for example, handle all out-of-hours calls to general practitioners and be in a position to deal with up to 1 million lower priority ambulance calls.

Mr. Levitt: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I congratulate NHS Direct and its partner BT on having recently answered their 10 millionth call since NHS Direct was set up. I am sure that she agrees that there is still a need to educate some parts of the population about the use of NHS Direct, especially in respect of out-of-hours service replacement. Will the extension of NHS Direct be not only quantitative, as she has described, but qualitative, in terms of bringing new services into the NHS Direct family?

Ms Blears: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is right; NHS Direct can really help to contribute towards the reform agenda. For example, in west Yorkshire, NHS Direct is involved in an innovative scheme for people with long-term lung complaints. They can be monitored at a distance via the telephone and computer software, and when their life signs start to deteriorate an emergency response can be triggered. Similarly, Hope hospital, in my constituency, has an innovative programme for people with diabetes. NHS Direct can offer a contact centre to all patients around the country with diabetes, who can get advice through e-mail, the telephone and interactive online services. NHS Direct is truly the kind of service that we want for the 21st century; it is a very exciting development indeed.

Wembley Stadium

3.30 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) *(by private notice):* To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on Wembley stadium following the passing of the 30 April deadline that she set.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): I explained to the House on 19 December that the Government were willing to support the Football Association's national stadium project, provided that the Football Association and Wembley National Stadium Ltd. came forward with fully detailed and funded proposals within a reasonable time scale. In the light of the David James-Berwin Leighton Paisner report, I asked that they should deal with four points: first, to commission an independent value for money assessment of the proposed contracts with Multiplex; secondly, to make papers relating to the project available to the Comptroller and Auditor General; thirdly, to make corporate governance changes to produce a management structure capable of delivering a complex project with procedures acceptable to the public sector; and, finally, to confirm that financial support is adequate and fully committed. I also explained to the House that I had asked Sport England to commission a detailed technical evaluation of the new proposals for athletics in the stadium.

Since 19 December, the Football Association and Wembley National Stadium Ltd. have worked closely with stakeholders and banks to develop the stadium project at their preferred location—Wembley—and to address the issues that I have outlined. Significant progress has been made.

Wembley National Stadium Ltd. carried out my request to make available to the Comptroller and Auditor General papers relating to the project. WNSL also commissioned Cyril Sweett Ltd.—a company with no previous or known likely future involvement in the national stadium project—to undertake a value for money study. Cyril Sweett Ltd. concludes that the Multiplex contracts represent value for money. I have considered the company's report carefully and accept its conclusions. The full report necessarily contains much commercially sensitive information and therefore cannot be published. However, I have asked WNSL to commission a publishable study, which I shall place in the Library.

WNSL has committed itself to meeting the required standards of corporate governance, and I am pleased to be able to say that significant improvements have been made. The WNSL board has been strengthened with experience in construction, financing and marketing. The new chairman, Michael Jeffries, has construction and project management experience. The Government remain in discussion with the FA, WNSL and other stakeholders about these issues.

WNSL also invited the Office of Government Commerce to undertake a gateway review of the project, which recommended that the project should proceed to contractual completion and that it was well managed and viable.

Sport England has completed its athletics study, which was prepared in close co-operation with UK Athletics, the British Olympic Association, UK Sport and the International Association of Athletics Federations. My predecessor rightly drew attention to the extremely long time scale and exorbitant cost involved in the installation and removal of the original platform, and to the fact that there was no legacy for the sport from the project.

I am pleased to report that the new design conforms to the standards required by the IAAF, is considerably quicker to install and remove, and the costs associated with it have been substantially reduced. I have asked Sport England to publish its study. The matter of a legacy for athletics is the subject of separate discussions between my Department, Sport England and UK Athletics. I hope that they will be concluded in the next two weeks.

Although much of the necessary work to secure the financing of the stadium project has been completed, the Football Association has requested more time to enable it to conclude its discussions with the banks. In the light of the progress that the FA and WNSL made in fulfilling the conditions that I set out on 19 December, I have agreed to refrain from reaching my final decision on Government support for the national stadium project at Wembley at this point.

I understand that that decision will disappoint many people in the west midlands, and hon. Members who represent that region. However, it would be wrong for the Government to withdraw their support at such a crucial stage. The FA is closer than it has ever been to making Wembley the home of English football again. I do not believe that it would be right or reasonable to pull the plug on its project when the prospects of success look better than ever.

Subject to the successful conclusion of the continuing discussions with the FA and WNSL, final confirmation that the financing is adequate and fully committed, and the terms of Patrick Carter's final report, the Government will be pleased to support the national stadium project at Wembley. My decision will be taken after full consultation with Sport England and in the light of Patrick Carter's final report. I fully recognise the public and parliamentary pressure for an end to the process and the start of the construction of a world-class stadium. I will therefore make a further statement to the House before the Whitsun recess.

Mr. Kaufman: My right hon. Friend talked about parliamentary and other pressure to conclude the matter, but she gave the House a firm and unequivocal commitment to bring the matter to a conclusion before now. On 19 December she set out her "four fundamental points" and said that they "must be addressed first". They included

"confirmation that financial support is adequate and fully committed".—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2001; Vol. 377, c. 292.]

In reply to parliamentary questions on the matter on 10 April, my right hon. Friend said:

"I expect the FA's work to be completed in April. The Government will determine whether or not that work satisfies the conditions I set out on 19 December".—[*Official Report*, 10 April 2002; Vol. 383, c. 309W.]

Is it not a fact that the work has not been completed by the FA and that it therefore does not satisfy the conditions that my right hon. Friend described as "fundamental points"? Is it not a fact that the money is not "adequate and fully committed"? Is it not therefore a fact that the undertakings that she gave the House on 19 December and 10 April have not been fulfilled?

[Mr. Kaufman]

How can the Government continue to embrace the tar baby? It is not simply a matter for the FA, because it involves £20 million of public subsidy, which my right hon. Friend promised the FA and £120 million of lottery money, which Sport England irresponsibly and disreputably gave the FA before planning permission had even been sought. It is time to put an end, one way or another, to this travesty of a process and settle the matter.

Tessa Jowell: I know that my right hon. Friend, for whom I have the highest regard, has never been the greatest fan of the national football stadium at Wembley. Let me deal, however, with the serious points that he raised. First, he raised the question of the deadline set for the end of April. He is absolutely right to say that the Football Association set the end of April as the point by which it expected to have met the four tests that formed the condition for Government support for the project. As I have outlined to the House this afternoon, in my judgment, and on the basis of the evidence that has been made available to me, it is clear that the FA has made good progress on at least three of the tests. The outstanding matter relates to the financing of the project, on which—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Hon. Members must allow the Secretary of State to be heard.

Tessa Jowell: Progress has been made on the financing of the project. Hon. Members will understand that the detail of that progress is shrouded in commercial confidentiality. This is a difficult matter of judgment, but, in my view, it would be unreasonable and unfair to fail to give the Football Association, which is now in negotiation with the bank, the opportunity to conclude those negotiations. To do so would be gratuitously to wreck a project on which good progress has been made. I do not think that that would be right or proper, and that is why I have agreed to allow more time to complete the negotiations on the financing.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Does the Secretary of State regret her original plan to try to sneak out this announcement on Wembley by means of a written parliamentary answer on a day when she was known to be making a major statement in Parliament on the Communications Bill? Is there ever going to be an end to her dithering on this subject? On top of the Government's inability to honour their commitment to staging the world athletics championships in London, does the Secretary of State recognise that Britain has now become a complete laughing stock in international sporting circles?

Will the Secretary of State confirm that her statement breaks the promise that she gave to the backers of the Birmingham bid? Is she willing to set any date after which Birmingham can have its proposals seriously considered? Will she confirm that describing the latest stadium design in oral questions before Easter as "athletics-capable" was just a device to allow Sport England to avoid asking for £120 million of lottery money back? Does she seriously believe that Wembley, given the geographical constraints surrounding it, could ever form the centrepiece of a British bid for the Olympic games?

When does the Secretary of State honestly think that work on building the national stadium might actually start? When will Wembley Park tube station be rebuilt? Is it not true that, five years after lottery money was provided for a national stadium, and 18 months after Wembley shut its doors, the Football Association has, in fact, delivered its side of the bargain, and that the real reason for this project now being stalled is ministerial dithering? While footballers, athletes, rugby league players and fans wait in frustration, Britain's international sporting humiliation continues.

Tessa Jowell: I hardly think that I sought to sneak out an answer on the national football stadium when this is the first day after local election purdah on which it has been possible to inform the House of this matter. Secondly, I took the trouble to telephone the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) this morning to draw his attention to this question. I also telephoned my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman).

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Your right hon. Friend forced you here.

Tessa Jowell: My right hon. Friend had made absolutely clear his disagreement with the position that I had taken. He has a robust view, and he is perfectly entitled to do what he did.

In relation to the status of athletics, I made it clear earlier that a working group involving Sport England and the key athletics governing bodies has been considering the position of athletics at Wembley. As I have told the House, the Sport England report will be published shortly, but it shows that the stadium is capable of taking a track that is cheaper and can be dismantled much more quickly than that in the original proposal. As the hon. Member for South Suffolk is also aware, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions made an announcement about financing the upgrading of Wembley Park tube station.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), as ever, does the House a great service. He has chronicled and pursued the trials and tribulations of the national stadium project for the past five years. Indeed, I have often fought in the trenches with him shoulder to shoulder in cataloguing the past failures of the Government and the FA. However, we part company on one fundamental issue, and west midlands Members would do well to take note of it. Although he may be their hero of the moment, it is clear that he wishes the project to fail completely. I wish it to succeed.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the four conditions that she set on 19 December have been substantially met and that, in the light of that progress, it would be foolish, wasteful and perverse to abandon the Wembley bid in the 89th minute? Will she also convey to the FA the House's frustration at the fact that it has not yet concluded its financial contract? Will she urge it with all speed so to do?

Tessa Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend. It is important to remind the House that the four conditions in relation to Wembley that I set before Christmas are attached to the investment of a further £20 million of Government money

and £21 million from the London Development Agency to contribute to infrastructure costs. Those conditions attach to the release of that money.

This is not a Government project but an FA project. It is led and financed by the FA, but it is dependent on further Government money, for the reasons that I have outlined. As those who have taken the trouble to read Patrick Carter's report will understand, the FA is also dependent on support from the Government to facilitate aspects of this complex project, such as the infrastructure issues. That is why the Government have a role, and it is my judgment in the context of the progress that has been made that the FA should be allowed further time to conclude negotiations on funding the project.

Nick Harvey (North Devon): If the FA is expected to raise all the money for the project, what exactly is the Government support that the right hon. Lady has yet to decide whether to give to it? If the FA takes another month to raise the money, surely it would be perverse for her then to refuse to support the transport infrastructure to which she refers. As for the Sport England analysis of athletics, will she tell us categorically whether the revised design would be adequate for an Olympic tournament to be held in the new stadium? Is it still the FA's intention that the new stadium should open in the spring or early summer of 2005, precisely when we were supposed to have held the world athletics championships in London?

Tessa Jowell: The further support from the Government is the £41 million to which I have just referred. In relation to the opening date and the hon. Gentleman's question about the status of the track for Olympic events, those judgments will have to wait until I have had time to study the Sport England report, which has not yet been submitted to me.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): This is, of course, a considerable problem for the whole of football, and I am afraid that my right hon. Friend will find it difficult to rebut accusations of muddle and, certainly, delay. The delay is no longer acceptable; we must soon have decisions. It would help if she could say today, clearly and without equivocation, whether a national football stadium that is worthy of the name will be built at all if it is not to be built at Wembley? In short, if Wembley cannot produce the goods, must we assume, as I fear we must, that there will be no national football stadium, simply because all the eggs have been put into one basket and—as I fear—too many have already been broken?

Tessa Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I recognise that he has advocated for a long time that the stadium be built in the west midlands. As Patrick Carter's report assessed, if Wembley fails—we hope that it will succeed, given the provision of additional time—Birmingham is an option, but it is a more expensive one. However, the decision on location—Birmingham as an alternative to Wembley—is a judgment not for the Government but for the Football Association, because it is the FA that will pay for the project.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield): Does the right hon. Lady understand that her decision today will be regarded as enormously unfair to the west midlands and to the Birmingham bid? Does she also understand that she has not lived up to the solemn commitments that she gave to the House concerning the 30 April deadline, and which the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) rightly described as firm and fundamental? Is it not true that the work has not been completed according to the terms that she described, that the money is not in place, and that the undertakings to this House have not been delivered? Does she accept that her decision today will be seen throughout Birmingham and the west midlands as an enormous breach of faith, and as yet another example of southern-based decision makers acting in the interest not of the country as a whole, but of the south?

Tessa Jowell: No, I do not accept the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's questions. I fully recognise the passion in Birmingham and the west midlands for trying to secure the national stadium for Birmingham. The negotiations will be conducted by the west midlands and the FA with full understanding and recognition of the costs involved—that is the beginning and end of the matter. This is a question not of letting anybody down but of taking a difficult decision and making a reasonable judgment, so that a project that has made progress can have every reasonable chance of succeeding at Wembley.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): Does the Secretary of State know whether the value for money report, which she describes as satisfactory, took into account the £120 million of lottery money and the £20 million of public money? Surely the root of the problem is that, so far as Birmingham is concerned, there is not an even playing field. The £120 million was intended to provide a multi-sport national stadium. The FA has to decide whether it prefers Wembley or Birmingham, and in my view, if the stadium is to be used only for football, it should be in Birmingham. The reality is that football will get £120 million and there will be no multi-sport use. A football ground such as Millwall's could be made athletics-capable, but who would pay for the necessary work, if ever it were needed? Are we not witnessing yet another example of the richest sport in the country getting money that it does not need and should not have? The whole £120 million should be ploughed back into community sport.

Tessa Jowell: I know that my hon. Friend has strong feelings about the lottery grant, and I shall certainly let her know how the matter was dealt with in the context of the value for money report when I have further studied its detail. However, all the indications are that, if the stadium is funded to proceed, it will be multi-purpose, providing facilities for rugby league, football and athletics. In doing so, it will largely meet the terms of the lottery agreement on which the £120 million was originally awarded.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): When the Secretary of State sets a deadline, what does she mean?

Tessa Jowell: I am sorry, but I did not catch the hon. Gentleman's question.

Mr. McLoughlin: I was trying to oblige by asking a short question. When the Secretary of State sets a deadline, what does she mean by it?

Tessa Jowell: That is a very good question. As I have indicated to the House, the 30 April deadline was set by

[Tessa Jowell]

the FA in the expectation that it would have made progress in each of the four key areas, in order to release the outstanding Government money by that time. The hon. Gentleman is right; the deadline has passed, but I have had to judge whether it would be reasonable—given that the FA has met three of the four conditions and is making progress on the fourth—to deny it the opportunity to complete the negotiations on the funding package. As I hope I have made clear to the House, I have concluded that the FA should be allowed the additional time to conclude the financing with the bank with which it is in negotiations.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West): Every time that I have heard a statement on this issue, it has been reported that the FA and WNSL have been making progress. Given the fact that we have already had two deadlines that were not so dead, it would have been reasonable for some sort of conclusion to have been reached. Will the Secretary of State talk to the FA and WNSL, assess the position and give them a non-negotiable deadline, with transparent criteria, for them to complete, with the exercise of due diligence, all financial and contractual matters?

Tessa Jowell: It is important to make it clear that the FA has secured an outline offer of finance from the financial institution with which it has been negotiating. However, the timetable for completing the negotiation is not wholly within the FA's control. The timetable is set by the financial institutions and, to a great extent, the FA simply has to comply with it. Therefore, it would not be reasonable to set an irrevocable date at this point, but I have already told the House that I will make a further statement on progress—and the status of Government support—before the House rises for the Whitsun recess.

Bob Russell (Colchester): Does the Secretary of State agree that whatever transport improvements are made in and around Wembley they would still be inadequate for the purpose? Bearing in mind the success of playing international matches at stadiums around England, does not she agree that that might be a better way forward? Given the possibility that 30 football clubs might go out of existence because of their financial problems, would not the £600 million be better spent on retaining a nationwide network of professional football clubs?

Tessa Jowell: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman refers all those questions to the FA, whose proper responsibility it is to answer them.

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): I entirely support my right hon. Friend's decision. The English national stadium has to be at Wembley. It would be absolutely crazy of my right hon. Friend to pull the plug on a deal that looks as though it is almost complete. Let me say to my hon. Friends who represent constituencies in Birmingham and the west midlands that I am not opposed to Birmingham. My family comes from Birmingham; I used to go on holiday in Birmingham—[*Laughter.*] Well, it was because we were so poor. If we are ever to attract international events to this country, the stadium has to be in London because the International Olympic Committee and the International Association of Athletics Federations will only go to London.

Finally, despite the talk about the lottery money that was used to purchase the old Wembley site, the majority of the money for building the new national stadium must be subject to the FA's decision, because the FA is raising £460 million on the money markets to do it. Therefore, it is a matter for the FA, and perhaps we should have less Government interference rather than more.

Tessa Jowell: I agree.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): The right hon. Lady represents a south London seat, but I wonder whether she realises the adverse effect that this sorry saga has on the economy of north London. We lost Picketts Lock as the national athletics stadium; there will be no football at Wembley for at least five years, probably seven, which will affect the local economy; and the need to take infrastructure decisions is now urgent. It seems obvious that we must have a world-class multi-sports stadium at Wembley, and we should get on with it as soon as possible.

Tessa Jowell: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support.

Alan Keen (Feltham and Heston): As a member of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I have been as frustrated as anyone else over the past two or three years. However, is it not true that the decision is very simple? It is a question not of where the stadium should be but of whether my right hon. Friend will allow a few more weeks so that the right decision is reached rather than blowing the project out of the water straight away. Anyone who has ever worked in the private sector knows about flexibility. I am sure that my right hon. Friend agrees that she is being flexible today for the very best reason.

Tessa Jowell: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend's assessment. In these circumstances, flexibility and reasonableness are the only way forward.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): The site of the proposed alternative bid is in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State accept that her description of "disappointment" as characterising the feelings in the west midlands is a serious understatement? We await this decision because of the related key strategic decisions on expanding the airport and widening the M42. It is not so much disappointment as hair-tearing frustration that is felt at this endless prevarication.

Tessa Jowell: I am very surprised by the hon. Lady's newly discovered support for the alternative site, as the correspondence that I have seen suggests that she opposed at every turn the prospect of a national stadium in Birmingham.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will know that I have always supported the case for Wembley, so I support the extra time that she is asking for today. As well as the transport and infrastructure improvements, which are crucial, does she accept that the fans who pay to go through the turnstiles week after week are concerned

that sufficient seats will be available for the ordinary spectator at the new stadium, as opposed to the snobs with their hospitality suites?

Tessa Jowell: The answer to my hon. Friend's first question is that the investment in infrastructure will obviously improve access to the stadium and will offer regeneration to a part of north-west London that badly needs it. Secondly, the FA's proposal is for a 90,000-seater stadium; 18,000 will be so-called corporate seats, but 15 per cent. of the seats will generate 75 per cent. of the money for the stadium's ongoing funding. So there will be more space in Wembley for ordinary fans paying ordinary prices than in any other stadium in the country.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): The right hon. Lady will be very aware of the anger and disappointment in the west midlands about her statement today of her failure to make the FA stick to its 30 April deadline. A few moments ago, she said that she was not prepared to give an irreversible deadline, but surely she owes that to the people of the west midlands—at some point she must be prepared to pull the plug on Wembley. What is the point of her office if she is not prepared to take executive decisions?

Tessa Jowell: The fact is that the FA is currently in negotiations and I believe that those negotiations need to be allowed reasonable time to run their course. That is why I indicated to the House that I shall provide further information—a further report on progress—before the Whitsun recess.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Is the Secretary of State aware that Wembley holds a special place in the hearts and minds of football fans internationally? Does she agree that it is only too appropriate that the Government should bring the national football station—[HON. MEMBERS: "Stadium!"]—the national football stadium home to Wembley and that that decision will be welcomed not just by many millions of people internationally and in London, but by people all over the country who love football and love the traditions that Wembley represents?

Tessa Jowell: Yes, I do, and I thank my hon. Friend for that point. The national football station, as well as stadium, would also be better upgraded with the money that the Government will provide if the deal goes ahead.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Secretary of State not recognise that the whole history of this project has been one fiasco after another? Every time there is another problem, another Minister from this sorry Government pops up, with further reports being commissioned, further excuses and further delays. The real problem for those of us in this place and outside who care about sport is that, at every stage, the Government have completely failed to get a grip of this project and bring it to a conclusion. From the City pages of the papers, one sees that banks are walking away from the project as soon as they get close enough to realise the mess that the Government and all around them have made of it. Is not the real problem that what we need is not further delays and reports but a new Government who will get a grip of the project?

Tessa Jowell: I do not think anybody thinks that. The bile that the hon. Gentleman has just tipped over this issue is the easy bit. The hard bit is to do what we have done: work with the FA to get the project to a point where it has achieved more progress than ever before in its history, and make the judgment that it would not be right to pull the plug when there is a possibility—not a certainty, but a real possibility—of success.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): If the stadium is to be for football first, with athletics afterwards, how many seats will be lost when the athletics part is put in? The opening of the Olympics requires at least 80,000, so if the stadium is to be used for Olympics we need to be certain that we can provide that many.

Tessa Jowell: Those are precisely the kind of questions that I hope to be able to answer, and on which hon. Members can form their own view, when Sport England publishes its report on athletics at Wembley. The report will be prepared in conjunction with the athletics governing bodies.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The House will have heard the Secretary of State say that she will make another statement on this matter. I will take note of hon. Members who have been disappointed today when the right hon. Lady comes back to the House.

We now come to the statement on the draft Communications Bill. I call the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

Draft Communications Bill

4.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): Here comes the second episode, Mr. Speaker. With permission, I should like to make a statement, on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and myself, on the draft Communications Bill, produced jointly by our Departments and published today.

Copies of the Bill have been placed in the Library and are available from the Vote Office, along with a policy document and explanatory notes. It is also available on the world wide web.

In December 2000, the White Paper "A New Future for Communications" set out the Government's objectives: creating a dynamic market; universal access to a choice of diverse services of the highest quality; safeguarding consumers and citizens; and minimising regulation. Everything that we announce today flows from those principles.

The communications industry is of immense importance to this country, so we are determined to proceed, wherever possible, with the fullest consultation and consensus. That is why we held further consultations on media ownership. That is why the Bill published today is in draft and is subject to scrutiny by a Joint Committee of both Houses. This degree of consultation on major legislation is perhaps unprecedented, but it is important that the legislation has the confidence of the industry and of the public.

There is general agreement that the existing regulatory framework has become outdated because of rapid changes in technology, markets and consumer behaviour over the past six years. The communications industries are regulated in different ways by separate regulators, yet they are coming increasingly closer together in their ownership and in their operation. The evidence is all around us: television and radio companies are linked to newspapers; traditional media are developing websites; cable companies deliver television, radio, telephony, interactive services and broadband internet. This converging industry needs a converged regulator, providing industry-specific regulation with a light touch: a framework that protects the citizen while setting business free; and a regulatory framework that offers certainty where it is needed for business plans and investment, and flexibility where it is needed in a fast-moving environment.

Previous legislation in 1984, 1990 and 1996 has left us with clumsy regulation that inhibits investment and reduces efficiency. The ownership rules send the signal that the UK is not open for investment in our communications industries. The rules on newspaper ownership are opaque, discriminatory and still retain criminal sanctions. The rules on news on ITV have seen investment in ITN fall. Furthermore, technology is changing, throwing up new challenges and new opportunities. The case for change is therefore compelling. The twin ideals of regulation are to be light-touch yet effective. But the current rules are neither.

The communications industries are vital to the health of the British economy and to our democracy. Every week we watch more than 1 billion hours of television, listen to more than 1 billion hours of radio and buy 100 million national, regional and local newspapers. The BBC licence fee costs each viewing household £112 a year and raises £2.5 billion. We send billions-plus of text messages a year; three-quarters of adults use mobile phones; and 24 million people have internet access in their homes.

Crucially, our democratic debate could not take place without newspapers, television channels, radio stations and internet sites that tell us what is happening. Those sources can be biased, sometimes wrong, and occasionally strident. There are many of them, however, and people can hear many voices. This plurality must be protected at all costs.

The White Paper proposed one regulator—Ofcom—to replace the Independent Television Commission, the Radio Authority, the Radiocommunications Agency, the Broadcasting Standards Commission and Oftel. It also suggested that Ofcom should have sector-specific powers to promote competition; that quality public service broadcasting should be protected; the introduction of measures to enable universal access to public service broadcasting channels over all main platforms; the consolidation of ITV subject to competition rules; the simplification of regulation for commercial radio; that BBC regulation be brought within Ofcom for basic standards and for specific public service broadcasting requirements, while retaining the regulatory role of the BBC governors; and the promotion of broadband. Since then, the policy has been developed, the detail of which is contained in this draft Bill, supplemented by the policy document.

With regard to the structure of Ofcom, its top board will operate at the highest strategic level. It must be able to move quickly and with agility to address issues in a fast-moving sector. At the heart of its operations will be its sector-specific responsibility to promote competition, to curb abuses of dominant market positions and to ensure fair access to dominant network systems and platforms. In addition, all broadcasters, including the BBC for its commercial services, will continue to be subject to the Competition Act 1980.

Ofcom will have a number of other duties to promote certain interests, especially those of nations and regions. That is why we are providing for Ofcom to establish a content board as an integral part of its structure. It will be a significant body, bringing together diverse interests, including those of the different nations of the United Kingdom. There will also be a consumers panel that is able to articulate the needs and views of consumers, again with strong representation from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The draft Bill proposes a regulatory regime that will be lighter in touch, with greater reliance on self-regulation by all broadcasters. Ofcom will be taken out of day-to-day regulation and will use its backstop powers only if licensed broadcasters fail to deliver.

Ofcom's responsibilities will extend to the BBC for the basic broadcast standards and for agreed quotas for such things as regional and independent production while setting the general standards across the industry. It will be responsible for general reviews of public service broadcasting. However, the quality of BBC output under its public service remit will remain fully regulated by the governors. This regime, with its detailed scrutiny by governors, is a measure of the special role that the BBC fulfils. This system has developed because the BBC's obligations are the greatest, not the least.

But we recognise that the media of the future must provide the high-quality public service broadcasting that people have enjoyed in the past. Competition alone cannot guarantee this. Public service broadcasting nurtures creativity. It is vital to independent producers. It provides training grounds that sustain the whole sector. It meets the particular needs of local and regional communities, both in programming and in production. And in the case of the BBC, the £2.5 billion raised annually by the licence fee is venture capital for the whole of British broadcasting.

Most important, public service broadcasting works for the public. The draft Bill therefore proposes for the first time to define public service broadcasting and to consolidate in statute the hierarchy of public service broadcasting obligations that viewers and listeners will readily recognise.

The draft Bill is much more than a system for regulating the content of television and radio broadcasting. Telecommunications have become ever more important to our economy and to our society. By bringing together the functions of Oftel and the Radiocommunications Agency with those of the Independent Television Commission, the Radio Authority and the Broadcasting Standards Commission, we will ensure that content, economics and technology are viewed as a piece, not as fragments.

The competition responsibilities for Ofcom are intended to deliver dynamic competitive markets in networks and infrastructure as well as in content. Our economy needs access to networks to be opened up. That means a regulator that is light-touch where possible, but powerful where necessary.

The new regime for telecoms will enable Ofcom to operate within a harmonised European framework, providing greater certainty so that UK companies are better able to sell their services abroad. The new regime will be lighter in touch, removing the requirement for licensing of telecoms systems—thereby removing about 400 licences—and replacing it with a much simpler regime for electronic communications. The new regulator will have the right responsibilities and powers to promote competition, tackle abuses and make sure that consumers' interests are protected.

We will also extend the principles of deregulation and market competition to the allocation of the radio spectrum by introducing spectrum trading. Spectrum is to the modern age what iron and steel were to the first industrial revolution, and it must be used efficiently. Companies need to know that they can gain access to spectrum so that they can bring their ideas to the market. In future, as well as being able to apply for a licence, firms will also be able to buy spectrum from an existing user within the terms of that licence. That should prevent the hoarding of spectrum, increase the number and range of users, deliver significant benefit to businesses and consumers and promote the innovation on which the future of United Kingdom competitiveness depends. The proposals are broadly in line with the recommendations of Professor Cave's independent review of spectrum management that was published in March. We intend to respond to that review by the summer and I therefore emphasise that all the spectrum management provisions are subject to revision.

The draft Bill will continue our policy of not imposing regulation on the operation of the internet, although we will continue to work with the industry to improve the standards of protection available through self-regulation.

Lastly, on media ownership, competition and competition rules to regulate undue economic power are increasingly recognised here and abroad as the best means of delivering innovation, investment and employment. It is our intention to apply the same principles to the communications industry. But the media are different from other industries in one crucial respect: they are uniquely important to the debate that underpins our democracy. Citizens need access to a range of different media voices if they are to take informed decisions. So we need a system that delivers a plurality of owners and a diversity of output.

Our approach is simple and proprietor-neutral. We will deregulate where it is possible to rely on competition law to maintain a range of voices; where it is not, we will establish clear, predictable rules. The changes that we are proposing today will remove barriers to investment, will encourage innovation and will allow companies to consolidate and expand.

Ofcom will combine the important twin roles of promoting competition while protecting plurality and diversity. Within television, radio and newspaper markets, competition law will tend to encourage dispersed ownership and new entry. We will therefore remove most ownership rules within those markets, retaining only those that we need as minimum guarantees of plurality.

Overall, we intend to get rid of or relax most rules concerning media ownership while keeping those necessary to protect the public interest. We will strengthen safeguards for news and other broadcast content. The rules that we will scrap include those which prevent the ownership of a single ITV, those which prevent large newspaper groups from acquiring Channel 5 and those which prevent ownership of more than one national commercial radio licence. In addition, we will ease the complex rules preventing consolidation of ownership of local commercial radio and scrap the criminal sanctions that apply in the newspaper merger regime.

We also intend to scrap the inconsistent rules that prevent the non-European ownership of some broadcasters. It makes no sense that French, Italian or German companies can own television and radio licences, but Canadian, Australian or United States companies cannot. The resultant inward investment should allow the UK to benefit rapidly from new ideas and technological developments. New blood and new competition will help to give our industry the edge.

The recent report on communications by the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, for which I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and his colleagues, made a case for relying on competition law alone, but we do not believe that that will guarantee the plurality of ownership that democracy demands. We will therefore retain three key limits on cross-media ownership to safeguard debate at every level—national, regional and local. First, recognising that most people get their news and information from national newspapers and terrestrial television, we will keep a simple rule that any newspaper group with more than 20 per cent. of the national market will not be able to own a significant stake in ITV,

[Tessa Jowell]

the only commercial public service broadcaster with universal access to a mass audience, currently 25 per cent. of all television viewing. Secondly, a parallel 20 per cent. rule will prevent anyone with a dominant position in local newspapers from owning the regional ITV licence in the same area. Thirdly, there will be a scheme to ensure that at least three commercial local or regional media voices exist—in newspapers, TV and radio—in addition to the BBC in almost every local community.

Where necessary we will retain and strengthen content regulation to ensure the quality, impartiality and diversity of broadcasting services. Ofcom will have the power to investigate the news and current affairs programming of any local radio service if it has concerns about accuracy or impartiality. It will have a new duty to protect and promote the local content of local radio services. It can vary any licence on change of control, to ensure that the character of the service is maintained. For ITV, that will protect regional production and programming requirements. Ofcom will oversee the nominated news provider system for ITV, to ensure high-quality and independent news on free-to-air public service television.

In conclusion, these changes are deregulatory. We will depend more on competition and on competition law exercised by a sector-specific regulator. Ownership regulations will disappear or be reduced. Self-regulation will be extended wherever possible. Complex schemes for licensing networks and access to them will be scrapped and replaced with a streamlined system. All regulations will be reviewed regularly.

The rules that remain will be simple and purposeful, and will include a streamlined system for newspaper mergers, simple limits on cross-media ownership of ITV and the largest newspaper groups, and minimum levels of ownership for local radio and for cross-ownership by local newspapers. There will be content rules in broadcasting to ensure UK production, regional production, local and regional programmes and accurate, impartial news and information. Public service broadcasting will be protected in the digital future as it has been in the analogue past.

The reform of the regulation of this vital sector is a major task. The draft Bill will exceed 250 clauses. The accompanying documents also indicate areas of policy not yet fully reflected in the draft clauses, notably those giving effect to the policies on media ownership which I have announced today. Like the changes to the BBC agreement, these will be published shortly so that they can be considered alongside the draft Bill. Our proposals are subject to a three-month consultation period, and I am delighted that both Houses have agreed also to subject the draft Bill to pre-legislative scrutiny. We shall introduce the Communications Bill itself as soon as parliamentary time allows.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and I want Britain to have the most dynamic communications industry in the world. We want Britain to continue to have the best-quality TV and radio in the world. This Bill is the route map to making those ambitions a reality. We look forward to hearing the views of hon. Members and we commend the draft Communications Bill to the House.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for making it available to me in advance. I warmly welcome the announcement of moves towards less regulation which reflect the huge changes that have taken place since the law was last updated. A less onerous regime is necessary if Britain's leading role in these industries is to be preserved.

I regret that, more than five years after the Government's original manifesto commitment on this issue was made, we still do not have all the details of their policy, and I hope that the gaps will be filled in soon, so that pre-legislative scrutiny, which I also welcome, can be effective.

Starting with the rules on media and cross-media ownership, I strongly support the relaxation of the present regime, whose restrictive provisions are no longer justified in light of the wider choice available to consumers as a result of new technology and the enterprise shown by many in the industry. I am very disappointed, however, that the Government are not willing to go all the way and leave questions of media and cross-media ownership entirely to the competition authorities.

The Secretary of State proposes to retain three extra limits on cross-media ownership. Why are they necessary, and why can the competition authorities and the marketplace not safeguard adequately the public interest? Extra controls on media and cross-media ownership are no longer needed, especially as leaving decisions about ownership to the marketplace, subject to the constraints of competition law, would not mean that the content of television and radio programmes would be completely unregulated. The authorities would continue to monitor content through their codes and their duty to preserve diversity and choice for consumers.

On the issue of monitoring content, will Ofcom distinguish between harmful material, for which regulation is needed, and offensive material, for which a much lighter touch is appropriate. I welcome references by the Secretary of State to promoting competition. Given that Ofcom will be an enormous organisation, is the Secretary of State aware of the danger that it could become a lumbering bureaucratic giant that obstructs rather than promotes competition? Given that the paving Bill for Ofcom was approved by Parliament more than two months ago, what progress has been made in setting the organisation up?

In promoting competition, how does the Secretary of State envisage that Ofcom will ensure fair access to electronic programme guides? Similarly, how will fair access to competing platforms be secured? As the Secretary of State undertook 11 days ago to keep Parliament in touch with her policy on digital terrestrial television, will she explain whether the Government still intend to switch off the analogue television signal by 2010, what steps she is taking to secure the survival of the digital terrestrial platform, and when the Government will set out the way in which they will increase the strength and reach of the digital television signal?

I welcome references to spectrum trading. Spectrum is a finite resource, the value of which has recently been more clearly recognised. One of the criteria by which Ofcom will be judged is whether it will achieve the aim of more efficient use of spectrum.

As for the BBC, I look forward to debating the definition of public service broadcasting that is in the Bill. Does the Secretary of State agree that the proposed

relationship between Ofcom and the BBC will perpetuate an unlevel playing field to everyone's disadvantage? Does she agree that the issue must be settled during the passage of the Bill and cannot be left until the debate about the renewal of the BBC charter? Does she accept that if the BBC was brought fully within the remit of Ofcom, there would still be a role for the governors? Does she accept concerns about the extent to which the BBC is using its uniquely privileged funding basis to supply services which could be left to the market to provide? If, when the Joint Committee finishes scrutinising the Bill, the Government reject any of its recommendations, will the Secretary of State publish in advance of Second Reading their reasons for doing so?

The Bill is huge—nearly 260 clauses—and deals with issues crucial to consumers and business. Britain has an opportunity to lead one of the 21st century's most important industries, building on our record of innovation, high-quality public service broadcasting and our large pool of creative and entrepreneurial talent. Ofcom can help that process only if it adopts the lightest possible touch, but, equally, it can hinder it if Ministers or regulators get drawn too closely into matters that should be left to the market and the industry to resolve. I trust that the Secretary of State recognises that the acid test of her proposals is whether the regime that she is setting up operates with a light touch rather than a heavy hand.

Tessa Jowell: The hon. Gentleman made many points. Because I spent some time on my statement, I shall not repeat arguments that I made then.

On content, as I have suggested, Ofcom will establish a content board whose membership, importantly, will be drawn from every part of the United Kingdom. The content board will develop codes. It will have a close relationship with the broadcasters and the industry, but content will also be determined for the public service broadcasters by the three-tier regulatory structure. Tier one and tier two will apply to all public service broadcasters including the BBC, and tier three will allow self-regulation of content by the public service broadcasters regulated by Ofcom. Tier three for the BBC will be regulated by the governors.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable standards in television, the content board will be charged with responsibility for developing media literacy and will begin to codify such standards as its work develops.

On the size of the Ofcom board, when the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), took the Bill through the House, he constantly repeated the benefit of the Ofcom board being small. It is our intention to maintain that, with wider representation on both the content board and the consumer panel. We are making progress on the establishment of Ofcom, with the advertisement for chairman appearing in the national newspapers yesterday.

On the obligations relating to electronic programme guides, as we move to switch-over and as the number of digital channels increases, this area of technology will become more important. The operation of electronic programme guides will be subject to codes of performance that will be developed by Ofcom.

It is still the Government's intention to work with the industry and the broadcasters to achieve analogue switch-off between 2006 and 2010, subject to two tests—first, the affordability test and secondly, the accessibility test. The accessibility test means that everyone who currently receives an analogue signal should be able to receive a digital signal.

The final point is the relationship between the BBC and Ofcom. It is important to recognise that the White Paper argued the case for a twin system of regulation—the governors for the BBC and Ofcom for the other public service broadcasters and the rest of the broadcasting industry. That is the position that we have maintained. However, it is important to be clear about the extent to which there will be a level playing field between the standards applying to the commercial public service broadcasters and the BBC.

Standards set at tier one—the general standards that apply to all broadcasters—will apply equally to the BBC. At tier two, the quantitative aspects of broadcasting—the proportion of regional production, independent production and so on—will be set by Ofcom and will also apply to the BBC. I have outlined the new shape of regulation at tier three where, arguably, the BBC will be subject to much tougher regulation because of the regular monthly vigilance of the governors, whereas the other broadcasters will be subject to post hoc regulation by Ofcom against their statement of programme policy.

The BBC will be accountable to Ofcom for all its commercial standards—*[Interruption.]* I am trying to do justice to the questions asked by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), but there is fizzing and grunting from those on the Opposition Front Bench.

My final point is that in developing the Bill, we have proceeded from very clear principles, whether in relation to the structure and purpose of Ofcom or the new proposals that I have announced in respect of media and cross-media ownership. That is in direct contrast to the Opposition's approach. When they last introduced a broadcasting Bill—it became the Broadcasting Act 1996—that approach looked to fixing particular proprietors and institutions. The media industry in this country has paid the price ever since.

Mr. Chris Smith (Islington, South and Finsbury): My right hon. Friend has reiterated that, in the draft Bill, the BBC will fall within the purview of Ofcom for basic regulation in tiers one and two, but not for the backstop powers that will apply to all other public service broadcasters. Can she confirm that that decision is not set in stone and that it is open to further debate and discussion? Will she seize the opportunity made available by the offer of the chairman of the BBC board of governors to discuss whether the role of Ofcom can indeed be enhanced at the level of tier three—an issue that will form a major part of public discussion about the Bill?

Tessa Jowell: Those are precisely the sort of issues that stress the importance of the pre-legislative scrutiny to which I have referred. There will be scrutiny by both Houses, together with further consultation with the industry, to ensure that a very large and complex Bill will work and deliver our stated aims in practice.

Nick Harvey (North Devon): May I welcome the final publication of the Bill and also the general direction in which it travels? On the issue of ITV companies merging into one, there is clearly a strong commercial case,

[Nick Harvey]

but should not there be two prerequisites? First, there should be more rigorous news programming requirements in the light of ITN's cuts. Secondly, regional programme making should mean just that: making programmes in the regions and not centrally with changing regional backdrops.

I welcome the general thrust of the cross-media ownership rules that the Secretary of State is introducing. If each sector is competitive, we do not need to be so pre-occupied with cross-media ownership issues. However, if she is to allow The News Corporation potentially to own the Channel 5 licence, will she consider as a quid pro quo allowing Ofcom to regulate the platforms as Ofgem does in the energy sector? The sort of battle that has occurred between Sky Television and ITV about access to satellite services could then be resolved by the regulator and not by a two-year process going through the competition authorities.

Will the Secretary of State now promote free-to-air digital terrestrial television as a way of salvaging that platform? Is there any country with three viable subscription platforms?

Finally, will the Secretary of State ensure that the new technologies, especially in broadband, are available throughout the country? When telephone, television and radio became available, it was a matter of public policy that everybody everywhere, however remote the place where they lived, obtained those technologies. A market would never have delivered any of them. Will she ensure that everybody in the country gets access to the new technologies on equal terms?

Tessa Jowell: First, in relation to the potential for consolidation of ITV, it is important to be clear that we are proposing to remove the media ownership obstacle. Clearly, the competition rules will still apply. In the event of the ITV companies seeking to merge, the proposed merger would no doubt be considered by the Competition Commission. Secondly, yes, the Bill contains provision for the proper continued networking of ITV. Thirdly, when the hon. Gentleman has an opportunity to study the detail of the Bill, he will also see that we have included provision for ITV news to be properly funded. There is, rightly, considerable concern about the drop in value of the contract and the consequence for the quality of news coverage.

On platform regulation, Oftel and the Office of Fair Trading will have concurrent powers. Access for broadcasters to the satellite platform will be fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory, and that will be overseen by Ofcom. Who knows who might want to buy Channel 5 if it ever came up for sale? Many American, Australian, Canadian and European media companies could be interested. The important point is that we will ensure, through tough content regulation, that we preserve the distinctiveness of British broadcasting while opening up the possibility of investment from all over the world.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does not the health of our democracy, to use my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's words, depend on there being no weakening of media ownership rules? It would be entirely undesirable for a situation to develop whereby one or two individuals or companies could own more of the press and television than they do now. There is great concern about that, certainly among Labour Members.

Tessa Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, which in a sense makes the case for the proposals that I have set out. We hope that we are striking a proper balance between competition and the benefits that it will bring to UK media: competition that is, where necessary, tempered by regulation in the interests of preserving many voices—diversity—through a plurality of owners.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Three times the right hon. Lady talked about a regulatory light touch. Does not she accept that by tinkering with the ownership rules, she will create a situation whereby the Silvio Berlusconis of this world, who run porno channels in Italy, could take over ITV, but Rupert Murdoch, who owns *The Times* and *The Sun*, could not?

Tessa Jowell: Currently, ownership is open to people who are resident in the European economic area. That is precisely why we decided to make changes in relation to Channel 5 and to loosening cross-media ownership rules. ITV is a major national broadcaster, commanding an audience share of at least 25 per cent., and a major source of news for many people. It is right that we maintain a limit on the degree of cross-ownership as regards major newspaper proprietors and the ownership of ITV.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I welcome most of what my right hon. Friend said, but I want to raise a couple of points.

If I asked hon. Members who produced "Friends", "The Forsyte Saga", "Big Brother" or "Bertie and Elizabeth", they probably would not be able to say. What is important is not how one watches, but what one watches. What needs careful regulation is not who owns the overarching companies, but who owns the production companies.

Will my right hon. Friend allow a free vote in the House on whether the BBC should be regulated by Ofcom? It seems to me that only the Executive are against the BBC being regulated by Ofcom; certainly, it is not the wish of the House.

On digital satellite, will she ensure that the underlying software is not owned by the company that runs the platform, so that many software designers can put their games and other information on to the platform in an open, not a closed, format?

Tessa Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. His last point, which raised competition issues, will be a matter for Ofcom and the Office of Fair Trading. Secondly, on the governance of the BBC and its relationship with Ofcom, I hope that I have made the extent of overlap and counter-accountability clear. The chairman of the BBC governors has made changes largely in response to the debate that took place in Parliament on the Office of Communications Act 2002 to tackle transparency and accountability, and separate the governors' role as a regulatory body from that as an executive body. I welcome that.

My hon. Friend is right that much of the detail of our debate on the Communications Bill will pass most people by. However, I hope that the benefits will be apparent:

rich, vibrant television; good, distinctively British content; and a flourishing broadcasting and media industry that will maintain our position as a world leader.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Will the Secretary of State answer the question that her hon. Friend—and mine—the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) asked about whether hon. Members will be given a free vote on the BBC? Will she also clarify the rules that she intends to set out for ITN? As she pointed out, it has experienced a diminution in investment in recent years. Does she intend to change ITN's ownership structure?

Tessa Jowell: First, whether hon. Members vote on the relationship between the BBC and Ofcom is a matter for the House. Pre-legislative scrutiny will take place; the Bill will be introduced when time allows, and I am sure that the relationship between Ofcom and the BBC will form one of the key debates that shape our proceedings on the Bill.

Secondly, the hon. Lady asked about the ownership structure of the nominated news providers. When she has a chance to study our proposals, it will be clear to her that they intend to alter the current ownership structure, which deters the necessary investment that I mentioned. We propose to alter the balance of the ownership structure and thus allow for three owners rather than the current five, with a maximum share of 40 per cent. We proposed that because we believe that it will provide much needed investment for the nominated news provider.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I want to take my right hon. Friend back to the consolidation of ITV. If we get a single company, will we have only one broadcaster or will we keep the regional broadcasters, such as Border television in my area? Does the Bill include plans to change the boundaries? To echo a point that has already been made, will the Bill contain an assurance that news programmes will not only be made in but broadcast from the regions?

Tessa Jowell: When my hon. Friend has a chance to study the Bill and the policy narrative, I think that he will be pleased to read assurances about both points. Clear quotas for regional and independent productions will be set for the ITV companies at tier two, which will make judgments about qualitative performance. As I said in answer to an earlier question, ITV's network system with its regional character will be able to continue.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Secretary of State is introducing a Bill on behalf of two Departments that tries to promote broadband in Britain. Does she agree that that requires action across Government? Will she examine proposals on which her colleagues in the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions are working to charge lane rental access fees to telecommunications companies that want to put in new broadband infrastructure, and ensure that they do not work directly against the Bill's objectives?

Tessa Jowell: Yes, we are working across Government on smart procurement. Prices are falling and, as the hon. Gentleman suggested, that is precisely the way in which to encourage further penetration and take-up.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): My right hon. Friend has twice referred to the inadequacy of the previous legislation, including the Broadcasting Act 1996. One of the problems with that Act was that it was out of date before it even reached the statute book. Does my right hon. Friend accept that she is legislating not for an Act for May 2002 but for an Act that will have to last until the end of this decade or the beginning of the next one? That is the perspective that she should adopt, with regard not only to cross-media ownership—in which I think that she is mistaken in imposing these pretty arbitrary percentages, which are comparable to those in the 1996 Act—but to the way in which Ofcom conducts itself.

Will my right hon. Friend take seriously into account the proposals, published in the Select Committee's report last week, that both Ofcom and the BBC board of governors should meet in public in the way that the Federal Communications Commission does? Will she also assure the House that, when she speaks about the need for different voices, that will include giving a proper position to community radio, which she has not referred to today?

Tessa Jowell: I studied the Select Committee report at the weekend and was particularly taken by the proposals concerning the governance of Ofcom and the BBC. Ofcom will clearly operate on the Nolan principles. It will be a matter for the bodies themselves whether they meet in public; clearly, there will be occasions on which matters of commercial sensitivity will need to be considered. I entirely share my right hon. Friend's view, however, that, as an operating principle, public bodies such as these should meet in public, and provide specific reasons as to why it might be necessary to meet in camera from time to time.

I know that the Select Committee has been very interested in the position of community and access radio, and in the present uncertainty over restricted service licences. I hope that both spectrum planning and the results of the current access radio pilots will be able to inform future policy in this area. In principle, we see great opportunities for the development of community radio and considerable opportunity for the extension of the restricted service licences.

The answer to my right hon. Friend's final question is yes, it is our ambition to view this as legislation that will last, certainly through the analogue switch-off. We are talking about legislation that should stand the test of time for eight to 10 years. It is important that it should be subject to the degree of scrutiny that we are proposing, to ensure that it is fit for that very demanding future.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Does the Secretary of State realise that, in the course of answering questions this afternoon, she has twice suggested that competition rules will be relied on to deliver plurality and diversity where media ownership rules have disappeared? If she wishes to say that the British broadcasting and communications industries are open for investment and will be flexible in the future, with the least possible regulation consistent with efficiency, does she not realise that competition is the mechanism by which that can be achieved? Will she at least acknowledge that, in the course of the coming scrutiny, she will be open to the argument that competition might be a more efficient and lighter-touch way of delivering this objective?

Tessa Jowell: It is important that the House takes account of the extent to which this is a deregulatory Bill

[Tessa Jowell]

in relation to cross-media ownership and media ownership. We have scrapped at least 12 of the existing media ownership and cross-media ownership rules, keeping only a minimum of three rules that we believe are necessary for the preservation of plurality and diversity. There will certainly be plenty of opportunity during the passage of the Bill, and in the Government's response to the Select Committee report, to reflect on why a degree of regulation is important to secure the essential place of the media in our democracy.

I should add that it is clear from the regimes operating in other European countries, and indeed throughout the world, that those countries are trying increasingly to use a system underpinned by competition, while recognising—just as we do—that a plurality of voices and a diversity of content cannot be guaranteed by competition alone.

Jim Sheridan (West Renfrewshire): Can my right hon. Friend give us any idea of the protection, if any, that will be offered to those who are subjected to extremely spurious allegations through the internet, which are offensive to both friends and family? What options will the Bill provide to enable those responsible to be dealt with?

Tessa Jowell: As my hon. Friend will know, we do not propose any specific regulation of the internet, but I understand that the libel laws apply to internet use, as does other legislation such as the Obscene Publications Act 1959. We are working with the Internet Watch Foundation to encourage and promote more self-regulation through the introduction of codes, and although Ofcom will have no regulatory role in that context, it will have an interest.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Both Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party look forward to getting their teeth into the meat of the Bill.

May I suggest that the Secretary of State add a third principle to her twin principles of regulation—or at least that the House add a third? I refer to democratic accountability. Many people in Scotland and Wales feel that Ofcom, in its present form, represents a step backwards from that principle.

Will the Secretary of State tell us a little more about how Ofcom will work with the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales, and indeed in Northern Ireland, where there are unique communications issues? For example, will her tests for the digital switch-on apply to the United Kingdom as a whole, or can they be applied to its constituent nations?

Tessa Jowell: We take those points very seriously. Ofcom must be seen, and trusted, as a body with the capacity to represent the interests of the United Kingdom as a whole. That is why—as I hope I have made clear—each devolved nation will be represented on both the content board and the consumers panel. There will also be an Ofcom office in each devolved nation. Moreover, Ofcom's terms of reference—the principles that will guide its operations—will include the need to take account of the needs and interests of the regions.

Mr. Calum MacDonald (Western Isles): Does my right hon. Friend agree that broadcasting policy must reflect the full cultural diversity of the United Kingdom, particularly the indigenous minority languages of Gaelic and, of course, Welsh? I am glad that Gaelic broadcasting will continue to be part of the Government's overall responsibility. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me, and representatives of the Gaelic broadcasting community, to discuss these matters further in the spirit of consultation of which she has spoken?

Tessa Jowell: I should be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. I have already discussed the matter with the Secretary of State for Scotland, in the light of recommendations in the Milne report. It is clear that much can be done to improve the range and quality of Gaelic broadcasting, and that Ofcom should and will have a role in that.

Lady Hermon (North Down): I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware of the broadcasting obligations set out in the Belfast agreement of 1998. Do the Government intend to implement those obligations in the Bill? If so, what discussions has the right hon. Lady had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland?

Tessa Jowell: It is important to be clear that broadcasting is a reserved not a devolved matter. As the hon. Lady noted, provisions in the Belfast agreement give certain powers to Ministers in the Assembly. In recognition of the fact that broadcasting is a reserved matter, it is not our intention that those powers should be represented in the main Bill. I have discussed the matter with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the proposals will mean much tougher external regulation for the BBC under tier one and tier two than was the case under any of her predecessors? Ofcom is essentially an economic regulator, which imposes a light-touch regulation over the commercial companies' public service broadcasting role. The ultimate backstop powers need to be heavy touch to ensure that the BBC maintains its public service roles. Does my right hon. Friend agree that giving Ofcom such powers would exclude the roles of the governors, Parliament and even the Secretary of State?

Tessa Jowell: Yes, the BBC will face tougher regulation than the other public service broadcasters. However, as I said in my opening remarks, I think that that should be the case. I also believe that the backstop powers should remain with the Secretary of State, as the BBC spends licence payers' money, and that requires a particular accountability.

Point of Order

5.6 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. On page 63 of "Erskine May", under the heading "Ministerial Accountability to Parliament", it is stated that

"it is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity. Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister".

On 26 February, my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), who is in his place on the Front Bench, asked the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions to say

"whether Mr. Martin Sixsmith was a civil servant in his Department on 22 February".

The Secretary of State answered:

"As I said earlier, Martin Sixsmith offered his resignation, which was accepted, on 15 February."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 574 .]

However, today's edition of the *Evening Standard* states that, in an astonishing turnaround, a statement from the Department apologised for the fact that it announced on 15 February that Mr. Sixsmith had resigned, when he had done nothing of the sort.

That is a very serious matter indeed. On the face of it, the House appears to have been grievously misled in exactly the terms set out in "Erskine May" and the ministerial code. Can we therefore expect—indeed, demand—the earliest possible statement and apology to the House from the Secretary of State, to set the matter straight? We deserve no less. Admittedly, there have been recent rare examples of Cabinet Ministers coming to the House and apologising for errors, even though they were less serious than this. However, this is a matter of such public interest and gravity that I hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will agree that it is no less than the Secretary of State's duty to come to the House immediately and set matters straight. If necessary he should apologise, and preferably he should resign.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I have listened very carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman has said. I have no knowledge of any statements of that kind being proposed at the moment. It is not the job of the Chair to rule on ministerial statements that have been made earlier in the House, but I have no doubt that the whole House will have heard the points that the right hon. Gentleman has made this afternoon.

BILL PRESENTED

Age Discrimination (No. 2)

Mr. Paul Burstow presented a Bill to make it unlawful to discriminate against persons on grounds of age in connection with employment or the provision of goods and services; to establish an Age Equality Commission with the function of working towards the elimination of such discrimination and promoting age equality generally; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 10 May, and to be printed [Bill 133].

Fixed-term Parliaments

5.9 pm

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for fixed-term parliaments.

Ten years ago, I was elected to the House on a policy of introducing a Bill to provide for Parliaments of a fixed term of four years. Labour's 1992 election manifesto declared:

"The general election was called only after months of on-again, off-again dithering which damaged our economy and weakened our democracy. No government with a majority should be allowed to put the interests of party above country as the Conservatives have done. Although an early election will sometimes be necessary, we will introduce as a general rule a fixed parliamentary term."

That proposal was a good one then, and I believe the argument to be a good one now. Indeed, the case has become stronger still because of recent developments, which I shall mention in a moment, but the fundamental issue is this: should one party and one person be able to fix the date of a general election to suit their own interests?

If it were suggested that one runner in a race should be able to fire the starting pistol at a moment of his choosing and, moreover, that that runner should be the one who had won the race last time, it would be considered absurd and monstrously unfair, although, no doubt, there would still be those who would defend the practice as traditional and having the merits of flexibility. Yet that is precisely what we allow in relation to general elections.

Of course all parties, all Governments and all Prime Ministers see this issue through the distorting lens of their own interests. Indeed, when I asked one of my colleagues what he thought about fixed-term Parliaments, he said, "What a good idea. What shall we say, 20 years?" It is not difficult to understand why a proposal that seems eminently sensible in opposition should begin to look less attractive in government—except that the Government have presided over a bold and ambitious programme of parliamentary and constitutional reform, which will be their great historical legacy. They have done so because they believe in reform, often against their immediate political or party self-interest, and it is in that spirit that I wish to add this further item to the programme.

Why is it possible for a Government, in the person of a Prime Minister, to fix the date of a general election? It is possible because it is a prerogative power, formerly exercised by the monarch, but, in practice, it is passed to the Prime Minister. That is why a letter arrived to tell me that I shall need to get the permission of the palace, through the good offices of the Home Secretary, before the Bill can proceed any further.

It is surely no longer acceptable to the House for the prerogative to be used in that way, as a legitimising cloak for Executive and prime ministerial power. It could also put the monarch in an invidious position, which has been glimpsed at certain politically sensitive times in the past. Not the least of the benefits of constitutionalising the prerogative power of Dissolution would be to protect the Crown against possible political difficulty and embarrassment. That would surely be an admirable golden jubilee gift from a grateful Parliament.

The present arrangements, which limit the life of Parliament without fixing the date of elections, are simply the product of historical circumstances. The Septennial

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Act 1715—which, of course, replaced the previous Triennial Acts—was designed by the Whigs as a bit of emergency propping up of the new Hanoverian monarchy. The shift from a seven-year limit to five years under the Parliament Act 1911 was an incidental by-product of House of Lords reform. At that time, Prime Minister Asquith said that the change would

"probably amount in practice to an actual working term of four years."—[*Official Report*, 21 February 1911; Vol. XXI, c. 1749.]

That is what the Bill seeks to enact.

The Bill would fix general elections at four-yearly intervals, which reflects a post-war average of 3.7 years. It would allow departures from that in the event of Governments' losing the confidence of the House, while preventing Governments from engineering bogus no-confidence votes to trigger Dissolutions. It would also give the Electoral Commission a role in setting precise dates for the election timetable.

The question of when elections are held is, or should be, a basic part of a democracy's infrastructure. In local government, it is accepted practice that they be held at regular and fixed intervals. The same practice was accepted when this House legislated to set up the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales; there was no suggestion then that the Executives of those bodies should be able to decide when they wanted to hold elections. The same practice is also accepted by the European Parliament and, indeed, by most of Europe, in which fixed four-year electoral cycles are common.

The time has surely come for Westminster to catch up. Indeed, a Prime Minister who will be the first since the war to agree to appear before a Select Committee of this House is well equipped to be the first to relinquish this prerogative power. If he remains unpersuaded, a word with Lord Callaghan might be enough to convince him that the power can be a curse, as well as a blessing. A change such as I am proposing might help him with other difficulties, too. For example, the Government would like elections to a reformed House of Lords to be tied to general elections, but as the Public Administration Committee's recent report on House of Lords reform pointed out, it is very difficult to fix the terms of those elected without first fixing general election dates.

Similar difficulties exist in relation to the new legislation on party funding. Spending controls are imposed on parties and groups for one year before a general election, but given that election dates are not fixed, the timing of that period is unclear. That creates problems for parties, pressure groups and the Electoral Commission, so it is not surprising that the commission itself is taking an interest in fixed-term Parliaments. As I said, such new factors add weight to the traditional case.

There is a further factor. We are all preoccupied with how to counter the electorate's cynicism about, and detachment from, the political process. The spectacle of parties and politicians manipulating election dates to their own advantage—a process that has intensified in the past 30 years—does nothing to counter, and much to reinforce, such cynicism. We live in a different world from the one in which Sir Stafford Cripps, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, persuaded Clement Attlee to call an election in advance of the 1950 Budget, lest the charge might be made that the electorate were being improperly bribed. On that ground alone, the case for change is surely made.

I offer one final consideration. It will not be long before speculation about the date of the next general election begins in earnest, and pencil marks around certain dates have doubtless already been made on someone's calendar. A change of the kind that I propose would close down that industry at a stroke, and would be received by the electorate with a huge collective sigh of relief. Of course, there would be losers. I am thinking of all those journalists who spend a happy year or two writing endless columns of, and filling many hours with, speculative nonsense about election dates, and who would be obliged to give their attention to something else. To be deprived of the product of their labours is, I suggest, a cross that we should all just have to bear. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Tony Wright, Mr. Graham Allen, Kevin Brennan, Mrs. Annette L. Brooke, Sir Patrick Cormack, Mr. Frank Field, Mr. Mark Fisher, Helen Jackson, Mr. Mark Oaten, Mr. Paul Tyler and Brian White.

FIXED-TERM PARLIAMENTS

Tony Wright accordingly presented a Bill to provide for fixed-term parliaments: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 19 July, and to be printed [Bill 134].

Orders of the Day

Police Reform Bill *[Lords]*

[Relevant documents: Second Report from the Home Affairs Committee, Session 2001–02, on the Police Reform Bill, HC 612; Thirteenth Report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights, HC 646, and Fifteenth Report from the Committee, HC 706, Session 2001–02, on the Police Reform Bill.]

Order for Second Reading read.

5.19 pm

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill has been considered in some detail in the other place, and today we have had the welcome and valuable report from the Home Affairs Committee. Nothing is more important to local communities than the ability to live free from crime and antisocial behaviour, and to live without the fear of being a victim of crime. The effectiveness of the police service is critical to achieving that aim. Up and down the country, dedicated and professional police officers do a difficult, and sometimes dangerous, job well, as we have seen in the past week with disturbances at a football match, the local elections and the May day demonstrations.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I am sorry to interrupt the Minister so early, but it is usual for the Home Secretary to introduce a Bill of this magnitude. The Minister has not said where the Home Secretary is or whether he is ill. If so, we all send him our best wishes for a speedy recovery, but if not, his place is here.

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has asked me to introduce the Bill this afternoon, having worked on it in great detail. Of course, it is not unusual for Home Office legislation to be introduced by Ministers other than the Home Secretary.

The Bill reflects the Government's commitment to ensuring that the police service—

Sir Patrick Cormack: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It really is extraordinary for the Home Secretary not to be present in the Chamber. As I said earlier, if he is ill we all wish him a speedy recovery, but if he is not ill he should be here as the Cabinet Minister in charge of this major legislation. I do not disparage the Minister, for whom I have a high regard, but the Home Secretary's place is in the Chamber when a major Bill is being introduced.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): That is not a matter directly for the Chair. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that it is for the Government to decide who should introduce a Bill.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that I have dealt adequately with that point of order.

Mr. Denham: The House will have noted that the Opposition prefer not to concentrate on the issues of effectiveness in fighting crime.

The Bill reflects the Government's commitment to ensuring that the police service is able to do its job as well as it can be done. It underpins the police reform that we have already developed with the police service. Our aim is to continue the reduction in crime; to reduce the fear of crime itself; to improve conviction rates and to target persistent offenders; to tackle antisocial behaviour; and to ensure public confidence in the police service.

Ahead of the legislation, we have already begun to put in place changes that do not require primary legislation. As part of our commitment to reform, we are providing the extra investment the police service needs—an extra £1.6 billion in the three years to 2003–04. In addition, as part of the Budget, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced last week that a further £87 million would be made available to the police this year for counter-terrorism and an additional £67 million to fight street crime.

Police numbers are at their highest level ever, with an increase of more than 3,000 in the nine months since March 2001. We are well on track for the Government's target of 130,000 police officers by spring 2003. The police standards unit was established in July 2001 and has already played a key role in co-ordinating between the police service, the Home Office and other agencies in developing the current campaign against street crime. We are making the best of the new technology available to the police service. The DNA database now contains more than 1.6 million profiles and the number of matches to scenes of crime was nearly 60,000 in the year to March 2002. We are rolling out Airwave and have overhauled the police information technology organisation—PITO—to ensure effective delivery of police information technology.

We are cutting the bureaucracy that ties up police time, making it possible for the first time to carry out identity parades by video, and introducing the pilot video recording of interviews, which will begin tomorrow in four police forces.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The Minister referred to rolling out Airwave. When does he intend to reply to the written questions that I tabled on 26 March about the delays to the roll-out of Airwave? Is it not the case that many forces, including my own in Cambridgeshire, will suffer many months' delay because the contracts are not being fulfilled by MmO2 and the roll-out is way behind schedule?

Mr. Denham: I was not aware that there were outstanding parliamentary questions from the hon. Gentleman, but as soon as this part of the debate is concluded I will make inquiries as to where the replies are. I know that I have signed off some, and I will pursue that point.

As with all major contracts, there have been teething problems at the outset of Airwave. However, forces such as North Yorkshire, which have been at the cutting edge, have reported its tremendous effectiveness. I believe that the development of Airwave across the police service will be a significant contribution to modern communications.

We have made clear our determination to tackle the decline in the number of specials, giving them a clearer role in the police service, improving the way in which they are recruited and deployed and giving them greater

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recognition for the work that they do. In April, we launched Centrex, the new training authority that will also be the focus for the development of best policing practice and the home of the new national centre for policing excellence.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Bearing in mind the very useful work undertaken by special constables, who will, I believe, be known as auxiliary officers from now on, would it not be better to extend their use and perhaps even remunerate them to meet the Government's goals?

Mr. Denham: I do not believe that there are any proposals to rename specials as auxiliaries. Auxiliaries is a term that the Metropolitan police force has used in the context of community support officers, which I am sure we will come to in due course. I do not believe that the House or, more importantly, the police service is faced with a choice between the development of the special constabulary and of community support officers. They are different roles—specials are, at the core, a volunteer service, whereas community support officers would be paid officials. Specials have the responsibilities of sworn constables but CSOs would not. I believe that we can look to a future in which both can play an effective role in carrying out policing and public order duties.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Following on from the question of the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), how far have the Government got in considering having part-time posts for fully qualified and trained police officers who may be past 50 or whose family commitments do not allow them to work full-time? I understand that many people would be interested. Is that likely to be possible within the next year?

Mr. Denham: I was just about to say that I hope that we are close to concluding a new agreement on police pay and conditions through the police negotiating body which will reward officers better and more fairly and give police managers the flexibility required to deliver an efficient and effective policing service that is responsive to changing operational needs. The agreement should also provide greater flexibility in the hours that police officers work, which I think would go some way towards what the hon. Gentleman wants.

We have made it a statutory duty of local authorities to work with the police service to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour. We are also putting in place a comprehensive package to tackle street crime in the 10 forces with the worst problems.

These and other measures have had an impact. Crime has fallen overall—according to the British crime survey, it has fallen by 21 per cent. since 1997. However, we are not complacent—there are still more than 5 million recorded crimes. Figures for some types of crime, particularly street robbery, rose over the past year, although in the first eight weeks of the Metropolitan police's safer streets campaign, there has been a reduction in the number of street crime allegations compared with 2001 levels. Only one crime in 10 results in a conviction, and the fear of crime remains high.

The challenge is to work with the police service to ensure that the rising number of police officers, the record resources available and the best of science and technology are used to the best effect. We must ensure that forces co-operate effectively together, make certain that the police receive the support that they need from the wider criminal justice system, make sure that best practice is identified quickly and spread and implemented appropriately across the police service, and raise the standards of forces' performance to the level of the best. That is the purpose of the Bill.

I want to outline the main elements of the Bill and, in doing so, highlight the areas where the Government intend to bring forward amendments to introduce new elements into the Bill or deal with amendments made in another place.

Part 1 is about driving up standards across the police service to the level of the best. There is, of course, already much good practice throughout the country, but the police service has not been as effective as it might be in capturing excellence and ensuring that forces learn from the successes of others. The Audit Commission has identified variations in performance that cannot be explained simply by differences in work load or by the varying circumstances faced by forces.

Part 1 is about raising standards to the performance of the best. It does three things. Through the national policing plan, it will create a coherent national framework designed to ensure that all forces are working effectively together in pursuit of excellence. It will create a framework for the promotion of best practice and ensure that some basic essential elements of policing are approached consistently. It will enable action to be taken in the rare cases where performance is shown to be persistently poor. It will do that by building on the existing tripartite structure of the police service. Throughout, it makes clear the importance of consultation with key organisations, including the Association of Police Authorities and the Association of Chief Police Officers.

Nothing in the Bill creates a national police force; nothing destroys the tripartite structure; and nothing can lead to the micro-management of forces from Whitehall. Those who want to make such claims would do better to concentrate on the issue about which the public are concerned: how we can ensure high-quality policing in every community.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): One of the organisations that has made precisely those points is my police authority, which states that the provisions of the Bill

"would radically shift the current balance of responsibility for policing away from local people and local accountability towards greater central direction".

Has the authority got that wrong?

Mr. Denham: Yes, I believe that the hon. Gentleman's police authority has got that wrong, although I recognise the concerns about the Bill that were expressed by a number of police authorities. In part, that was a wrong reading of the intents and effect of the Bill. In part, some of those concerns were addressed in another place by making it explicit in the Bill that there would be consultation with police authorities. We had always intended to do that and had made it clear in all previous speeches on the matter.

At present, the Home Secretary sets policing priorities; he determines the performance indicators under best value, but there is no single place where all the Government's strategic priorities for the service come together. The national policing plan will set out national priorities for policing: the Home Secretary's policing objectives, best value performance indicators, proposals for issuing guidance, codes of practice and regulations. It will look forward to other priorities, such as the development and roll-out of new IT systems or new targets for police numbers.

The plan will be developed after wide consultation with the national policing forum. The forum will include the APA, ACPO, other police staff associations and representatives of the voluntary sector and victim support groups. We hope that the national policing plan will be debated annually in Parliament.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Is it the intention of Ministers to make the Mayor of London one of the people who has to be statutorily consulted, and to include such a provision in the Bill?

Mr. Denham: It had not been the intention to include provision for consultation with the Mayor of London in the Bill. Part of the measure provides for consultation with appropriate local authorities—where that is the Mayor of London, he would be included in the process. No doubt the matter can be discussed further in Committee if Members choose to raise it.

The national policing plan will identify priorities for the issuing of guidance, codes of practice and regulations and will help to deliver consistently high standards across all 43 forces in England and Wales. I shall deal with the three types of measure in turn.

Regulations, which will be binding in law, will be made when, and only when, it is in the national interest that all forces adopt common practices or procedures to facilitate effective cross-border co-operation. Part 1 also extends the existing power to make regulations in respect of equipment. Regulations could determine a particular type of equipment, where it is the best available, and could also prohibit the use of certain equipment—for example, where there are concerns about its suitability on health and safety grounds.

Codes of practice will bring together established best practice and will be produced after full consultation with the police service, often using the new national centre for policing excellence. Chief officers will have to have regard to those codes, but will retain the professional discretion to decide on their application to local circumstances. Finally, guidance will continue to be issued, as at present, on a purely advisory basis. Much of it will be issued on a non-statutory basis, not only by the Home Office, but by the inspectorate, ACPO and others.

In another place, the original clause 5 was removed from the Bill. We believe that that was a wrong move. It cannot be right that a Government, or Home Secretary, who are rightly held accountable, in the public eye, on issues of law and order, have no means of taking action in support of a community suffering unacceptable levels of crime and unacceptably poor policing performance. No one would suggest that such a power is routinely needed, nor that, in the vast majority of cases, the existing means of tackling poor performance, together with the other measures taken in the Bill, will not work. However, we believe that, properly constrained, the Home Secretary needs the power to act. We will, therefore, in Committee bring back the power to direct chief officers. With that power, we will again bring forward the safeguards, welcomed by the Home Affairs Committee but implicitly rejected by the other place, to address the legitimate concerns that have been expressed about clause 5.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The right hon. Gentleman is most courteous to give way again. Is the Home Secretary proposing to delegate his powers under the Bill to the right hon. Gentleman?

Mr. Denham: I think that I shall move on.

Part 2 of the Bill establishes the independent police complaints system and a new system for the investigation of complaints—

Simon Hughes: Do the Government not yet understand the principle that was behind the Lords removing clause 5 of the Bill? Law and order is not the responsibility only of the Home Secretary; that responsibility is shared with police authorities. When things go wrong, therefore, people do not—and should not—look only to the Home Secretary to put it right. We do not have a national law and order policy; we have a national framework within which law and order is delivered locally. That is the basis of policing, and it has been for many decades.

Mr. Denham: Indeed. I am not sure, however, that the hon. Gentleman understands the nature of the debates that took place in another place. It was never suggested, and has not been suggested today, that the Home Secretary should be in the front line of addressing every problem that arises in a local police force. The issue is this: what happens in a situation in which the chief constable has clearly failed to respond and in which a police authority has failed to respond effectively? Under those circumstances, should nothing be done, or should the Home Secretary, within the constraints of the Bill in terms of giving people the ability to respond to representations and the chance to put their house in order, be able to act? The Government's view is that, at the end of the day, we should be able to act. The view of the Opposition parties, as I understand it, is that it would be better to leave people with a high crime level and a poor policing service than to do something about it. That is not acceptable.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Silly.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman says that that is silly, but that is precisely the logic of the Opposition parties on this matter. They have been so desperate to whip this up into a mythological story about centralisation, national police forces and central direction that they have failed to grasp the central issue: if chief constables and police authorities are not able to deliver, who can act on behalf of local communities? None of us expects the power to be used regularly. Clearly, it is a reserve power, as we made clear to the Select Committee, but that power should exist.

Mr. Paice: If the Minister's hysterics mean anything, will he explain why clause 4 remains in the Bill and there

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has been no effort to remove it? Under that clause, the Home Secretary will still be able to give directions to police authorities. In addition, clauses 28 and 29 deal with resignation when chief constables are not efficient. The Opposition have no problem with the Government taking a role when there is a serious breakdown in local areas. The clause that was removed, however, would clearly abolish the tripartite arrangement. That is why the clause was removed in the other place. The right hon. Gentleman's suggestion that we are opposed to the Home Secretary having any involvement whatever is massively excessive.

Mr. Denham: We will no doubt discuss this issue at greater length in Committee, but the hon. Gentleman's analysis is wrong. I do not believe that the powers available to police authorities under the current legislation—the Opposition parties have made no proposals to change it—give police authorities the ability to tackle some of the issues relating to how chief constables respond not, of course, to individual crimes and individual criminals, but to particular types of crime. Nor do I believe that it is appropriate to see the proposals in the Bill for retirement and suspension as necessarily the best way of dealing with problems of poor performance and policing practice. I believe that the powers in the original clause 5 are necessary to complete the picture.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): One of the points repeatedly made to us was that many chief constables feel that the bureaucratic burden is still increasing rather than diminishing. The creation of a standards unit separate from the inspectorate is part of that problem. Does my right hon. Friend envisage a day when the standards unit and the inspectorate will merge?

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend's question raises two issues. On the burden of information, I accept that a challenge for the police service is to rationalise the number of types of information—often similar but not identical information—that it is required to provide. That would create one set of information that would be useful for the police service in managing its affairs and in responding to various inspectorates, including the Audit Commission and others. We have some way to go, but that is the way in which we want to go.

Bob Russell (Colchester) *rose—*

Mr. Denham: I do not anticipate the merger of the inspectorate and the police standards unit, as they have different roles. The inspectorate essentially inspects all the police service all the time while the police standards unit will concentrate on particular areas of police activity and police performance. Trying to combine the two in one organisation is more difficult than maintaining them as two separate organisations. I note the prediction in the Select Committee's report, but it does not reflect the Government's view at the moment.

I should now like to make progress. Part 2 establishes the independent police complaints system and a new system for the investigation of complaints against the police and police support staff. These provisions also provide for the investigation of serious conduct matters in cases where no complaint has been made.

I wish to acknowledge the important contribution that the Select Committee on Home Affairs has made to the development of the new complaints system. Its report in the 1997–98 Session was, in many ways, the genesis of these reforms, and today's report broadly endorses the approach that we have taken in the Bill. As there has been extensive consultation with all stakeholders, there is strong support in the service for the new arrangements.

The new system will deliver better accessibility for complainants, greater openness and greater independence—particularly in relation to the investigation of more serious complaints. Improved access will be facilitated by allowing a representative of an aggrieved person or an independent body to submit a complaint on his or her behalf. Greater openness will be secured by a presumption in favour of maximum disclosure of information to a complaint, subject to a sensitivity test. Greater independence will be achieved by conferring on the Independent Police Complaints Commission powers to call in any case.

In the case of the more serious complaints—for example, those involving allegations of serious corruption or racist conduct—the commission will either manage or supervise the police investigation. In the most serious cases, the commission will itself undertake the investigation using its independent body of investigators.

I should like to mention a couple of issues on which we are considering tabling amendments to part 2 to respond to points made in Committee in another place. First, as it stands, part 2 excludes complaints that are about not the conduct of an individual, but operational decisions relating to the direction and control of a force. The Government accept that, in principle, there should be some mechanism whereby public concerns about the policing of major events can be addressed. In the most high-profile cases where serious concerns have been aired about the policing of a major event, we consider that there should be provision for the matter to be independently investigated. We are considering how that might best be done.

Secondly, we will table an amendment to part 2 to strengthen the protection afforded to police officers who report misconduct or criminal wrongdoing by other officers. It is right that in such cases the whistleblower should have the full protection afforded by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, and we will therefore seek to bring police officers within the ambit of that Act. I welcome the support of the Home Affairs Committee for that step.

We intend to make a further change to part 2. In a small number of cases, a person has not been able satisfactorily to pursue his complaint against the police because of the inability of the force to identity the officer responsible for the alleged misconduct. A gentleman—I will not mention his name without his permission—who was allegedly injured by police officers in the disturbances following the England *v.* Germany game in 1996 is a case in point. To allow for such cases, we will table amendments to make it explicit that complaints against the police can be fully investigated when no officer can be identified. If the investigation does not reveal the identity of the officers responsible, no criminal or disciplinary proceedings

against individual officers can follow, but if there is evidence of misconduct we would expect the chief officer to take responsibility and make an apology or ex gratia payment as appropriate.

Norman Baker (Lewes): We welcome the creation of the independent commission and the Government's proposed amendments. However, we are concerned that the new commission will be swamped by cases because of the availability of manpower and finance. Liberty and others estimate that the commission will deal with only 3 per cent. of complaints. What system will be in place to ensure that it is not swamped? Will it be possible to refer a genuine complaint to a higher level if the complainant so wishes once a case has been through the internal procedures, which is what happens with the local government ombudsman and councils?

Mr. Denham: We will discuss that in detail in Committee. The broad answer is that all complaints will, in the widest sense, come within the ambit of the IPCC. For example, an individual who is dissatisfied with the action taken in a substantial number of cases that would usually be resolved at force level, as at present, will be able to complain to the commission about the handling of his case. That facility is not available at the moment. Clearly, the commission's staff will carry out the investigation in only a minority of cases and the IPCC will directly manage, as opposed to supervising, a further minority of those investigations.

The critical consideration is that the rights of the complainant are built into the system so that someone who is dissatisfied with the handling of the case at a lower level is able to raise that within the commission. It was never the intention that the commission would investigate every complaint, including the malicious cases that inevitably come into the system. The protection is afforded, however. The IPCC acts as an umbrella over the whole system and is able to issue guidance to ensure that its responsibilities are carried out effectively.

Part 3 relates to the removal, suspension and disciplining of police officers. By their very nature, the powers, especially in respect of chief officers, will be used only as a last resort. This point was reinforced by the Home Affairs Committee in its report and I am happy to reiterate and agree with its view that we are concerned with removal in what will be exceptional circumstances.

Of course, a key part of the wider reform process is to strengthen the leadership of the service through better selection, better training and improved arrangements for professional performance appraisal. The question of the early departure of a chief officer should arise only in the most exceptional circumstances. The Police Act 1996 already provides for the retirement of a chief officer in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness. So powers exist for the Home Secretary to call on a police authority to exercise its powers to require the chief officer to retire.

It is against that background that the Bill makes three main changes. First, it provides for the option of resignation rather than retirement. With more chief officers being appointed in their early to mid-40s, when retirement would not be appropriate, that is a sensible change. Secondly, the Bill makes existing procedures less cumbersome. Thirdly, it enables the police authority, either on its own initiative or at the instigation of the Home Secretary, to suspend the chief officer when that is necessary for the maintenance of public confidence in the force. In another place, the Government included in the Bill procedural safeguards in response to understandable concerns raised by chief officers.

Part 4 is divided into two chapters. Chapter 1 will enable the police service to employ and make more effective use of civilian support staff in a variety of new roles. By doing so, the service will be able to free up for front-line operational duties the time of the record number of police officers that we now have and to harness the work of the extended police family in supporting the police in tackling low-level crime and antisocial behaviour. It will also enable the police service to make effective use of specialist skills in tackling crime. Chapter 1 will also allow close working between the police service and other organisations providing part of the extended police family.

Chief officers will be able to designate support staff as investigating officers, detention officers and escort officers. The police reform White Paper stressed the need to improve the skills and strength of police investigating officers. In part, we will do that by enabling officers to develop careers as investigating officers, but we also need to bring in specialist skills—in IT and finance, for example—to strengthen investigating teams. Chapter 1 will enable such people to exercise appropriate police powers.

Our recent study, "The Diary of a Police Officer", found that 43 per cent. of an officer's time was spent in the police station. We can cut that by giving appropriate police powers to support staff to carry out custody and escort duties. Chapter 1 makes that possible.

Martin Linton (Battersea): Would my right hon. Friend consider extending the power of detention and the power to demand a name and address not only to community support officers but to neighbourhood wardens and street patrols, such as the one that, I am glad to say, started in Clapham Junction this morning? The power to demand a name and address is essential for work against disorder offences.

Mr. Denham: I agree with my hon. Friend, but the Opposition parties in another place disagreed, so we will have to consider that issue in Committee.

Since the Bill was introduced, we have received representations from police forces planning to arrange the provision of detention and escort services by private sector organisations. They want employees of companies involved in that work to have access to relevant powers. Although there is no question of compulsion in that respect, we will be tabling amendments to allow that to take place. As will be the case for designated police authority support staff, powers will be granted to contracted-out staff only where the chief officer is satisfied that the individual concerned is suitable, capable and adequately trained.

Bob Russell: Does the Minister agree with me, and the Home Affairs Committee, that the Government should refrain from including in the Bill measures to allow the employment of civilians to conduct intimate body searches of people who have not even been charged?

Mr. Denham: The Select Committee's arguments on this point were thin, albeit sincere. The power to conduct

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an intimate search is only rarely used by police officers on detention duty, and the norm, as the PACE code indicates, is for qualified medical practitioners or custody nurses to carry out such searches. Indeed, I understand that last year the power was exercised on only four occasions by police officers in that role, so it would be wrong to have the idea that it is extensively used.

The Government's view is that if we are to allow civilian detention staff to carry out the duties of a police officer in the custody suite, it would be sensible to give them the full range of powers, particularly given that it is not a matter, as the hon. Gentleman said, of employing them for the purpose of conducting intimate searches, and such searches occur very rarely. I am sure that we will return to the matter in Committee, but at the moment we are not persuaded by the Select Committee's conclusions.

Mr. Mullin: If such searches are so rare, it would not cost the Government very much to concede the point, would it?

Mr. Denham: The operational issue, which will need to be considered in Committee, is whether the provision of extra police officers that might be needed to cover the remote possibility would remove the advantage of having civilian detention staff. We must consider that difficulty. The issue is not as straightforward as my hon. Friend suggests, and it would not be worth undermining the potential benefits of having civilian detention officers to cover such a rare circumstance.

Chapter 1 also introduces community support officers, which are another important way of making sure that we use the record and rising number of police officers to best effect. The Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis see the introduction of CSOs as vital to the policing of London. Following the events of 11 September, the Met diverted considerable resources from the boroughs to guard against terrorist attacks in central London, with an inevitable impact on crime away from Westminster and Docklands. The introduction of CSOs will enable the Met to return officers to fighting street crime and other crime across London.

The Met also intends to use CSOs in what we see as their primary role of providing an increased visible policing presence on the high street, in town centres and on housing estates. Fifteen other forces outside London have also expressed varying degrees of interest in CSOs. It will be a matter for chief officers, in consultation with their police authority, to decide whether community support officers are appropriate for their force area.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): May I tell the Minister how successful and popular the existing community warden scheme has been in my constituency? May I tell him also what reservations police officers in Greater Manchester have expressed to me about the CSO proposals? Does he agree that it is crucial that there is a clear explanation of the distinct legal responsibilities of conventional police officers and CSOs, particularly in respect of powers of detention? Will he be tabling amendments to clarify those powers?

Mr. Denham: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for CSOs. *[Laughter.]* My hon. Friend talked about the welcome for such measures in his constituency. At least I am listening to the interventions, unlike Opposition Front Benchers. My hon. Friend raised important issues. People will need to understand the powers that CSOs are exercising, and chief constables in particular will need to take account of that in deciding to employ and deploy CSOs.

It is worth remembering that many of the objections to CSOs are almost identical to those made against the introduction of traffic wardens in the early 1960s. It was argued that traffic wardens would be confused with police officers and would divert attention from proper policing. No one would seriously argue that today. In the 1960s, it was radical to have people working for the police service as traffic wardens. In many parts of the country, traffic warden responsibilities are now carried out by people working for the local authority. While I would not suggest for one moment that it is the most popular service in the world, everybody recognises it as necessary for the proper implementation of the law.

It is a good thing that we are not using the time of professional police officers for duties that demonstrably can be carried out, properly according to the powers laid down by Parliament, by people who are not police officers. Those who oppose this change, and therefore oppose the leadership of the largest single police force in this country who want to use these powers, should think a little more carefully about the matter because, in a few years, people will look back on this debate and wonder what the argument was about.

Mr. Cameron: The Minister will have noted what the Select Committee said about welcoming CSOs in those areas that want them, such as London, but can he guarantee that he will not use ring-fenced funding to browbeat all police forces into accepting CSOs?

Mr. Denham: It is perfectly clear in the Bill that the chief constable will have a legal duty to be satisfied about the introduction of CSOs, and there is no power in the Bill to force chief constables to make a decision that they do not believe is in the best interests of their force. However, I see nothing wrong with funds being made available for the development of CSOs. This is a new area of policy and we want to kick-start it. We want to free up police officers' time for fighting street crime and other serious crime, and I see nothing wrong with making funds available to develop CSOs.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, certainly in my area, the issue is not so much the creation of CSOs but their long-term deployment? Will he confirm that it will be the responsibility of each individual chief constable to decide how and in what circumstances those officers are deployed?

Mr. Denham: The Bill is clear; the chief constable is rightly responsible for making decisions about those officers, as well as their training and deployment.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) *rose—*

Mr. Denham: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, but then I must make progress.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the Minister and do not want to detain him for long. Will he guarantee never to compel a police force to adopt an action plan that includes the forced deployment of CSOs?

Mr. Denham: To say that there could never be a point in future—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] Let us be clear;

at some point in future it may be clear to everybody, including the community which is suffering, that policing is not being approached in the most effective way, so it would be ridiculous to go through the whole range of measures today and say, "We will never do this or that." The intention behind the Bill is not to use clause 5, when reintroduced, or any other clause to impose CSOs. However, if we are looking at established best practice, I do not want today to say that any particular measure must always be ruled out because that would be wrong and dishonest of me. I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts my assurance that the intention is not, and never has been, to use the Bill or clause 5 as a back-door route to impose CSOs.

In another place, amendments were made with the intention of wrecking the development of CSOs. We believe, as do the Metropolitan police, that the power to require a person's name and address in certain clearly defined circumstances and the power to detain someone for a limited period of time using reasonable force are important to the work of CSOs. We shall introduce amendments to restore those powers to the Bill, which also provides for chief officers, in partnership with local authorities and others, to establish community safety accreditation schemes. Such schemes will enable the work of neighbourhood and street wardens and the like to be more effectively co-ordinated with the police. Accreditation will be subject to a dual-key procedure. Both the chief officer and the local authority or other employer need to agree before any powers are conferred on wardens or security staff. The Bill specifies a more limited range of powers which may be conferred on them, compared with community support officers.

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Denham: I am sorry, but I must make progress.

During debate on those provisions in the other place, there was broad support for the proposal that the chief constable of the British Transport police should be able to establish community safety accreditation schemes. Accreditation of such security personnel would bring immediate benefits in tackling antisocial behaviour on the railways, so I propose to introduce amendments to bring the British Transport police within the ambit of the accreditation arrangements.

The other place saw fit to overturn the conclusions of its own Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee by rejecting the power to amend chapter 1 of part 4 by order. The Home Affairs Committee acknowledged that the powers of CSOs may need to be amended in the light of experience, so we shall need to look at how best to ensure that the Bill confers the necessary flexibility.

Chapter 2 of part 4 includes provisions to modify and supplement police powers. There is not time to mention all of them, so I will confine my remarks to two areas. As the law stands, an unconscious driver can avoid prosecution for a drink-driving offence because he is unable to consent to the taking of a blood sample. The Bill therefore enables a blood sample to be taken from an unconscious driver for subsequent analysis once he has regained consciousness and consents to the analysis. As now, a refusal to agree to the analysis will be a criminal offence. The Bill provides for nurses to take blood samples in routine road traffic cases, but since its introduction we have received representations from chief officers that that does not go far enough. It is important that the person taking the blood or other intimate sample is appropriately qualified and trained; their job title is irrelevant. We will therefore introduce amendments to enable qualified paramedics to take samples both under the Road Traffic Act 1988 and under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

The Bill includes measures further to enhance the effectiveness of antisocial behaviour orders. I shall not go into them in detail, but I know that they will be welcomed on both sides of the House, given our previous debates on ASBOs.

Part 6 removes the anachronistic bar on foreign nationals other than Commonwealth nationals and citizens of the Irish Republic joining the police service. As in other walks of life, recruitment to the police service should be assessed on merit and determined according to relevant objective criteria. A person's place of birth does not provide evidence of whether he or she would make a good police officer.

Finally, I shall deal with sex offender orders and give notice to the House of two more amendments that we will introduce in Committee. Sex offender orders are an important tool in the management of the most dangerous offenders living in the community. If someone previously convicted of a sex offence starts to act in such a way that the police believe that he may soon reoffend, they can apply for a sex offender order, which includes a list of prohibitions designed to prevent him reoffending. If he breaches any of those prohibitions he can be sentenced to up to five years' imprisonment. For the majority of offenders subject to an order the existing system works well, but it has become apparent that there are real problems when the police have to deal with offenders who move from one area to another part of the country or between the separate jurisdictions of the United Kingdom.

We would therefore like to amend the law in two interrelated ways. First, we propose giving police throughout the UK greater flexibility in the way in which they apply for orders and, secondly, because the original provisions applied separately to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, we propose to make them apply across the UK as a whole. In addition, we would like to provide for interim sex offender orders in England and Wales, which would allow us to deal more effectively with the most urgent cases, and follows the success of interim orders in Scotland.

The Police Reform Bill will help the police service to deliver a better and more consistent service to the public. It will build on successes over the past five years in reducing crime and tackling antisocial behaviour, while recognising that much more still needs to be done. Reform is essential if the police are to meet public expectations of improved public services; I believe that the police service recognises the need for reform, and is up to the challenge. The Bill will give it the means to get on with the job, and I commend it to the House.

6.6 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): The Minister will be congratulated by the Home Office; he was clearly given a brief to speak fast and say little, and he has succeeded admirably.

[Mr. Oliver Letwin]

This is a major Bill; it is one of the most significant Bills introduced by the Government this Session and we agree with or acquiesce in roughly 98 per cent. of it. However, we disagree almost wholly with 2 per cent. of it., as the Home Secretary knows. He knows that the House of Lords took the same position after mature reflection, because the Bill includes major issues of principle that will change entirely the relationship between the Government in Whitehall and the country's police forces. He knows those things, because he has spoken about them. However, he has chosen to make a speech in Cardiff about a Bill that he removed from this Session's legislative timetable. It is possible that he lacks influence over the business managers of the House, but that is doubtful.

It is also unlikely that the Home Secretary was entirely unaware that our debate was rescheduled for a later hour as a result of the concoction of several other parliamentary events this afternoon. We are led to believe by the evidence before us that the Home Secretary wishes the Bill, as far as possible, to disappear. I have news for him: we will not allow it to do so. We are debating a major issue which deserves consideration because the Government are taking, for understandable and perfectly upright reasons, a wrong turn in British history. We must make sure that that wrong turn is not taken.

The primary issue concerns what used to be clause 5. The Minister and the Home Secretary have consistently maintained—the Minister did so today—that it does not fundamentally alter the relationship between Whitehall and police forces. The Minister maintained that it does not give the Home Secretary a new power of direction over police forces. A reading of the clause, after the Government's propositions were half-added to it, but before its removal by the Lords, does not bear out that interpretation.

The clause is headed "Power to give directions to chief officers". It tells us that the Home Secretary, who is mentioned 21 times in the first four pages of a Bill that he does not choose to defend in the House, will have the power to ensure that whenever he, and not somebody else, judges that any police force, or any part of any police force, is not efficient—efficiency to be determined and defined by him—he may

"direct the chief officer of police of the force to prepare and submit . . . 'an action plan'".

Now, if there were merely those two subsections, we could have thought that the Home Secretary intended the initiative to lie with the chief constable, but that is not the case. In subsection (4) we are told that if the Home Secretary does not like the action plan, he has the power

"to revise that plan in accordance with the directions of the Secretary of State".

If the chief constable does not choose to revise the plan, he may then be forced

"to resubmit the plan . . . with the required revisions".

The fact is—this cannot be denied by anyone who reads the plain text of the Bill that was before us and which the Minister tells us he intends to reinstate—that the Bill, for the first time in our history, consciously gives to the Home Secretary the power to determine the way in which each of the police forces of this country goes about policing the district or districts for which that force is responsible.

It is open to argument whether that is a good thing or a bad thing, and I would have had considerable respect for the Minister's position, and in particular for the Home Secretary's position, if the Home Secretary had come to the House today and argued openly for that proposition. He believes, and I can understand that belief, that he is sitting there in Whitehall—he has said as much repeatedly in the media—holding levers which, when he pulls them, have no visible effect on policing in this country. I sympathise with that feeling of frustration.

The Home Secretary and I share many desires to see, for example, the police back on the streets of our country. I understand that he would like the power to direct chief constables how to deploy their forces, but if he wishes to have that power he ought to come and defend the proposition. There are two arguments that the Home Secretary would have needed to meet and which the Minister would have needed to address in order to carry any conviction on that point.

The first argument is one of principle. However the process starts in practice, it could all too easily end by a politician in Whitehall exercising such influence over the day-to-day activities of chief constables and of those in command of the basic command units in their territories that, in effect, he begins to be the chief of police. There is a great danger to our democracy lurking in that proposition.

I do not say that the current Government would wish to abuse that power; they would not. I do not say that an immediately future Government would be likely to abuse it; they would not. But some day, people would look back at that clause and identify it as the moment when we had begun to slip into tyranny. That is too great a danger. *[Interruption.]* No, it is not hyperbole. The price of freedom is eternal vigilance. We are sent to the House to be vigilant. We are sent here to look forward to possibilities with which legislation is pregnant, and the Bill is pregnant with that possibility.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham): It is a strange and novel concept that the Conservative party is the defender of freedom. We do not need to look forward. For a good example of national policing, should we not look back to 1984 and 1985, when many constituents in North Durham and other mining communities saw the effects of a police force under the direct control of Margaret Thatcher and a Conservative Government?

Mr. Letwin: I am genuinely astonished that the hon. Gentleman does not understand that the only reason why the law-abiding citizens of this country were willing to tolerate the police action at that time was precisely because of the operational independence of the chief constables, and because it was understood that the Home Secretary of the day did not have the power to direct their actions. If the hon. Gentleman believes that that is a principle of the rule of law which is worth defending, he cannot possibly subscribe to the reinsertion of the clause.

Mr. Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that at that time police forces throughout the country were being directed centrally by Government—yes or no?

Mr. Letwin: No, they were not, in practice or in theory. The duty of the police forces of this country is and has

been for decades and, indeed, centuries to maintain the rule of law, not the rule of a politician. If the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues do not understand that distinction, they do not understand the foundations of our democracy.

There is a second argument that the Minister would have had to address. I accept that one might be willing to tolerate even such an attack on the foundations of the rule of law if there were an overwhelming practical advantage in the prevention of crime to be gained by so doing. Crime is so dreadful and so prevalent, and street crime is such a problem, that if we could be persuaded that by that means the Government would bring about a vast reduction in it, there would be a serious argument to counterpoise against the argument from the rule of law.

We must ask ourselves the question—I urge the Minister to ask himself the question, and if the Home Secretary can be contacted, I urge him to ask himself the question—whether there is the slightest shred of evidence that, of all the bodies in Britain, the Home Office is the one most able to bring about the efficient deployment of anything. This is the Home Office that has created an asylum system which, by the Home Secretary's own admission, is in chaos. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members may not like the recitation, but the truth remains visible to the population, the media and hon. Members.

This is a Home Office that has not been able to run an effective asylum system. It is a Home Office that cannot run an effective Passport Agency. It is a Home Office that has prisons with recidivism rates among the highest in the world. This is a Home Office that cannot pretend that it has vastly more efficient means at its disposal than our police forces have at theirs.

In the whole of rather a long speech delivered at a great rate, the Minister did not give us the slightest argument for supposing that there will be greater efficiency. He hardly mentioned the clause. The Select Committee on Home Affairs examined it seriously. It entertained reservations and supported the clause with great reluctance and modification, but the Home Secretary and his Minister have not chosen to take on the argument. That is extraordinary. There are two arguments against a signal clause—the clause that causes all the fuss: an argument from the rule of law and an argument from practice, and what do we hear? Nothing. A blank. A vacuum.

Sir Patrick Cormack: My hon. Friend is making an extremely good case, as he always does, and making it powerfully. Has he had any indication that the Home Secretary will play some part in the passage of the Bill? Will he be a member of the Committee? Will he at some stage stand at the Dispatch Box and defend and explain the Bill? If not, not only is the House being subjected to an insult of monumental proportions, but Henry VIII powers are being taken in absentia.

Mr. Letwin: I have not had such an indication. My hon. Friend knows, I know and the entire House knows that the reason why the Home Secretary is seeking by every means at his disposal to play down the Bill is that he does not want to enter into those two arguments. I do not know why he thinks he will lose them, but I suspect that the reason is that they are very difficult to win.

I hope that before we have ended, the Home Secretary will, in response to my hon. Friend, have played a role in the Bill. By the time the Bill is sent back to the Lords, and the Lords, as I profoundly hope, with the assistance of our allies on the Liberal Democrat Benches and the Cross Benches there, have sent it back to this House, I hope that the Home Secretary and others and I will have the chance to negotiate the clause out of existence.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Will he concede that some communities in the UK are exasperated by the performance of their local police authorities? After the authorities' failure to engage with them in improving performance, they must look elsewhere and seek the Home Secretary's intervention. If people cannot count on such intervention, must they be satisfied with the appallingly dismal service that they receive in relation to the elements of crime that are not effectively tackled in their community?

Mr. Letwin: We often hear that structure of argument, and it leads to perdition. What the hon. Lady is actually saying is that we should give up on local democracy and local accountability, and that whenever and wherever they do not happen to work at a given moment, we should seek to centralise to solve the problem. That is the structure of her argument and that of the Home Secretary. It suffers from twin deficiencies, as by centralising we threaten the foundations or our democracy and do not achieve the efficiency that she rightly seeks. There is no evidence to show that the Home Office is efficient. The real way of solving the problem in some areas to which she alludes is to increase and not reduce local accountability and the effectiveness of local communities in ensuring that they are policed in the way they want. The Government have not made any proposals in that regard. Had they done so, we would have considered them constructively and worked with the Government to try to implement them.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): To return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas), does the hon. Gentleman recognise the problem that communities face when they cannot get the services that they desire? The existing system of accountability for police forces, which operates through the police authority, is not the same as local accountability to locally and democratically elected politicians. That failure of the democratic process in the police accountability system is one of the factors that causes many of us great frustration in seeking to exercise some degree of control or influence over our local police authorities.

Mr. Letwin: I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's point. In the United States, there are 18,000 police forces and local communities feel that they have the ability to influence the way in which they are policed. In Britain, there are 43 police forces and most people do not currently feel that they have the ability at local level—or at what passes for it in Britain—to affect the way in which they are policed. I repeat that if the Government had brought forward what they should have brought forward—proposals to try to restore and increase the degree of effective local accountability—we would have been working with them and not against them. However, they have moved in the opposite direction, which will further distance people from the feeling that they can affect how they are policed.

Mr. Denham: It would probably be helpful for our further discussion if the hon. Gentleman were to expand

[Mr. Denham]

a little on the ideas that he is advancing and has aired previously on the "Today" programme. Is he suggesting the direct election of police chiefs at local level? Is he saying that the police force should come under the control of the local county council—or what? It would be very helpful to the House to hear exactly what he is proposing.

Mr. Letwin: We will, in due course—*[Laughter.]* In due course and in our own time, we will make our own proposals to achieve an aim that the Government should share. They have 600,000 civil servants at their disposal and they are the current Government of the United Kingdom. It was up to the Government to make proposals. As they have not done so, we will do so before the next election, and our proposals will be in tune with the general propositions that we set out at our Harrogate conference: there should be more, not less, localism and less, not more, centralisation. When we make those proposals, the Minister will have to explain why they are wrong. I suspect that he will find it a good deal more difficult to do so than we find it to show what is wrong with his proposals for centralisation.

Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman knows that his party and mine are at one on this issue. Does he agree that there is an inconsistency between the arguments that are being advanced? On the one hand it is argued that to make people feel that local government is more important and to encourage them to vote more, they should be given more power, not less. Yet on the other hand, to make people have more confidence in the police and more desire to become engaged in the local police authorities' activities and to be involved in local decisions, the Bill seeks to ensure that they have less power, not more. Surely that position is entirely inconsistent, and works against engaging the public with the police and in working alongside them and in their democratic management.

Mr. Letwin: I can only agree with the hon. Gentleman. We did not hear an argument from the Minister, so I do not know whether he is saying that centralisation will by some miracle achieve localisation, but I doubt it. I imagine that he would admit—although he did not do so—that the measures will diminish and not increase local participation and a sense in local communities that they can influence the criminal justice system. As he did not mention that position, however, he did not defend it, so we do not know what his argument is. All I know is that that argument would be difficult to mount effectively, and I suspect that that is the reason why we have not heard it.

I should like to turn now to the only other parts of the Bill with which we have major problems. Apart from a brief tour d'horizon, the Minister was again remarkably silent about them. Communication between the Home Office and the Prime Minister has also obviously been lacking. To judge from what the Prime Minister repeatedly says at Prime Minister's Question Time, it appears that he is under a misapprehension, which I shall correct. He repeatedly asserts that the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives oppose community support officers. I think—I have never quite been able to disentangle the matter, either at the time or by reading the text—that he may be under the misapprehension that community support officers and accredited schemes are the same. I do not know, but it is clear that he thinks—or says that he thinks—that we oppose those items. We do not, we never have done and we did not do so in the House of Lords. It would be as well if someone in the Home Office were to inform him of those facts.

What we have opposed and the House of Lords has rejected are two specific powers, which are in fact the same power in relation to two separate items: community support officers and accredited schemes. They are the powers of detention or semi-arrest. That is the issue that is before the House. The Minister did not address it in any detail, but it is important, and again, I understand the argument that he might have advanced for supposing that the limited power of detention is important.

The argument has been advanced by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and the Deputy Commissioner, who have a perfectly rational case. Their argument is that as they will not quickly obtain through the training schools and from the Chancellor sufficient numbers and funds to put proper numbers of policemen and women back on our streets, it would be better if they could quickly put on the streets as community support officers a group of people who do not require so much training and are rather cheaper. A rational case has also been made by local authorities, including Conservative groups, which have argued that in the absence of sufficient numbers of police officers, it would be good to put quasi-police officers on their streets through the accredited schemes.

We understand those arguments and have some genuine sympathy with them. Indeed, as we proceed with negotiations about the Bill, and as the two Houses undoubtedly find themselves in opposition to each other, we would be willing to concede that some form of experiment or restricted group of experiments should take place. There is much to be said for experimenting on this matter, but that is not what the Bill would have done or will do in the state in which the Government presented it to the House of Lords and wish to present it again.

When the Government have reinserted the missing clauses, including old clause 5, the Bill will do precisely what the Minster had to admit in response to a question that I asked him during his speech. He and his Home Secretary will be given power to use the action plans in clause 5 to force forces the length and breadth of this country to adopt community support officers in place of proper police officers. They will be able to use Treasury influence and ring fencing, and in the last resort they will be able to use clause 5. I doubt that they will ever have to do so; its existence will ensure that they do not have to use it. That is the way in which Whitehall works.

Under the Bill as it was presented to the House of Lords—and as it will go back to the Lords if the Government have their way, as they will in this House—the Government will have the ability to try to make up for policing deficiencies by introducing a wide range of community support officers who are much less trained and paid somewhat less than police officers, and who have powers that parallel, but do not quite match, those of police officers. We believe that that would be a wrong turning.

Mr. Denham: It will be important to look back at the *Official Report* to see the reply that I gave earlier. What I said about clause 5 powers was that I did not want to constrain in general the ways in which they might be used

in future; I was not dealing specifically with CSOs. I want to make that clear. Nothing in clause 5 overrules the provision elsewhere in the Bill that it must be the chief constable's decision whether he or she wishes to appoint CSOs. The hon. Gentleman is wrong in his interpretation of what clause 5 would do. It is very important that that is understood between us and that I leave him in no doubt about the fact that the chief constable decides whether CSOs are to be appointed, as the Bill makes clear. No doubt the matter can be further explored in Committee.

Mr. Letwin: Let us explore it more now. I invited the Minister to preclude the possibility of the clause being used under any circumstances to place in the action plans a requirement for CSOs. He refused to preclude that possibility. The structure of my argument is clear. I am not saying that the Home Secretary will seek overnight to use clause 5 to enforce action plans everywhere to bring about CSOs. That is not how Whitehall works. The process will start with ring fencing and Treasury pressure, beneath which lurks the threat of the use of clause 5. Which chief constable or chief superintendent in charge of a basic command unit will want to have to undertake the experiment of discovering what happens when he is forced into an action plan?

The only safeguard against that line of argument is for the Minister to say that use of the clause is absolutely precluded—in which case, let that be included in the Bill. The provision was never there, and it is not there now. We are not debating a measure that will be debated in a court of law, in which case Pepper *v.* Hart would be relevant and the Minister's assurances would be useful. We are dealing with administration, and that works through combining the massive power of the Treasury and the Home Office to enforce patterns of action on chief constables. That is what we fear. We are willing to countenance a restricted group of local experiments, but not portmanteau powers.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): The hon. Gentleman denies that he opposes the introduction of community service officers, so will he tell us what powers he would like them to have?

Mr. Letwin: They are called community support officers, but let us not worry about that.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman what powers I should like CSOs to have, because they are listed in schedule 4, which he may or may not have seen. There are vast numbers of them, and we support them all except those on detention. The powers are as follows: the power to issue fixed penalty notices; the power to require a name and address; the power to use reasonable force, which, oddly, survived, although it will not be necessary if the detention order is removed; powers relating to alcohol consumption and the confiscation of alcohol; powers relating to the confiscation of tobacco; powers relating to entry to save life or limb; powers relating to seizure of vehicles; powers relating to abandoned vehicles; powers relating to carrying out road checks; powers relating to cordoned areas; and powers to stop and search vehicles in authorised areas.

As we have said—I hope that the hon. Gentleman will mention this to the Prime Minister, as he may have been the source of the Prime Minister's confusion in the past—our subscribing to all those powers is not the same as opposing CSOs. It is important that political debate is conducted honestly, not on the basis of smears.

Lady Hermon (North Down): Would the hon. Gentleman feel more comfortable with CSOs having the power to detain if the form of declaration in clause 68 was extended to them, so that they would have to declare that they would uphold fundamental human rights and accord equal respect to all people? That would refer them to the power of detention in the Human Rights Act 1998. Would that clarify the matter and ease the hon. Gentleman's concerns?

Mr. Letwin: It might slightly, but we are dealing more with a practical problem than a question of the legal framework.

The signal moment when the state expresses its power over the citizen is the moment of arrest. That is the single most important thing that the state can do to a citizen. Ultimately, it underlies the rest of the panoply of the state's powers—for example, as regards taxation. One has to pay one's taxes because one might be arrested and put in prison if one does not. The moment of arrest is not a minor issue: it is the crux of the relationship between state and citizen. In this country, it has for many years been carried out exclusively by people who hold the office of constable or are otherwise very highly trained—for example, Customs and Excise officials. The whole purpose of these measures, if applied nationally, is to avoid the need for the individuals concerned to be so highly trained and to have such authorities, duties, obligations and constraints as police officers have. Were it not so, there would be no point in introducing CSOs. They would not be needed if they had the same level of training, expertise, authorities and obligations, because they would be police officers.

Methods are being devised to enable groups such as Transport for London to police, say, the buses—it could be a local area—at their own expense through a contract with the Metropolitan police. A similar method already obtains in another of our great cities. Those are perfectly acceptable means of carrying forward a programme for bringing more money into policing. If CSOs and accredited officers are given the power of detention, that is the signal moment at which the trained constable, with all that that term implies, ceases to be the principal person in England and Wales who can arrest people. We should not take that lightly.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): What about a citizen's arrest?

Mr. Letwin: As the Under-Secretary says from a sedentary position, apart from the rare occurrence of a citizen's arrest.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham): As the Under-Secretary said, in some circumstances individuals can exercise the power of arrest. The hon. Gentleman should accept that that is the current position in law, not—in error, I am sure—misrepresent the situation to the House.

Mr. Letwin: I do accept it, because it is true. That is why I said so. At least I try to be truthful.

[Mr. Letwin]

There is a point that may have eluded the hon. Gentleman. When one citizen arrests another, the power of the state is not being used to make the arrest, but the people we are discussing will be regarded by the general public—with good reason—as expressions of the power of the state. It is extraordinarily important that those individuals should be endowed with sufficient resources in their training, obligations and many other respects so that they do it in the best possible way. That is why we heartily subscribe to the independent complaints procedure in the Bill.

We are all trying to make the police better at arresting people, then along comes the Minister with what is in effect a framework for a national plan for less well trained community support officers and accredited officers who will effectively, if with some limitations, carry out the power of arrest without the necessary apparatus to protect the citizen. That is a dangerous way to go. It is a substitute for the way that we should be going, about which I thought that I was in agreement with the Home Secretary. We want to see our police forces back on our streets taking control, not other people.

Ian Lucas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. First, the law bestows on an individual the power to arrest another. We are discussing the rule of law and specific circumstances under which we will allow one person to arrest another. The Bill provides for accreditation and training schemes to deal with such circumstances. Community support officers will be trained within the limits that the Bill sets out. It is simply incorrect to say that the Bill does not deal with the fundamental right of one individual to arrest another.

Mr. Letwin: The difficulty with the hon. Gentleman's argument is that it ignores the facts. Some—I believe that it may be only one—of our police forces want to employ CSOs because they believe that the training period will last approximately three weeks, in huge contrast to training a constable. The police believe that they can get CSOs on to the streets quickly, without undergoing prolonged training.

The hon. Gentleman misses another point. The advantage to the Treasury is that CSOs will be cheaper; they will not be paid as much as constables. That is another reason for the Government's wish to proceed with them. The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but the Home Secretary has admitted it. He said that they were cheaper. *[Interruption.]* The Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs says that that is not a bad reason.

As long as CSOs are not arresting citizens, I say, "Hear, hear." All the other powers are fine; of course I back support for the police. We would agree to conducting an experiment, which I hope will ultimately happen, but introducing a measure on a national scale whereby people with three weeks' training and on lower pay wander around arresting people is a bad direction for our police forces to follow.

Mr. Mike O'Brien (North Warwickshire): The hon. Gentleman wills the end but not the means. He wants CSOs, but he will not give them the power to do the job. Indeed, his proposal would almost make fools of them. He says that he supports giving them the power to impose fixed penalty notices and, therefore, to demand the name and address of the person involved. However, under his proposals a person who refused to provide the information could simply walk away and the CSO would have no power to detain until a police officer arrived. The hon. Gentleman would make fools of the CSOs.

Mr. Letwin: I find that argument extraordinary because earlier the Minister rightly defended traffic wardens. He defended them against nobody because no one opposes them. According to the hon. Gentleman's argument, traffic wardens would be useless, yet they are not. We perceive CSOs and accredited officers as useful. However, the system whereby traffic wardens impose fixed penalty notices works well. *[Interruption.]* The Minister knows that well, despite his sedentary chuntering. The number of people who pretend that they are not the person with whom the traffic warden is dealing is nugatory.

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Number plates.

Mr. Letwin: It is true that the notice is attached to the number plate, but there are few instances of people trying to deny their identity or ownership of the car. That is not the pattern of action. When a fixed penalty notice is issued by somebody in a uniform, people in this country are willing to accept that on the whole.

If the Minister or the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) had in mind great crooks or a gang of violent youths, let us consider the power of detention that they believe will salvage the situation. The circumstances are utterly different from those with which traffic wardens deal. How will a 30-minute power of detention, until a policemen arrives, tackle the problem effectively? Why will everything be put right in that period?

Mr. O'Brien: A traffic warden is in an entirely different position from a CSO. The number plate is the issue for a traffic warden, whereas in the sort of circumstances that the hon. Gentleman describes, a CSO would require a name and address. One of the main problems that police officers constantly experience when they nick someone is getting the correct information about identity. If CSOs do not believe that the person has provided the correct identity, they must have the power to detain the individual till a police officer arrives and decides whether to exercise his full powers of arrest. Without that power, the CSO has no real relevance. I repeat that the hon. Gentleman would make a fool of the office.

Mr. Letwin: I simply do not understand the hon. Gentleman's structural argument. I read out the list of powers, including, for example, the seizure of cars. I do not understand how lack of the ability to detain will affect that power. In Committee, we will go through case after case in which there is no such link. The hon. Gentleman said that the CSO could detain until the police officer arrived. That is not true; he can detain for 30 minutes. If no police officer arrives, he has to let the person go. The potential for practical problems in the scheme is enormous. The only rational means of deciding between

us is conducting a few experiments, not a national scheme that is imposed by the mechanics of Treasury ring fencing, allied to the hidden effects of a reinstated clause 5.

I must not speak for much longer; I have been speaking for about 50 minutes.

Mr. Mullin: Forty minutes.

Mr. Letwin: I apologise.

The critical issues are whether the former clause 5 will be reinstated—I hope that I have at least pointed out the argument to which the Minister did not want attention drawn—and whether we give powers of detention to the CSOs and the accredited schemes. I hope that hereafter we can at least debate those crucial matters, not evade them.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I remind hon. Members that the Speaker has set a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

6.47 pm

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): In keeping with the spirit of the times, the Select Committee on Home Affairs has attempted a little pre-legislative scrutiny. The report of our inquiry, which was inevitably hastier than we would like, was published this morning. We took oral evidence from all the main interested parties and took into account the deliberations in another place.

Although the welcome for the Bill has not been universal, it is fair to say that there is widespread support for the Government's general aim of improving the quality of service that the police can offer the public, especially by freeing more officers for front-line duties and giving chief officers the tools that they need to manage effectively. Above all, there is a need for the public to perceive that they are getting value for the considerable sums of public money that we invest in our police. At the moment, there is a suspicion that they are not.

I shall deal mainly with the issues that have provoked controversy: first, the provisions in part 1 that would give the Home Secretary power to intervene in local forces, down to a basic command unit. Almost all our witnesses, except, of course, the Minister believed that that was a bridge too far. As the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said, the power could easily be abused by a Home Secretary who was less scrupulous than the current incumbent.

The Association of Police Authorities was especially offended that the Bill, as originally drafted, placed the Home Secretary under no obligation to consult a local police authority before intervening. Since then, the Bill has been amended in another place, and a clause allowing the Home Secretary to direct chief officers has been removed. As the Minister said, the Government want to reintroduce a similar provision in Committee. They tabled an amendment in the other place that takes account of the widespread objections to the original proposal.

The Select Committee believes that it would be acceptable for the original clause 5 on directions to chief officers to be reinstated, together with the inclusion of the additional safeguards in Lords amendment No. 42. However, we shall watch carefully the way in which the powers are exercised.

The hon. Member for West Dorset said that we needed a few experiments to ascertain what worked. I agree, but I emphasise that we shall get a few experiments because not every force will sign up to the scheme to which he referred. Those first in the queue are therefore likely to constitute the experiments and we shall gain a clear sign of the way in which they will work.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that he would be happy with only a very limited number of experiments being allowed on the face of the Bill?

Mr. Mullin: I see no need to put them on the face of the Bill because I am confident that, initially, only a handful of forces will sign up to this. Let us see what happens. I do not have a problem with that.

It is fair to say that there is widespread scepticism about—not to say downright opposition to—the proposal for community support officers from most parts of the police, particularly in relation to the powers of detention. Strong support comes from the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, who is keen to make use of them. The Minister has been at pains to assure us that community support officers would be optional, and that if a force did not wish to use them, it need not do so. If that is the case, and given that forces such as the Met are keen to make use of them, my Committee sees no reason to object. If the experiment works, others will try. If it does not, they will not. There is nothing to be lost by trying, and, personally, I am optimistic.

On the powers of CSOs, it has been pointed out that it is unlikely that they would operate alone in potentially dangerous areas late at night. The odds are that they would be used in conjunction with fully trained police officers. A majority of the Committee took the view that the proposals should be left as they are for the time being. I also take on board the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) that CSOs would be ineffective in most situations if they did not have the power of arrest.

On complaints, there was widespread welcome for the proposed Independent Police Complaints Commission. Although some witnesses were concerned that the proposal did not go far enough, we believe that it is a big step forward and that its independence would be enhanced if its chairman were to be appointed—like the Comptroller and Auditor General—with the advice and consent of the House of Commons and not simply by the Home Secretary. Perhaps the Government could give some thought to that.

I now turn to several matters which are not in the Bill, but which, in our opinion, should be. It has been put to us, and we agree, that police officers should be brought within the scope of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998—the so-called whistleblowers Act. I welcome the Minister's commitment on that point. Secondly, we believe that there is a good case—as recent events at Yarl's Wood have demonstrated—for repealing the Riot (Damages) Act 1886 which makes police authorities liable for damage caused during a riot. This Bill may or may not be the right place to do that, but it presents a window of opportunity and the Minister might wish to reflect on this point.

Thirdly, we remain concerned about the huge and inexplicable variation—ranging from 9 to 63 per cent.—in retirements on medical grounds. The Metropolitan

[Mr. Mullin]

police have suggested a number of improvements to the regulations surrounding medical retirements and injury awards. We appreciate that, as the Minister said, these do not require primary legislation, but we would like to hear, during the course of this Bill's passage, what plans he has for dealing with this issue.

Finally, in view of the tight time scale, it would be helpful if the Home Office could reply to the Select Committee's report in time for the House to take the Government's response into account on Report. I would appreciate the Minister's assurance on that point.

In conclusion, people are crying out for more effective, visible policing. This is especially true of people in the poorer areas of the country such as the one that I represent. The problem is not organised crime, but disorganised crime. The lives of many of the people I represent have been made miserable by out-of-control youths against whom the criminal justice system is all too often ineffective. This is not simply an issue of resources. It is a matter of priorities and proper management of existing resources. I have long taken the view that a hundred policemen on bicycles would be more effective than two in a helicopter, although those propositions are not mutually exclusive.

Police officers used to live in the communities that they served, but one effect of the big pay increases awarded in the early 1980s was that they all got mortgages and moved up to the posher end of town. I remember a police inspector's wife in my constituency telling me some years ago that there were 13 policemen living in the rather short street in which she lived. By contrast, there were none at all in the vast housing estates where most of the crime and disorder is to be found.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the poorer parts of my constituency—it was the same elsewhere—were virtually abandoned by the police. If they came at all, they came in large raiding parties and glared at the residents through reinforced windshields. Today, I am glad to say, all that has changed. Thanks to a succession of enlightened chief constables and other officers of all ranks, the quality of policing in Sunderland has improved immeasurably. I believe that that is true of many cities. We have dedicated police taskforces based in the communities they serve, working with local people and other agencies to overcome the mayhem that blights the lives of too many of my constituents. They have achieved some impressive results, but, with the best will in the world, we have a long way to go before the genie is back in the bottle. I hope that the measures in the Bill will make a small contribution.

6.55 pm

Norman Baker (Lewes): This country has high standards of policing and we all wish to maintain and improve them. We support the Government's aim to drive up policing standards and to achieve a better-quality police service. Echoing the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), my colleagues and I support the vast majority of measures in the Bill; it is well-intentioned and sensible, and will go a long way towards achieving those ends. For that reason, my colleagues and I will support the Government in the Lobby tonight on Second Reading, while ensuring, as far as we can, that the Government understand the strong arguments that we shall put forward on the small minority of proposals on whose impact we disagree substantially.

One issue that is not in the Bill, but which ought to be, is police pensions. This is the great unspoken issue, the time bomb coming down the track—probably a terrible mixed metaphor, I confess. The estimate is that 13.63 per cent. of police funding nationally is now being spent on pensions, and that percentage is rising year on year. Of course, all retired police officers deserve a decent pension, but not at the expense of front-line policing. The Government have to address that issue.

In Sussex, the percentage is even higher, and my local paper, the *Evening Argus*, made the point today that, under the present system, the local authority in which a police officer is working when he or she retires picks up the entire pension requirement rather than its being spread across all the authorities in which that officer has served. I hope that the Government will consider that issue, because it discriminates disproportionately against police authorities such as Sussex.

I was pleased that the Minister acknowledged in a written parliamentary answer on 19 March that there was a need to bring "greater clarity" to pension obligations on police forces, and that the Treasury and the Home Office were reviewing their options. I hope that that process will be accelerated, and, if possible, brought forward as part of the Bill, even at this stage. My colleagues in the Lords tabled an amendment relating to pensions, and I also hope to do so as the Bill progresses in Committee.

Having identified an issue that is not in the Bill, I shall turn to those that are, and identify some which are the cause of disagreement among hon. Members and between the Opposition parties and the Government. I entirely agree with the comments made by the hon. Member for West Dorset to the effect that the original clause 5 represented dangerous centralisation. Labour Members did not like that suggestion, but I ask them to consider the clause headings in part 1 of the original Bill presented to the House of Lords: "National Policing Plan"; "Codes of practice for chief officers"; "Powers to require inspection and report"; "Directions to police authorities", a clause which contained the provision entitled, "Power to give directions to a police authority"; "Directions to chief officers", which contained the provision entitled "Power to give directions to chief officers"; "Regulation of equipment"; and "Regulation of operational procedures and practices". I accept that that last one was amended by the Government in the Lords.

All those clauses may have some validity, and there may be some reason for their introduction. The Minister explained some of that is his presentation. Taken as a whole, however, they represent a change to the traditional tripartite system that has served this country well. It may not have been created deliberately as a tripartite system, but it has evolved into one that works and gives the people of this country confidence. It provides a fair balance between the local police authority, the chief constable and central Government. The Government meddle with that arrangement at their peril and at ours. I beg them to think again about their intention to try to reinsert the original clause 5 into the Bill. It is opposed by the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and other parties in the House. I believe it is also opposed by most of the police,

and by the public. It would be a shame to spoil a good Bill by including such a controversial, destructive and debilitating measure.

The Government could command unanimity, or at least overall support. They could present to the public a united House—a House united in its determination to drive up police standards and maintain the improvement in years to come. They could ensure that those on all three Front Benches said the same, and backed them. If they want all that, they must not reinsert clause 5.

The arrogance of the Home Office lies in its belief that it can do best—that if someone fails, a superman will arrive from somewhere and suddenly make it all better; that a magic formula, to be used sparingly, can be sprinkled over police authorities, and suddenly whatever was wrong with them will be cured. I do not think that that will work, because it is undemocratic and takes power away from local people and local police authorities. I accept that local police authorities could be more democratic than they are now. That is a legitimate point, which has been made from the Labour Back Benches. Nevertheless, the Government's proposal is undemocratic.

Moreover, there is no indication that what the Home Secretary of the day will do will solve whatever problem appears to exist. Indeed, there is no guarantee that a problem will exist. How can a Home Secretary with officials in Whitehall be better able than the people of Essex, Northampton or Derbyshire to say that a problem exists in one of those areas?

Mr. Kevan Jones: What does the hon. Gentleman suggest a Government do if a police force is letting its local community down by not fighting crime, or by engaging in maladministration, corruption or other practices that lead to there being something severely wrong with that force? Is he suggesting that the Home Secretary will stand by and let that happen? What should the Government do when the local community has clearly lost confidence in its police force, and there are issues of concern for that community and possibly for the nation?

Norman Baker: If the community feels there is a problem, it should have power to take control and rectify it. It is the community that will suffer. If there is a problem in Derbyshire, the people of Derbyshire will suffer. They should be able to remedy the problem, rather than relying on the Home Secretary in London.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) failed to answer this question; I wonder whether the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) will be able to do so.

What powers has the hon. Gentleman in mind to deal with the problem raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones), if not those of the existing police authorities? Police authorities may not always be relied on to take effective action, although we hope that will be possible in the vast majority of cases.

Norman Baker: The question is based on the false premise that if there is a problem, it can be solved by the Home Secretary of the day. That makes no sense. Powers are already in place; indeed, the Home Secretary has powers. There are arrangements for independent inspections, for example. I would like to see a modified police authority that was more democratically accountable to its local community. That is the answer.

When there is a problem, the power should not inevitably go to the next level in Government, which would mean that eventually—regardless of the nature of the problem and the sphere in which it occurred—the Prime Minister would deal with it. That is not the way in which we organise things in this country. We have to trust local communities and local democracy. I refer the Minister to a paper on regional government produced by his own Government. Clearly, those in other parts of Government believe in local democracy; it is a shame that the Home Office apparently does not.

Mr. Kevan Jones: I still have not received an answer to my question. May I draw an analogy that relates to what was said by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin)? Is the hon. Member for Lewes suggesting that local police chiefs and police authorities should be directly elected?

Norman Baker: I do not think it would be very sensible to elect local police chiefs, and as far as I know no one in the House or elsewhere has suggested that, but there is an argument about who should choose—or elect, if you like—police authorities, which is perfectly proper. The hon. Gentleman may recall that when his party was in opposition, it—along with the Liberal Democrats, if memory serves me—strongly opposed the Conservative Government's proposed measures to stitch up police authorities. There is a legitimate way in which police authorities can be more accountable, and can be seen to be more responsive to their communities. We should aim for that, rather than giving blanket powers to the Home Secretary.

Labour Members have failed to answer another question. Do they not recognise, in their hearts, the dangers of handing powers such as these—albeit reserve powers—to a Home Secretary? I do not necessarily refer to the present Home Secretary. I ask Labour Members to imagine the worst possible Conservative Home Secretary, the Conservative Home Secretary whom they see in their worst nightmares. What would he or she do with such powers?

We are legislating not just for tomorrow, but for a long time ahead. We must therefore ensure that there is a separation of powers relating to local accountability: that is what democracy relies on. The Home Secretary's proposals undermine a system of that kind, and create a potentially dangerous situation. I ask Labour Members to accept what I have said, and I think that in their hearts many will.

Simon Hughes: Does it not follow from some of what has been said so far that the country has relied on people who are not politicians to enforce and uphold the law—the courts, with independent judges or magistrates, and the police, who come with no party political manifesto or position? That is a fundamental principle, and that is why Home Secretaries, who are politicians, should be kept away from these levers of power while police chiefs, who are not politicians, should be given access to them.

Norman Baker: My hon. Friend makes a persuasive point, as always.

[Norman Baker]

My colleagues and I are determined to resist the reinsertion of clause 5. I believe that that applies to the Conservatives as well. The Minister will have to believe that we are united in this regard, and that we are not going to give way. Certainly I am not going to give way. There can be as much ping-pong as the Minister wants, but that is our position. We do not intend to give way on such an important principle.

The Bill proposes the establishment of an Independent Police [redacted] Commission. As I said in an intervention on the [redacted] speech, my colleagues and I welcome such a sensible [redacted] which is long overdue and will do much to restore confidence in the police. I also welcome the suggested extensions of the commission's power. The Minister said he would table amendments relating to three issues in that context, and I think that sensible. I ask him, however, to reflect on my comment that the commission might be swamped by a huge number of complaints. People who have not thought it worthwhile to complain so far because, rightly or wrongly, they have assumed that they will not be given a fair hearing might want to complain to an independent body.

There may be a small secretariat, for want of a better word, dealing with relatively few cases—high-profile cases—and, in effect, relying on the police to investigate 98 per cent. of cases. That is welcome as far as it goes, but I think the public want to feel confident that if they are not satisfied with the police response, the case can be referred to the commission and examined independently. Many complaints to local authorities about their services are settled through an in-house council complaints procedure, but if complainants are still dissatisfied they have the right to go to the local government ombudsman. I think the same right should be given in this instance.

That right, however, will be worth nothing if there is no capacity for dealing with complaints that are referred—if the commission ends up picking and choosing, because it simply cannot cope with the river of complaints. The commission must be properly financed and properly staffed if it is to gain public confidence.

Let me say something about clause 19 of the original Bill, and the comments of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which was concerned about what the Government had proposed in relation to the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. The report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights said:

"Clause 19(2) would allow for the inclusion of the application of the relevant provision of the 2000 Act to Commission investigations, but does not require this. As a result, there is a risk that an Order made by the Secretary of State might fail to contain the provisions of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers 2000 Act designed to protect human rights. Such an Order might be invalid as breaching the 2000 Act, and would be in considerable danger of being invalid as violating the Convention right under article 8 of the ECHR."

The Minister needs to deal with that matter in Standing Committee.

I turn now to part 3 of the Bill. Liberal Democrat Members retain concerns about clause 31, which used to be clause 30. It deals with the power of the Secretary of State to remove senior officers. That is a further example of the centralising tendency. The Home Secretary wants to take to himself powers that might best be left elsewhere.

Clause 31 is headed "Removal etc. of senior officers at the instance of the Secretary of State". To mix metaphors again, I believe that that should send shivers down spines and set alarm bells ringing at the same time. It is an extensive and draconian power.

What is wrong with allowing police authorities to deal with that matter, as has been the position so far? How many problems have arisen? As it happens, the Home Secretary was already able to get rid of a chief constable by the slightly back-door method of issuing a press release, as happened with Paul Whitehouse, the former chief constable of Sussex. The proposed power would mean that chief constables would always be looking over their shoulders, wondering what the Home Secretary of the day was expecting of them. They would worry about whether they were complying with a police plan, or whether they should have community support officers in their areas, given that the police authorities next door and down the road had them. If they did not have such officers, they would worry about being asked to explain why, and wonder whether they would get a black mark.

In addition, let us suppose that a chief constable undertook an experiment such as the one launched in Lambeth regarding the enforcement of the law relating to cannabis. What would happen if the Home Secretary of the day disliked such a plan? Many hon. Members would be violently opposed to such experiments, so where would that leave the chief constable? The power proposed in the Bill would make chief constables less willing to make such judgments and take such chances. It is the wrong power to take, and I hope that the Government will reconsider.

I turn now to part 4, the other controversial part of the Bill. The ideal structure for police in this country would involve more police officers. Every hon. Member would support that. To their credit, the Government have finally adopted a strategy of recruiting more police officers—albeit after a long lead-in period. We are just about back to above 1997 levels, although some police authority areas are still below them. We are approaching the Government's target of 130,000 officers, and that is welcome.

Another problem is retention, as I and other hon. Members have pointed out in previous debates on this matter. There is no point in pouring police in at one end of the colander, if they are only to come out of the other. One or two police authority areas have poor retention levels.

In an intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) referred to the proposal in the Liberal Democrat general election manifesto that part-time officers should be employed on a retained basis. I was pleased to hear the Minister suggest that they may have a role. Some people may be too old to want to be full-time officers, but they may not want to retire. Their great experience means that they may have a great deal to give the community. It would be folly to lose such people, who may be prepared to continue to work limited hours. We must find a way to retain them.

Mr. Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Baker: No. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I have given way to him twice.

People may not want to work as full-time officers for various reasons. For instance, a mother who has recently given birth may wish to ease her way back into the police force. I hope that the Government will consider seriously the proposal that properly trained officers could work part-time.

Another question concerns specials. They have not been mentioned much today, but their role in policing is very valuable, as I am sure hon. Members of all parties will accept. In December 1971, there were 29,992 specials, whereas on 30 December 2001, there were only 12,068. That is a fall of more than 50 per cent. in the numbers of specials over that period. In fact, there has been a fall of 7,000 since the Government came to power in 1997. I am not making a party point, as the figure was dropping under the previous Conservative Government. Nothing has been done to arrest the decline. *[Interruption.]* As far as I know, there was no fall in the number of specials under the last Liberal Government of 1906, so my party can claim to be immune from the problem.

Over the lifetime of this Government, there has been a fall in the number of specials in my area of Sussex. There were 465 specials in 1997, and there are 301 now. Specials are valuable. They are properly trained police officers, who do not have the side effects—if I may put it that way—that community support officers might have. However, it seems that little enough is being done to retain them.

I hope that the Government will consider establishing an annual bounty—some sort of fixed allowance—for specials, as that would give them some recognition. I accept that there would have to be some rostering if such a proposal were to go forward. I believe that the Government told the House of Lords that they would consider such a proposal, and I very much hope that they do. We have to arrest the decline in specials—no pun intended.

Community support officers present a more difficult problem. They represent yet another tier of policing, an idea that the Liberal Democrat party put forward first, in our manifesto. Like the hon. Member for West Dorset, therefore, I object to the Prime Minister saying that we have been totally opposed to CSOs. We have not: we have opposed the powers that the Government have been willing to give them, but that is not the same thing.

If the CSOs are to command support in post, they must first be recognisable, which means that they must have a common uniform. Secondly, they must have one set of powers that does not vary between areas. Thirdly, they must be properly trained, by the police. Fourthly, they must be either police or local authority employees. We are against accreditation by external bodies. We do not want accredited officers to be employed by anyone other than the police or local authorities, and the same goes for CSOs.

We want simplicity and accountability. The Government scheme is something of a hotch-potch. It will lead to misunderstanding among the public about exactly who is doing what in which area. People will not know who controls the CSOs; to whom complaints should be made; or what powers the officers may have. That is a dangerous road down which to go. For example, a citizen may genuinely believe that a CSO who wishes to detain him, or issue him with a fixed penalty ticket, does not have the power to do so as CSOs elsewhere in the country do not have that power. That is a recipe for disaster. We need clarity and accountability. I fear that the Bill does not provide them.

Another way to reduce the number of tiers would be to wrap up traffic wardens in one of the groups. There is no reason why traffic wardens should be a discrete group, nor why they should not have enhanced powers and act in a more effective manner. For example, traffic wardens can antagonise motorists by giving out parking tickets, but they are unable to deal with problems with which people locally—in the area or the street—want someone to deal. We need to look at the powers of traffic wardens.

Mr. Letwin: Has the hon. Gentleman had a moment to consider the point made by the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), who wondered whether the power of detention was necessary to make the other powers operative? Does the hon. Gentleman consider that the power of detention is necessary in connection with powers such as giving notices for fixed penalties under road traffic legislation, or dealing with dog fouling, or in connection with environmental protection legislation, or in connection with the confiscation of alcohol or tobacco?

Norman Baker: The power of detention is very significant, which is one reason why my colleagues have opposed its being given to people who are not properly trained police officers. That significant power should rest only with the police. People associate the power of arrest with those who wear the police uniform, and they should know that they cannot be arrested by those who wear a different uniform. Allowing other people to have that power is a very dangerous road down which to go, and we intend to continue to oppose that right to detain. There is an argument about how many powers those officers should have. I make no secret of the fact that we are dubious of some of the powers in the schedule.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I suggested that fixed penalty notices in particular would require the identity of the person—the name and address—to be given. Indeed, if a person refused to give his or her name and address, a fixed penalty notice could not be issued and the community support officer would be faced with a very limited choice: he could either use his citizen's power of arrest or let the person go. In practice, would not the hon. Gentleman's suggestion put the CSO in the intolerable position of having to let the person go and not being able to detain him until a police officer arrived?

Norman Baker: First, depending on the offence, citizen's arrest would still apply. That point was made earlier by the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian Lucas). Secondly, people do abscond from police officers. They do so very effectively on occasion—the police officers are unable to catch them. However, I understand the serious point made by the hon. Member for North Warwickshire.

Mr. Denham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Baker: In a second; I am answering the question that the Minister's colleague asked.

The serious point that the hon. Gentleman makes is one reason why we have to consider the powers given to CSOs. I would personally wish them to have powers that were not

[Norman Baker]

likely to put them in the situation to which he refers. I would wish them to have powers, for example, in relation to untaxed vehicles—a major problem—and powers similar to those exercised by traffic wardens. They could have a range of non-confrontational powers, such as acting as eyes and ears for the police and assisting constables in the exercise of their duties. Those powers would be straightforward and would not put CSOs in the position to which the hon. Gentleman refers. He raises a genuine issue, which is why we need carefully to consider the range of powers that CSOs are given.

Mr. Denham: I should be grateful to the hon. Gentleman if he would enlighten me as to whether he would have preferred the Bill if we had made no reference to the detention powers but had said that we wished those paid employees of the police service to rely on their citizen's powers of arrest? Surely it is better to make it clear in the Bill what Parliament intends.

Norman Baker: That intervention is not very fair; in response to the point made by the hon. Member for North Warwickshire, I have referred at some length to the sort of powers that my colleagues would wish CSOs to have. To pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Wrexham, I have also recognised that a general power applies to all citizens of this country.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Norman Baker: I ought to make some progress.

It would be rather odd to include in the Bill a power that already exists for all citizens of this country.

I want to deal with the pressure that will be applied to police authorities or chief constables to deploy CSOs. The Select Committee on Home Affairs picked up the issue of ring-fencing expenditure. I was extremely worried by the Minister's response, in which he failed to rule out—in fact, he encouraged the idea—that the Treasury and the Home Office would, in effect, get their own way by the back door. In other words, chief constables would be given the right to deploy CSOs. If they chose not to do so, they would be put under financial pressure to encourage them to do so, until there were CSOs throughout the land and the Government could say, "They have all done it voluntarily. We have not used clause 5; they have taken the decision themselves."

Mr. Denham: I rather suspected that my straightforward and honest answer would be the subject of the most massive distortion by this time in the evening. What I actually said was that I see no objection to providing funding to kick-start the CSO initiative. Indeed, I do not see anything wrong with that. I undoubtedly did not say the other things that it has been claimed that I said, and the hon. Gentleman knows that full well.

Norman Baker: I hear what the Minister says, and I shall be interested to read *Hansard* tomorrow to find out whether that is exactly what he said earlier. I am sure that it will be because he is a very honest fellow. Nevertheless, the fact is that he now envisages a situation where, even if it is a kick start, certain authorities will be given a bribe, a sweetener, a golden hello to introduce CSOs. Those authorities that do not do so will be left out and, no doubt, their budgets will be top-sliced to help those authorities that have chosen to deploy CSOs. I am grateful to the Minister for confirming tonight that there will be a financial incentive.

In conclusion, I want to raise an issue mentioned by the hon. Member for Sunderland, South—the Riot (Damages) Act 1886, the Yarl's Wood fire and the fact that Bedfordshire police are being sued for £40 million. That is nonsense, and we should take the opportunity provided by the Bill to deal with it. That could be done quite easily; otherwise we shall put the police in a difficult position. Neither is suing Millwall football club any way to recover money for the police.

By and large, this is a good Bill. It could be a very good Bill. There were one or two poisonous flies in the ointment but, by and large, they have been removed by the House of Lords, and I very much hope that the Minister will not seek to reinsert them. If he does, I assure him that we on the Liberal Democrat Benches will not waver.

7.25 pm

Mr. Mike O'Brien (North Warwickshire): May I begin by declaring an interest? I am the parliamentary adviser to the Chief Police Officers Staff Association. I am also a member of the appeals committee of the Police Dependants Trust. Both those roles are unpaid. However, the views that I express today are my own, on behalf of my constituents, but I will let the House know the Chief Police Officers Staff Association's views on a certain issue.

Broadly, I welcome the Bill. It is a good Bill, which is designed to improve the performance of the police. On the whole, it will help police efficiency and effectiveness, and therefore reduce crime and the fear of crime and help to tackle antisocial behaviour. After all, police reform must be about giving the police the numbers, the tools and the management that they need to be more effective at catching criminals and reducing the fear of crime.

The taxpayer is putting unprecedented millions of pounds into Britain's police and expects results. To some extent, the taxpayer is getting results. The British crime survey shows a 21 per cent. fall in crime since 1997, but crime levels are still too high, especially for street crime.

The Bill aims to improve police morale and effectiveness. Police morale was undoubtedly damaged by the cut in police numbers in the mid-1990s and the failed Sheehy attempts at police reform.

I represent Warwickshire, which from 1993 to 1998, experienced one of the biggest cuts in police numbers. By 1998, Warwickshire had lost 11 per cent. of its officers—probably the largest number in the country. Police numbers are rising once again. The chairman of the police authority hopes shortly to restore record numbers of police officers in Warwickshire. As part of that process, the police authority has increased its council tax precept by 19 per cent.

Few voters in the recent elections complained about the cost of the police; they wanted to see more officers on the beat and were prepared to pay for it. Warwickshire police force has tremendous public support. It is an excellent, although small, constabulary. People are prepared to pay more for policing, but they demand value for the money that they pay. Taxpayers are not pleased when a police

officer turns up at the scene of an offence or an incident and says, "Sorry I am late, but we did not have enough staff on duty", or "There is no point in arresting them; the courts will let them off." That rarely happens now in Warwickshire, but it did happen until all too recently.

Across Britain, questions need to be asked about why some forces perform better than others. What efforts are being made to improve delivery? The Bill will put each chief constable and each bobby on the beat to the challenge of delivering for the taxpayer. Most of them will rise to that challenge and raise their game, but it is also important that the Government, the police authorities and chief constables have the powers to deal with those who are not raising their game and not delivering for the taxpayer.

Most police officers everywhere are committed, but performance varies, even where local policing is similar. We need to ensure that policing everywhere is brought up to the standard of the best. We also need to deal with the problems of red tape and bureaucracy that all too often clog up police procedures. Police officers spend 43 per cent. of their time in the station, much of it on paperwork. I am pleased that the Government are addressing that with their taskforce, which is working alongside the reforms in the Bill. The Independent Police Complaints Commission is good news and will, no doubt, be welcomed by the Police Federation, which has long sought such change.

The Bill is therefore a move in the right direction, as part of a broad strategy to reduce crime and raise standards in public service. However, in our zeal to create organisational tools to improve standards, we need also to recognise that good policing requires a fair degree of local discretion and local decision making. That means that chief constables must have considerable discretion in operational matters in their locality.

Chief police officers welcome the Bill's broad thrust and want it to be enacted, but they do have concerns about individual aspects of the Government's proposals. Given that the Government have had one or two problems with the federated ranks, Ministers will need the support of chief police officers in implementing reform, and they will doubtless want to listen with care to their views. Individually, most reforms in the Bill cause few problems for chief police officers, but in combination they raise some concerns. The creation of plans, the setting up of national bodies that give guidelines, and the measuring of performance are all sensible provisions, but what worries some chief police officers is their conjunction with the Home Secretary's extended power to remove and to suspend chief police officers. However, they can be reassured through minor adjustments to those powers. The agreement to a protocol on their use is helpful, but a further concession would be even more helpful. Chief police officers would like a tribunal to review any decision by a Home Secretary to require a police authority to suspend or bring about the resignation of a chief police officer, and the tribunal would also need the power to reinstate such an officer.

I accept that the Home Secretary's current powers under the Police Act 1996 are inadequate—a point illustrated by the recent experience of Warwickshire police, which found it difficult to remove a chief constable who was ill. Delay and difficulty occurred in that case, and although it was resolved, it is clear that better powers to take action are needed. It would help if the Home Secretary's powers were subject to review by a tribunal composed of, say, representatives of the Association of Police Authorities and the Association of Chief Police Officers, and, perhaps, a judge. After all, the circumstances in which those powers will be used are expected to be quite exceptional. That would certainly reassure chief constables and police authorities that they will not be subject to operational interference from Whitehall, and perhaps to sacking in default of doing as they are told.

To some extent, operational decisions should be the prerogative of chief constables. No Home Secretary should try to micromanage from Whitehall, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary doubtless has no intention of doing so. However, on police numbers—a political issue whereby politicians carry the can if chief constables do not use their budgets to increase numbers—the Home Secretary should have a real say. I have said so before and I believe it to be true, but in deciding how many police officers operate in a particular area or how policing takes place, chief constables need flexibility, not straitjackets from Whitehall. I do not believe that Whitehall has any intention to micromanage, but such concerns do exist, so Ministers need constantly to reassure the police, and in doing so to put in place safeguards, where possible and appropriate.

The shadow Home Secretary's claim that he supports the concept of CSOs but opposes the power to detain is nonsense. He wills the end but not the means. He would give CSOs the power to issue fixed penalty notices for antisocial behaviour, which require giving a name and address, but if a person refuses to do so, he would leave CSOs with the power to do nothing except make a citizen's arrest. If we are to have CSOs, a power to detain for 30 minutes is necessary.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman explain why detention is necessary to deal with alcohol consumption, confiscation of alcohol, confiscation of tobacco, seizure of vehicles, entry to save life and limb, abandoned vehicles, carrying out of road checks, cordons and so forth?

Mr. O'Brien: I could discuss each of those, but a gap in the hon. Gentleman's argument strikes me immediately. With an uncharacteristic lack of candour, he has omitted from his list fixed penalty notices, which he mentioned earlier. If he cannot fill that gap and must seek simply to divert attention, he ought to rethink his policy.

On abandoned vehicles—one of the hon. Gentleman's examples—let us say that some young kids are found in the vicinity of a burning vehicle. If a CSO discovers them and is unsure of the circumstances, he may want to detain them until a police officer arrives on the scene. Under the hon. Gentleman's proposal, however, he would have no power to do so. He would have only two choices. First, he could use his citizen's power of arrest, which might be going too far; after all, under such a power he cannot arrest on suspicion. Secondly, he could let them go. The hon. Gentleman looks confused, as indeed I suspect that he is.

Mr. Letwin: I cannot understand what that argument has to do with the removal of abandoned vehicles—the actual power in question. In what way do fixed penalty

[Mr. Letwin]

notices relating to dog fouling, or to litter and the Environmental Protection Act 1990, require the power of detention? I simply do not understand the argument.

Mr. O'Brien: The simple and straightforward point is that, if the hon. Gentleman is willing an end, he must also will a means to it. If he wants to be able to issue a fixed penalty notice to an individual, he needs that individual's name and address.

Martin Linton: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I shall deal with the point made by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin).

If a person refused to give their name and address, the CSO would be in a difficult position. If the hon. Gentleman cannot work out how to resolve it, that is his problem. He is creating the difficulty, and through the Bill the Government have set out a way to resolve it. The CSO will have the power to detain for 30 minutes, if necessary. If a person refuses to give—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has had his time. I call Mr. Francis Maude.

7.36 pm

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): The last time that the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) and I followed one another was 10 years ago, when he succeeded me as Member of Parliament for North Warwickshire. I join him in paying tribute to the Warwickshire police force, which is an excellent force, not despite being very small, but because of that fact—a point to which I shall return if I have time.

I am concerned about police accountability, and I agree that the current arrangements are inadequate. Although there is a deficiency in accountability, I differ from the Government in terms of how it should be dealt with. The deficit should be filled not by increasing centralisation, but by increasing local accountability, and the arguments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) made that case to devastating effect.

I want to use the case of a constituent of mine to illustrate the deficiencies of the current system and the way in which they need to be filled. Although the Bill fills them to an extent, it does not do so completely, as the Minister has acknowledged. The Minister referred obliquely in his opening remarks to the case of John Wilson. On 26 June 1996, then aged 16, having attended an international football match, John Wilson congregated with others in and around Trafalgar square. By common consent, he was a completely innocent bystander in a fracas that developed, during which the Metropolitan police—perfectly properly—deployed police in full riot gear.

As I said, John Wilson behaved peacefully. He is a responsible boy from a decent background. During the fracas, he was physically charged by a police officer in riot gear, fell backwards, smashed his skull on the pavement and sustained a double fracture. As a result, he suffers from epilepsy, and in the six years since he has been unable to study or to work. The High Court finally judged against the Metropolitan police in a civil action in July last year. The judge said:

"I am utterly convinced that the claimant was the victim of a deliberate unlawful assault."

That judgment was subsequently upheld in the Court of Appeal, without John Wilson's lawyers being called upon to rebut the Metropolitan police's case.

During that case, the Metropolitan police behaved—I choose my words carefully—disgracefully. I say that in no spirit of hostility. As a part-time London resident, I depend on them, and in a previous career as a barrister many years ago, my mortgage depended on them as my best client. However, during that case they maintained that it was impossible to identify the police constable responsible for the incident. It is inconceivable that such a serious incident, in which a young boy was laid out cold on the pavement and taken to hospital as an emergency, was not reported or recorded. It certainly should have been, and obviously procedures require that it should.

It was even maintained subsequently by the Met that the serial of officers—some 25 officers—could not be identified, so that other officers could not be interviewed about the identity of the offending officer. That is literally incredible. I simply do not believe that the serial could not be identified, but that is what was maintained at the time and has subsequently been stuck to.

Civil litigation was brought by John Wilson's mother, on John's behalf. I pay tribute to Susan Wilson, a redoubtable lady who has stuck to the case with great tenacity for which she deserves great credit. However, the Metropolitan police pursued a campaign of what can be described only as low-level harassment against the case. For example, at one stage, they wrote directly to the legal aid authorities to seek to have John Wilson's legal aid discontinued. It was discontinued, on that unilateral application. However, it was subsequently reinstated, with some strong words of reproof, by the High Court judge.

The police also pursued an appeal against the High Court judge's ruling on the substantive issue of liability, despite having said immediately afterwards that they would not do so. That appeal was rejected out of hand by the Court of Appeal, as was always likely to happen. Even after that, the police have tried to postpone the hearing on the question of damages, again to the obvious irritation of the judge handling the case. I have numerous other examples of petty behaviour by the Metropolitan police solicitor—all, happily, in vain—trying to hinder the conduct of the case.

My point in relation to the Bill is that no effective way exists for the Metropolitan police to be held to account, either for what happened in relation to the initial incident and the failure to investigate it by the police themselves, or for the way in which they conducted their defence to the proper and justified civil action brought by John Wilson. The Police Complaints Authority could not investigate the case because there was no identified officer against whom to lodge a complaint. Some of the later wrongdoing by the police prevented investigation of the original wrongdoing by the police.

I welcome the setting up of the new Independent Police Complaints Commission. However, as drafted, it would not remedy the gap that I have exposed, as the Minister has admitted. I welcome the Minister's commitment to table amendments to fill the gap, because that is very

important. Incidentally, I pay tribute to the time spent and courtesy shown by the Minister of State on this case. I know that he has taken it seriously.

It has also transpired that neither the Home Secretary, as the police authority at the time, nor the Metropolitan police authority as the successor authority have any power to investigate the case. That is a deficiency in accountability, and should be remedied. Much of the argument today has concerned where that accountability should lie. I simply raise the case of John Wilson to illustrate the deficiencies that exist.

In my opinion, accountability, and the probability that police forces will do what local residents want, will not be increased by giving a power to the Home Secretary to tell forces to do what local people want. He is much less likely than the local police authority to know what local residents want. Given the chance, the police will take decisions that respond to local needs. For example, in my constituency of Horsham and next door in Crawley, the local divisional commander—not even the chief constable—has introduced a terrific scheme that puts the police on mountain bikes so that they can pursue yobs who are being disruptive down the alleyways into the housing estates where police cars cannot go. That initiative is popular with the police and the local residents. It makes the police accessible and available. The only people who hate it are the hooligans who find that the police are silently and unexpectedly upon them. That is a local initiative that has not been imposed by the Home Secretary, although he probably thinks that it is a good idea—everyone else does.

We should consider ways of increasing local accountability and also ask whether police forces are now too big. Many are. The whole notion of economies of scale is a dubious proposition in any circumstances, but in the public sector the reverse is the case. There are inefficiencies because of the scale. We should consider having small authorities, perhaps with directly elected police authorities. That would provide a direct and focused responsiveness to what local people want. It was suggested earlier in the debate that chief constables should be elected. I foresee many difficulties with that, but we should not completely rule it out as a possibility. I cannot imagine anything that would provide greater emphasis on the requirements of local residents, so we should not close our minds to such suggestions.

There are hundreds of different ways in which the local accountability of the police could be improved. However, we definitely should not go in the opposite direction and push more and more power to the centre. I acknowledge that the Government whom I served in the 1980s achieved a certain amount of centralisation. I admit that that was wrong and, indeed, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has said that it was wrong. We should not continue to make that mistake—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

7.46 pm

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): I am pleased to contribute to today's debate. I wish to focus on the clauses relating to blood specimens taken from persons incapable of consenting, because those provisions have a particular significance for at least one of my constituents.

In November 1999, a young woman died in a road traffic accident in my constituency. Sarah Kettle was young, the owner of a dress shop in Truro and the much loved daughter of my constituent, Mary Kettle. There was another car involved in the accident and the injured driver was taken to hospital unconscious. At the point of impact, his car was travelling on the wrong side of the road at 60 mph in a 30 mph zone.

As the driver was unconscious on arrival at hospital, he was unable to give consent to a blood sample being taken. When the driver came round he promptly discharged himself from hospital. He later appeared before magistrates who banned him from driving for two years for reckless driving and fined him £250. There were eye-witness accounts of his drinking in a pub beforehand, but without medical proof there was insufficient evidence and the magistrates could do little.

In other words, because consent could not be given, the definitive piece of evidence could not be obtained. Mrs. Kettle, having endured the tragedy of her daughter's death, sat in court to witness a mockery being made of our legal system. I should make it clear that this is not a witch hunt. I was not there on the evening of the accident and it is not for me to judge. However, since hearing this story and speaking to Mrs. Kettle, I decided that the law was wrong and was not acting in anyone's best interests.

I believe in allowing the police appropriate powers to bring the guilty to justice. I also believe in giving people the power to prove their innocence. This driver and others like him are left with clouds of suspicion hanging over them for ever. The legal loophole serves only those who have committed an offence, and that is simply perverse. There are even reports of drivers attempting to feign unconsciousness to avoid an immediate roadside test.

That case is not the first of its kind, but the family involved were vociferous in their campaign for a change in the law. They did not want any other family to go through what they had, so they told their story to national newspapers, to local media and to me. I was pleased to arrange a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), then the Minister of State at the Home Office. I am grateful to him for meeting us so quickly—within a matter of days—and for taking the argument forward through consultation with the British Medical Association and others. He passed the issue to his successor, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety. Ministers recognised that the law as it stood was an obstacle to justice; justice had to be done and had to be seen to be done.

After the Bill had begun its passage through the other place, Mrs. Kettle came to London a second time and met my right hon. Friend. She related her story once again and heard what the Government were aiming to do. Clause 51 enables a police constable to obtain a sample, irrespective of consent, in the instances laid out in subsection (1). If requested, medical practitioners may take a sample, as they frequently do for medical purposes, from an unconscious patient, and that can be passed to the police. Crucially, when the person regains consciousness, they will be asked to give their consent to the sample being taken into account as evidence. They will still have the power to refuse, as they would at a roadside check, although that could also become a matter for the courts.

[Ms Candy Atherton]

The provisions establish parity, allowing evidence to be taken whether drivers are conscious or not. At present, the law has meant inconsistency.

I do not dismiss the arguments against the change lightly. Equally, necessary safeguards are attached. The person taking the sample would not be responsible for the immediate clinical care of the patient, which avoids a conflict of responsibilities. That very important point was made in discussions with representatives of the British Medical Association.

In most instances, as I understand it, the person taking the sample will be a police medical practitioner. I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members will agree with the BMA that the care and well-being of the patient must be the first priority of all medical staff. For that reason, blood samples will not be taken from unconscious patients if that would put them at any risk; medical staff would have the power to prevent a sample from being taken on those grounds.

Other concerns relate to the vexed question of consent. If a sample was obtained when a person had gained consciousness, was that person in a fit state to make the decision? That is a difficult question, but the validity of consent is a much broader issue.

Mrs. Kettle is expecting this House to deliver. She and her family have suffered a tragedy. The Bill offers a remedy, and I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members will support it tonight.

7.52 pm

Mr. Mark Simmonds (Boston and Skegness): The background to this debate is a police service that is demoralised, discontented and frustrated. The police are annoyed that they are not being given sufficient resources to provide the service to the community that they wish to provide and are fed up with being abused and assaulted not only by the criminal fraternity but by many of the comments emanating from the Home Secretary. I wish to place on the record my faith in the work that the police do in my constituency and across the country. We should all be giving them our full support and encouragement.

The police are aggrieved about increased paperwork and the lack of support from magistrates, many of whom are too lenient with persistent offenders. The police are co-opted into worthwhile specialist areas such as drug abuse, child abuse and domestic violence but without the necessary additional resources being allocated for such work, they are taken off the beat, which exacerbates the already poor perception of the police presence.

More administration staff are required, as is greater administrative streamlining. That would allow others, such as wardens, to take over basic information-gathering tasks such as taking and co-ordinating statements, allowing fully trained officers to go back on to the streets. More cases need to be prepared using computerised techniques to cut down on the massive amount of paperwork that our policemen and women have to endure. Several provisions in the Bill make some attempt to make adjustments to the existing situation, and I warmly welcome them.

The Home Secretary's plans to take powers to dismiss chief constables and to exert control over police forces by circumventing the chief constable and imposing demands on heads of basic command units is unacceptable. The proposition shows a fundamental lack of historical understanding that British policing is policing by local consent; it developed not from the state's desire to control its citizens, as in many continental European countries, but from the desire of local communities to professionalise and improve their volunteer constables. That, ironically and paradoxically, is also proposed in other sections of the Bill.

The Bill unbalances the tripartite relationship between chief constables, police authorities and the Home Secretary. It introduces excessive centralised control. The solution is to decentralise and increase democratic accountability, not to withdraw to a more centrally controlled structure.

The Bill intervenes directly in police forces, bypassing police authorities and thereby local democratic accountability. As has been said, the Government were defeated on the original clause 5 in another place and I hope that they will not seek to reintroduce its provisions. Clause 7 allows direct adoption of particular policing practices if the Secretary of State perceives that to be in the national interest. That is a very dangerous route to take.

Clause 30 allows the Secretary of State to direct a police authority to suspend its chief constable even when it does not judge that to be necessary to maintain local confidence in the force. I hope that the Secretary of State and his Ministers accept that following the logic of that argument to its conclusion would be very dangerous.

Clause 77 requires police authorities to submit their three-year plans to the Home Secretary. With this Government, I am surprised that the Bill does not specify a 10-year plan. The plans have to be checked, and if they do not fit in with the Home Secretary's desire, they will presumably have to be changed, irrespective of the local operational facets current at the time. I doubt whether anyone in the House would object to best practice and to forces learning from one another, but exerting political control and centralising power and decision making is not the way forward.

Both Lord Scarman and the Castle report highlighted the importance of local policing being responsive and sensitive to local circumstances. The formation of district-based crime and disorder reduction partnerships across Lincolnshire, including in my constituency, has started to improve the ability of local communities to share responsibility for community safety with police. To my mind, the Bill removes much of that local flexibility. It starts to create a national police force by the back door.

I wish to address the provisions that radically change the nature and style of local policing—namely, community support officers—and provide for a whole range of auxiliary non-police officers with arrest powers patrolling the streets in our urban and rural areas. In my constituency, Boston borough council has formulated an excellent and effective warden scheme. I have met those wardens and have a tremendous amount of time and respect for them, but both the police and the wardens believe it correct that wardens should have not full or partial police powers. Their role should be complementary, not a lesser, cheaper substitute and replacement for police officers.

Boston borough council and others are filling a vacuum that has been created, and the situation needs to be reversed. I wrote to all the parish councils in my

constituency and they responded, in unison, and without prompting, that they would like to see policemen in their rural areas. They want effective policing. Surely the answer is not to create a confused and multi-layered structure of different auxiliaries, with different powers both within the same police authority and between police authorities. Nothing should be done that would deter the police from taking back the streets as either neighbourhood custodians or responsible citizens in a particular geographical area.

We must find a way of restoring confidence both in the rural villages and on the urban estates in my constituency and beyond. We must get more police on the streets and we must use our existing officers to greater and more visible effect. We must reduce centralisation and improve the local democratic accountability that this Bill will severely damage.

8 pm

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): I welcome the Bill and the Government's commitment to tackling crime in all its forms. I especially welcome the Home Secretary's response to the many points that the Select Committee on Home Affairs made when we scrutinised the measure. That pre-legislative scrutiny might not have been ideal, as part of it took place while the House of Lords was debating the Bill; none the less, we managed to see almost everyone who was interested in the progress of the Bill.

I shall concentrate especially on community support officers and on police costs, despite the fact that in the case of the latter the Committee declined to make specific recommendations.

Much has been said about community support officers since they were proposed in the Bill. Many vested interests have raised their voice in protest: such officers would water down policing; we should end up using more police resources than we would have done otherwise; we would be policing on the cheap, and so on. The Select Committee rightly noted that the only way to know for sure is to try out the proposal. After all, if the largest police force in the country—the Met—is enthusiastically in favour of such a scheme, surely we should have the courage and confidence to see whether it works.

As has already been said, no one will be forced to join in. However, I believe that other forces will want to use such officers when they see the results in London. Indeed, I understand that, after the initial flurry of negative responses, more and more chief officers and police authorities are beginning to see the merits of the proposal.

Perhaps London, as the capital city, is different. I do not know, but I find it difficult to believe that Manchester, Birmingham or Leeds do not have much the same policing needs as we do in London. However, if they do not—so be it.

I speak as a Member who represents an inner-London constituency where crime is at the top of everyone's agenda and where the added problems of higher security risks and terrorist attacks are at the forefront of everyone's mind, so when Sir John Stevens, the Metropolitan commissioner, told us that, post-11 September, 300 plus officers had to act as eyes and ears for suspect packages in central London, we had to ask where they were to come from. They came from boroughs such as mine—from Lewisham, Lambeth, Wandsworth, Hounslow and so on. When my borough commander said that street crime had soared in Lewisham post-11 September, no one was very surprised; but because Lewisham is the safest inner-London borough in which to live, it was also deeply disappointing. Of course, the reason was obvious: as long as highly skilled police officers were being taken off the streets of Lewisham and elsewhere to look after the security needs of Members of Parliament here in Westminster, the rise in street crime was inevitable.

Surely it would be better to use between 300 and 500 community support officers—or auxiliaries as the Met calls them—to do the job of being eyes and ears, like the superb security staff in this place, thus allowing police officers to go back to the boroughs and do the highly skilled job for which they were trained. I really wonder at the stance taken by some people on that issue when that solution is so obvious.

I turn to community safety accreditation schemes. The Select Committee heard evidence about neighbourhood warden schemes and I want to consider one in my own borough—sadly, we do not have one in my constituency, but I hope that we shall soon remedy that. The scheme is based on the Honor Oak estate, in the north of the borough, where residents consider that crime has a major impact on their quality of life.

Lewisham council is extremely proud of its partnership with the local police force and the community—rightly so. Furthermore, it is important to remember that with crime and disorder people do not react only to the most serious offences—the tip of the iceberg. As Martin Ryan, the council officer in charge of the scheme, said:

"They see the whole iceberg."

So-called low level crime and disorder such as graffiti, abusive and loutish behaviour and vehicle crime all have a major impact on the fear of crime in our communities.

The wardens are helping to resolve those problems. Since the patrols commenced on that estate, there has been a 25 per cent. reduction in calls to the police; a 69 per cent. reduction in auto crime; an 80 per cent. reduction in racist crime; and a 75 per cent. reduction in burglary. That is against the background of a general increase in reported crime. Neither I nor anyone involved would suggest that the scheme is a panacea, but it is clearly having a positive impact, especially in reducing the fear of crime.

Accredited community safety organisations, of which local authority warden schemes would be an example, must surely be welcomed in the overall fight against crime, in the partnership between the police, the council and the local community.

I want to turn to an aspect that is not covered by the Bill but which was raised with the Committee by the Met and to which we refer in our recommendations: the cost of policing commercial events. The Met argues that it receives only 10 to 20 per cent. of its costs in policing some sporting and other events. It gave the example of a low-level Chelsea game where the force received £397 from the club for an exercise that cost £13,705.

When the Committee considered that point, we accepted the comment of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety that the matter was problematic in that smaller, less well-off football clubs and other organisations might not have pockets deep enough to cope with those costs. However, we ask the Government that guidance be reviewed in that area.

[Ms Bridget Prentice]

That point is especially important in the light of the remarks I am about to make. When the Second Reading debate was scheduled for today, I did not know that we should have to refer to the dreadful and appalling events in Lewisham on Thursday night after the Millwall-Birmingham game. I emphasise the fact that Millwall football club, under the excellent chairmanship of Theo Paphitis, has done wonders in changing the behaviour at the ground of fans who, in the past, had a well-earned reputation for disruptive and violent behaviour. The work carried out by the club in the local community is excellent and deserves wider praise and support.

However, Thursday night's violence was not down to one or two hooligans. It was an orchestrated assault on the police. I asked Commander Humphrey, the borough commander, about it when he returned to the election count shortly after the events. He described how between 400 and 500 thugs directed each other on mobile phones about ways to attack and injure police officers and horses, innocent bystanders and fans. Thunder flashes were exploded; cars were set alight; 47 officers were injured; all 34 horses were injured; and so, too, were many fans. No doubt some of the cars that were set alight belonged to law-abiding Millwall fans. A children's playground was wrecked and equipment used as weaponry.

I know that Millwall football club will do everything possible to help to identify those thugs, but I have to point out to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth), that that is a dark example of what the police have to put up with and we have to pay for in the general policing budget. That event may serve as a powerful and timely reason for giving more thought to how such occasions are paid for. I would make every hooligan found guilty of any crime in that attack pay directly to the police, the community and the fans for the shame that they have brought on the club and the devastation that they have wreaked on the local community.

The Bill goes a long way towards making the police more able to do well the job that we entrust to them. There are aspects that need further clarification, but I hope that the Home Secretary will not be diverted from the main thrust of the Bill by the concerns of vested interests when my constituents want policing at its best—catching criminals and reducing crime.

8.9 pm

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): I am delighted to take part in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice), who, like me, sits on the Home Affairs Committee. I commend our report to the House: we did as good a job as we could in the limited time that we had, and, in many ways, we were chasing a moving target—the Bill kept being amended in the other place, the Government kept being defeated, and we kept having to comment on something that was changing. The current Bill is an improvement on the one that was published, and some parts of it are widely supported, particularly the independent complaints commission for the police, which is supported on both sides of the House.

I believe, however—this is where I differ from the hon. Member for Lewisham, East, although we were able to sign up to the report together—that the Bill was wrong in its conception and remains wrong in much of its execution. What was wrong with the conception is the point about centralisation. My right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) and my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Mr. Simmonds) spoke clearly about that. This seems to be a default setting for the Government: they know, and they are right, that many things are wrong in the public services, and they rightly want to address them. Their answer, however, always seems to be to draw more power to the centre, which is profoundly the wrong way to go about it.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) pointed out that the Secretary of State is mentioned 21 times in the first four pages of the Bill. It is very much the Secretary of State who is being given the power. Remarkably, police authorities are barely mentioned in the Bill. If the Government think that police authorities are not good enough, they are not doing a good job, or they are not correctly constituted, they should come forward with proposals to change them. We could talk about that. What is not right, however, is taking all the power and handing it to the Home Secretary. It has been mentioned that clause 5 was removed in the other place, but the beginning of clause 6 states:

"The Secretary of State may by regulations make provision requiring all police forces in England and Wales . . . to adopt particular procedures or practices".

That is drawing powers towards the centre, which is wrong. Clause 5 itself was called "Directions to chief officers". The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety is therefore wrong to say that the measure is not about centralisation.

Lady Hermon: May I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that in Northern Ireland each local council has a district policing partnership made up of council representatives and independent members who are representative on the basis of sex, origin and various other characteristics? Would the hon. Gentleman like that—or a form of local accountability—to be extended to England and Wales?

Mr. Cameron: I certainly would. We often have things to learn from Northern Ireland. I served in the Home Office when the Police Act 1996 was drafted. That introduced independent members for police authorities, which the Association of Police Authorities now says were a thoroughly good thing.

Members on both sides of the House have spoken about the tripartite structure of the police service in this country—the Home Secretary, the chief constables and the police authorities. The tripartite structure is not just a good thing because it has a long name and it is there. It delivers something terribly important—police forces in this country have operational independence from the Home Secretary. That helps to give us policing by consent. The Home Affairs Committee referred to that at the beginning of our report:

"We believe that the tripartite structure and operational independence of police forces are essential safeguards against politicisation and centralisation of the police."

I am worried that we are going in the wrong direction tonight. I do not want to live in a country that has an interior ministry to which the police forces report. I am not saying that the Bill will deliver that in one go, but I profoundly believe that we are going in the wrong direction.

I asked a lot of questions on the Home Affairs Committee, particularly of the Association of Police Authorities. That is why I think that there is more to this than the removal of clause 5 by the House of Lords. Mr. Peel—great name—of the Association of Police Authorities said to me:

"Effectively what we are saying is 'Please take out Part 1'".

He referred not to clause 5 but to part 1, and added:

"Most of the rest of it is a matter of detail."

We therefore have some problems.

The conception of this Bill should have started with what is wrong with the police service in this country. Let me give four headings for that: we cannot keep enough good officers; it is almost impossible to sack bad officers; the ones that we have are strangled with red tape and paperwork; and there are not enough of them in any event. My problem with the Bill is that it provides no real answer to the first three of those problems. The problems of police disciplinary procedures are largely ignored by the Bill. It is a great irony that, once the Bill has been passed, the Home Secretary will be able to sack every chief constable in the land, just by order from his office. What about the chief inspector in the Witney nick, or the chief inspector running a basic command unit—will they be able to get rid of a police officer who is not corrupt but who is not particularly good at the job? That is incredibly difficult. We should be devolving power to police forces down to the basic command unit so that that can happen. I asked Mr. Ian Blair—not Mr. Peel, but Mr. Blair—how many of these problems with disciplinary procedures are addressed by the Police Reform Bill. He replied:

"I do not think any of them are addressed by the Police Reform Bill."

That is a missed opportunity.

The question that the Government do try to answer through the Bill is that of having more officers. Their answer is community support officers. There has been a lot of confusion about them, not least from the Prime Minister, who was asked about them at Question Time by my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Angela Watkinson). The Prime Minister gave them four different titles, so even the Government are not clear what those officers are meant to do. I agree with the comment that we should be in favour of more officers and more elements in the police family, whether wardens, specials or CSOs. What we must not have is confusion about their powers. That is a recipe for problems.

Mr. Elliott of the Police Federation appeared before the Select Committee and was asked what issues his organisation had with the 30-minute power of detention that was in the Bill. He replied:

"The practical difficulty with that is that anybody who knows anything about street policing knows that the first thing that you do when you arrest somebody is to try to get them out of the public eye. It is the most ridiculous thing to have somebody stood trying to explain why he or she has been arrested to them and you gather a crowd, it is embarrassing for the person who has been arrested, it is difficult for the officer, it is a recipe for disaster."

It was not just the Police Federation that said that. The superintendents had their concerns, and some of the chief officers had concerns. I am not saying that the CSOs should be scrapped. Let us have different elements in the police family as an experiment, as the Home Affairs Committee said, but please do not compel police forces and police authorities to go down this route.

I was a little disappointed by what the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety said in answer to the question that I asked him about using ring-fenced funding. The Bill has the ingredients to make sure that the Home Secretary has his or her way with every police force in the country with regard to CSOs. The Home Secretary can say, "Here is the ring-fenced funding; you only get it if you have CSOs." Compulsion to have CSOs can be included in policing plans. There is even concern that some of the powers on adopting procedures and practices could be used to insist on having CSOs.

Everyone who appeared before the Home Affairs Committee said, "Go for the local solution. Give us the money and let us get on with the job." The response from the Association of Police Authorities was,

"Why not more police officers?"

Sir David Phillips, the head of the Association of Chief Police Officers, said:

"Do you think there will be more operational gain from four police officers or six community support officers? . . . the answer would be four police officers".

That is the message that we want the Government to take home tonight: they should give the police authorities and the police forces the money, and leave them with more operational independence to respond with local solutions to local problems. The man in Whitehall—who is mentioned 21 times in the Bill but does not have the courtesy to turn up here this afternoon—does not always know best.

8.19 pm

Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): First, I apologise to the shadow Home Secretary, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). I was flatfooted by the fact that proceedings on the Bill did not start until nearly 5.30 pm, so I was not able to hear all his remarks.

I want to deal with the proposition that the Bill is somehow a major attack on the tripartite structure of the Home Secretary, chief constables and local police authorities. I do not accept that point or that we have the foundations of an interior ministry as described by the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) and other Conservative Members. The much more measured response of the Select Committee on Home Affairs is to be preferred.

Three fundamental principles are involved when we talk about the police. The first is that the police have to uphold the rule of law. They have to protect citizens' lives, liberties and property and they have to prevent public disorder and assuage citizens' fear of crime. Secondly, the police have to act in partnership. Traditionally in this country, that involves the notion of community policing. However, in more recent times, legislation has meant that the police have been called upon to act in partnership with local police authorities and, under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, with other bodies, such as local authorities. That is a good thing.

The third principle is the important one of accountability. One aspect of that is the police's accountability for their performance, and one aspect of performance is efficiency. The powers in part 1 are perfectly proper in terms of ensuring better accountability for efficiency. In a way, the foundations of that were laid by the previous Government. The Police Act 1996

[Ross Cranston]

brought together and consolidated a number of provisions whereby the Home Secretary could set performance targets, require a policy authority to have a chief constable retire and so on. There is nothing new in the principle of accountability being designed to improve the performance and efficiency of the police. I therefore do not accept the notion that the sky will fall in as a result of part 1.

The performance of police forces around the country is variable, and it would be much better for our citizens if the performance of the best was emulated by all forces. One aspect of performance that varies enormously is the quality of files submitted to the Crown Prosecution Service. If we can improve performance through the activities of the standards unit and other measures, so much the better.

My remarks will concentrate, however, on the Bill's provisions that deal with antisocial behaviour, which is a major concern. I shall consider two aspects of the issue: the use of community support officers and accredited community safety schemes, and the special provisions in the Bill for antisocial behaviour orders.

I want to make four points about community support officers and accredited community safety schemes. The first is that we already have an extended police family. We already have traffic wardens, security staff, street wardens, local trading standards officers and environmental health officers, and we even have citizens involved as part of the extended police family in as much as they are members of neighbourhood watch schemes. We are not dealing with a new principle.

The second point is that community support officers and accredited community safety schemes will be under police control. If a chief constable does not want community support officers, he or she does not have to have them. Of course, there is also control over the accreditation for community safety schemes. That is a second guarantee, which is contained in the Bill, that ensures that ancillary aspects of the police family will operate in accordance with the law.

The third aspect is that the powers of the community support officers, as set out in schedules 4 and 5, will be very limited. The extended police family already has certain powers. For example, trading standards officers and environmental health officers have the power of access to premises and they can seize property, but we shall entrust only limited powers to community support officers and members of accredited community safety schemes. My hon. Friends have mentioned the power of citizen's arrest. Although that power is not especially favoured by the courts, it is possible for store detectives to affect a citizen's arrest. Again, the Bill does not do anything new in terms of principle.

My fourth point is that there is always a bureaucratic imperative when agencies are established with a special responsibility. The police take antisocial behaviour seriously, but they have a whole range of other responsibilities. By entrusting to special units in the extended police family responsibility for dealing with antisocial behaviour, we will better address the problem.

The evidence already exists. The preliminary results that were published in 1999 in the Home Office paper "Neighbourhood Warden Schemes: an Overview" identified some of the emerging evidence. More recently, a casual perusal of the publication "Warden" shows the whole range of benefits that such schemes can bring. For example, the No. 4 bulletin, which is the most recent one, contains accounts of how east Manchester has recorded a 30 per cent. drop in crime following a community-driven package that includes the use of wardens. Wardens in Sheffield have fast-tracked the processing of abandoned vehicles, reducing the time from 30 to 10 days. There are also accounts about what has happened to deal with graffiti in Middlesbrough and to get rid of the needles used by drugs addicts in Hull. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) also mentioned the Honor Oak scheme in her constituency. There have been definite achievements.

When antisocial behaviour orders were introduced in 1998, they were a major advance. The recent Home Office report No. 236, which was published in April, suggests, however, that there have been problems and that we have not had as many antisocial behaviour orders as we want. In the borough of Dudley, 16 ASBOs have been issued. Seven of them have been breached and that has led to custody in every case. However, we need more ASBOs to deal with the issue.

The Home Office report identified several problems. One was witness intimidation, and that must be addressed. Others were delay and the patchy performance of local authorities. Clause 55 attempts to deal with those problems by extending jurisdiction and by giving registered social landlords the power to seek ASBOs and the county courts the power to issue them. I welcome that.

I also welcome the steps taken on the Independent Police Complaints Commission and the assurance by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety that provisions on whistleblowing will be introduced in the Bill in Committee. The Government promised such provisions when the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 was introduced, and I look forward to the way in which such provisions can deal with the problem of malpractice in the police, in as much as it occurs.

8.29 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): It is a contempt of Parliament that the Home Secretary is not here to take through what on the Government's own admission—not that of the Opposition—is an extremely important Bill. It is no disrespect to the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety to say that he has been put up as the monkey when the organ grinder should have been present. It is, of course, in stark contrast to what the Prime Minister has said about his belief in the importance of Parliament and, therefore, to the proposals that he has suggested to demonstrate that, such as coming before the Liaison Committee. I am afraid that the Home Secretary has betrayed the Prime Minister's intentions in that respect. The Minister could have done himself and the House a favour by explaining why the Home Secretary is not in the Chamber.

The debate is being held not just against the background of the contentious issues that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) set out so graphically, but against a great deal of dissatisfaction in the police service. As my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Mr. Simmonds) said, morale is extremely low. There was an overwhelming vote against

the Government's proposals on pay and conditions, and the police service has been left thinking that it is not appreciated by the Government. Everything that the Government have said about their intentions to improve the lot of our police service, to make it more modern and to improve the detection of crime has to be set against the experience of police officers up and down the country in recent months.

I make no apologies, as a Hampshire Member, for bringing to the attention of the House and the Minister the concerns of the police in that county. The chief constable, Mr. Paul Kernaghan, wrote to me on 25 February this year. Against the background of the dissatisfaction of the federated ranks, he said:

"My personal view and I stress it is a personal view, is that the federated ranks did not primarily look at the agreement in terms of whether or not they would personally gain from its implementation. I feel that given its conditional nature, many officers utilised the ballot as a means of expressing their anger at what they perceive as a sustained denigration of the police service in recent months. It is not appropriate for me to speculate as to how that climate in the media arose. However, you should be aware that many officers feel angry and resentful as a result."

That speaks volumes. Mr. Kernaghan is chief constable of a force that serves a county for which the Minister is a Member of Parliament and he is reporting the dissatisfaction of police officers in our county.

On 18 January this year, a number of right hon. and hon. Members met members of the Police Federation at Netley where we listened to their concerns about what was happening. Something like 78 police officers were present, all of whom had come in their own time. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), my hon. Friends the Members for Havant (Mr. Willetts), for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) and for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) and the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) were present. It was one and three quarter hours into our discussion before the issue of pay arose, so it was not a bleating operation by police officers in Hampshire, but the expression of real concerns, three of which I shall highlight.

The first relates to the new scheme to create community support officers. First and foremost, officers were worried about the experience of CSOs and what knowledge they would bring to the policing of our locality. They wanted to know who would train them and how long that would last. The particular point was made that cases might not proceed to court because those acting in a quasi-police role who do not have the full training and do not understand the ins and outs of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and other Acts that regulate the conduct by which police officers bring evidence to court would be unlikely to follow the rules of evidence.

Mr. Kevan Jones: The hon. Gentleman sets out why we should not have CSOs. Is he therefore at odds with his Front-Bench spokesmen who favour them, except for their powers of arrest?

Mr. Howarth: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman, who is very intelligent, failed to grasp that I am highlighting the concerns of police officers in Hampshire and some of the practical questions that they posed. That is not the same as opposing the idea of introducing CSOs; I am merely posing questions that have not been answered by the Government on how the CSOs will operate.

The police officers made it clear that they do not want to fill in forms or write out verbatim reports. Instead, they want to be on the streets doing precisely the job that the CSOs are supposed to do. As one of them said, that role used to be played by park keepers, bus conductors and others in a uniform. It is because those people are not so much in evidence and, indeed, because of the fear that some people might take the law into their own hands that the Government have come up with the proposals. The overwhelming message was that existing officers want to get on to the streets. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) made that point. He also referred to the special constabulary. We need to increase the number of specials rather than creating CSOs in the first instance.

The second point made by the police officers relates to bureaucracy. Police officers spend a great deal of time sitting around in court. Sometimes that is because the courts are not well organised and police officers spend time waiting for cases to be heard that are not running on schedule. That is a complete waste of their time. The Government should do something to address that problem because that will help to ensure that police officers do the job that they are supposed to be doing.

Vera Baird (Redcar): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: If the hon. and learned Lady will forgive me, I will not because many other hon. Members wish to speak.

One of the members of the constabulary, who is based at Aldershot police station, wrote to me explaining how difficult it is to do the job that he is charged with doing. He said:

"Mr. Blunkett obviously does not appreciate the complexities of criminal investigation . . . I compile files for some of the most serious and complex of cases that occur in Hampshire. I can assure you that the Police receive little co-operation from other Government Agencies, telephone companies and Banking institutes with the investigation of crime. Many Agencies are so confused and frightened by"

the European convention on human rights,

"such as Article 8, and they are no longer willing to make inquiries on behalf of the Police even with a written report explaining the full justifications for doing so . . . The amount of reports covering Data Protection and ECHR issues that I have to write on a weekly basis are one of the major reasons that our investigations take so long to complete."

The Bill does little, if anything, to address the concerns of police officers about the amount of time that it takes to bring cases to court. What police officers want is a reduction in bureaucracy, but there is very little sign of that in the Bill. That is a practical example for the Minister of how the Bill fails to address the concerns of the policemen out there on our streets.

Finally, the independence of police authorities has been mentioned several times. I simply want to reinforce the arguments that the Minister has now heard from hon. Members on both sides of the House. His own police chief, Mr. Kernaghan, asks:

"Why have additional powers been sought and what are the implications of the proposed changes in legislation?"

He continues:

"I respectfully suggest that the lack of safeguards and the effective bypassing of police authorities will result in a cadre of Chief Constables obsessed with pleasing the Home Office, regardless of

their own professional judgement. Chief Constables cannot be above account but the current proposals will result in increased central control at the expense of local representatives."

There in a nutshell is the case against what the Government are doing, and I hope that they will have the sense and the wit to recognise the validity of the changes made in another place, and to accept them here.

8.39 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): I welcome the Bill for its radical police reform. Time is of the essence, and I shall concentrate on parts 2 and 3, and particularly clauses 8 to 34 on complaints and misconduct.

It is no secret that in Teesside our local community has been sorely riven by one of the most high-profile police disciplinary cases that has arisen in this country. I refer, of course, to Operation Lancet, of which I am sure some hon. Members are aware. There have been debates about it in the Chamber and publicity in the national papers. Serious allegations were made against eight serving Cleveland police officers, most notably Detective Superintendent Ray Mallon, all of whom were suspended. Subsequently, a further 400 allegations that could be construed as criminal were made against 60 officers.

The case became a huge operation that took on a life of its own: 571 disciplinary notices were served; 6,701 inquiries were launched; 3,162 statements were taken and 8,311 other documents were taken into consideration. After a period of intense scrutiny and the referral of the allegations to the Crown Prosecution Service, none of those allegations was found to have any criminal content. Lancet has lasted for over four and a half years, and I estimate that it has cost over £7 million.

I do not intend to enter into a debate on the rights and wrongs of Operation Lancet—that is not the purpose of this debate. However, its subject is a fresh look at how police misconduct matters could be handled in future, and what lessons we can learn from the problems highlighted by the present system. My concerns are that it is bureaucratic and cumbersome, and gives a licence for investigations to grow like Topsy.

The present system dates from 1984 and is itself the child of previous legislation. The Home Office has always made it clear that the aim of legislation governing police complaints is

"to investigate complaints about individual policemen or women and not about the direction and control of a police force".

However, in cases such as Lancet and similar investigations elsewhere in the UK, it is difficult to discuss the substance of allegations against a police officer and the defence of that officer without looking at the central direction of a police force and whether that direction serves the public interest.

Allegations have been made against individual serving and suspended police officers which have been publicly rebutted by those very officers. Allegations and counter-allegations have been made not in a committee room at force headquarters but in the columns of the national press and on television. They have been part of a controversy that has rocked and destabilised the Cleveland police—a controversy that arose solely from serious jealousies and rivalries within the ranks of the senior management of the Cleveland force.

There are big issues here too about the seeming independence and openness of the complaints procedure. I want to make it clear that I am not criticising the officers from external forces who were drafted in to consider Lancet issues; they have conducted themselves in the great spirit of impartiality and independence which should characterise this country's police. However, the procedure has led the public of Teesside to conclude that Lancet is a case of the police investigating the police.

When questions arise about the suitability of the actions of the employing force and about the central direction and management of that force, it would be better to have an independent structure in place. That has been called for several times in relation to matters other than Lancet, most notably in the Macpherson report on the murder of Stephen Lawrence. From my own local perspective, it is welcome that the Bill addresses the need for an independent complaints commission.

Norman Baker: I share the hon. Gentleman's view that the police should not investigate the police. However, does he agree that if that is to be achieved it is important that the independent commission is properly staffed and financed, otherwise the inquiries it looks at will go on for any length of time, as has Operation Lancet?

Dr. Kumar: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister heard that. Doubtless the commission will receive strong support; the Minister addressed that earlier.

The independent complaints commission will have its own powers of investigation: it can call in a case for investigation or supervision and decide what level of investigation is fitting or justifiable in the light of the seriousness of a case; it can call for papers relevant to the investigation to be made available to it; it will have the power to enter any police premises without let or hindrance; and it can allow third parties access to the investigation. If an Independent Police Complaints Commission had existed, Lancet would not have become a debacle and public moneys would not have been needlessly spent on an investigation that went nowhere.

I wholeheartedly support the spirit of clause 8, which allows for the appointment to the commission of members who are not past or present members of a police force, thus allowing for greater public confidence and greater freedom to look laterally at the case under investigation, the way in which it has been handled by the force concerned, and the burden of the complaint laid against a serving officer or officers.

The Government were elected on a promise of openness and transparency in public life.

Mr. Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell): And they fulfilled it.

Dr. Kumar: I agree wholeheartedly.

The Bill is a testament to that great promise—*[Laughter.]* Opposition Members may laugh, but their Government never delivered that. Nowhere is the Bill more open and radical than in its clauses on police discipline and complaints; the only pity is that it was not introduced sooner. Had that been the case, the public of Teesside would have been saved many years of doubt, concern and anger and honest police officers would have

been allowed to get on with the job that they know best—policing effectively the streets of the towns, estates and villages of Middlesbrough.

8.47 pm

Mrs. Annette L. Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): The genuine desire for reform, across the political spectrum and among relevant organisations, is welcome; clearly everyone shares the vital objective of curbing antisocial behaviour. Division in opinion largely concerns the details.

I should like to look at three areas: the extension of the Home Secretary's powers; the responsibility and scope of powers given to community support officers and accredited community safety officers; and the use of antisocial behaviour orders. Excellent cross-party work was undertaken in the other place and I commend colleagues on their work to change the more illiberal aspects of the original Bill. The Government introduced some welcome amendments, but there were also strong messages for them about various aspects of the Bill. I welcome the removal of clause 5 from part 1 of the original Bill, as it would have granted the Secretary of State powers to give directions to chief officers. I feel, as do many people—many hon. Members have expressed such views tonight—that it is inappropriate for a Home Secretary both to give orders to chief officers on the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces and to scrutinise action plans. The clause would diminish local influence, accountability and control, leading to a diminished role for chief officers and police authorities, whether actual or perceived, in the system.

As a local councillor, I know only too well the problems of lack of powers and authority locally. The level of centralisation and lack of true devolution in England are significant contributors to many problems in our local communities. They also lead to a blame culture. All the time in the local authority we have a sort of ping-pong game: "It's the local authority's fault", then, "It's the Government's fault". With the centralisation of power, we bring in the blame culture with no true accountability.

By concentrating powers over the police in the hands of the Home Secretary and, in consequence, taking powers away from chief officers and police authorities in clauses throughout the Bill, we are reinforcing the view on the ground that under the present Government power rests only with central Government in London. Although London may be important, there are those of us from the shire counties who see life differently. Life is very different in different parts of the country.

I agree with one of my colleagues in the other place who argued that during all stages of the passage of the Bill through the Lords, the Government provided little or no hard evidence to show why such powers in the hands of the Home Secretary are necessary, or in what circumstances they would be used. That colleague also pointed out that many new initiatives to tackle crime have been launched by the Government and draw on the experience and knowledge of numerous organisations, including the Association of Police Authorities, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Association of Chief Police Officers and the courts. With such initiatives, why are additional powers for the Home Secretary necessary?

I am not convinced that the Government's own amendments—clause 42—are enough to address fully the concerns of members of both Opposition parties, although I welcome the Government's efforts to improve the Bill.

As hon. Members have said, the tripartite system should remain just that. The Home Secretary should not be in a position to override local control. Such political power—that is the crunch—should not hang over the police force. It contradicts the rationale underlying the tripartite system, which we all value.

On the use of civilian support, I shall begin by examining the proposed powers. I am concerned that the issues that caused so much debate in the other place and clauses that were so opposed by my colleagues there will simply be reintroduced. Many of those clauses infringe the liberty of our citizens. I do not deny that something must be done to prevent antisocial and criminal behaviour, but I am not sure that a non-police officer with limited training and powers should be able to detain someone for up to 30 minutes. We had a debate on that tonight, but I should like to add another point. What if a constable or a police officer does not appear within the allocated 30 minutes? In my part of the country, one cannot guarantee that the police will turn up in 30 minutes. That could lead to a very odd situation.

I welcomed the removal of clause 40, which would have enabled the Home Secretary to amend and supplement the list of police powers that civilians might possess. I am worried about the provision being reinstated.

With regard to the various forms of civilian support proposed in the Bill, I acknowledge that the Government do not intend to impose community support officers on police authorities where they are not required or wanted. Perhaps I am being generous; various hon. Members have mentioned the issue of ring-fencing. However, I am still rather naive, so I shall accept that assumption for the moment. I am concerned that in the absence of enough funding for police officers, police authorities can easily be seduced by the prospect of three for the price of two. I am frequently seduced in that manner when shopping in the supermarket; one does not always make the best decision. It is the seductive nature of the proposal that is inherently taking us down the wrong line.

Mr. Denham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Brooke: I should like to carry on, as I am worried about the time.

I am very concerned about the authorities' proposed powers, and I think that variations in powers between neighbouring authorities could create great confusion. In all these matters, clarity and ease of understanding are vital. Will the public really be clear about all the different categories proposed in the Bill? Neighbourhood wardens are being introduced in one part of my constituency. I am very pleased about that; I would like them to be introduced throughout the whole constituency. They will have a distinctive uniform. The important thing is that they are employed by the police and have arisen from a partnership between the police and local authorities. I feel that we should have not accredited community safety officers but one type of community safety warden whose role is clearly defined and must be recognised only by local authorities and the police.

[Mrs. Brooke]

I want briefly to mention antisocial behaviour orders. When we discuss those orders in Committee, we must consider not only the evaluation of their effectiveness, but what guidance is being given to local and other authorities on rehabilitative measures. I do not think that ASBOs work effectively by themselves. They need to be used with other measures as well; indeed, there are lots of measures that we can use besides ASBOs, which should be a last resort. I cannot agree with the simplistic suggestion that a large number of ASBOs is a good thing and that a small number is a bad thing. That argument is far too simplistic.

In conclusion, I should like to highlight the fact that the police need and deserve support. Police morale is low, but we have to get the support right. I welcome in principle the use of available civilians to undertake some of the tasks that are currently carried out by police officers and to allow the police to concentrate on police work rather than incessant form filling. However, the dividing line between civilian and police work should be very clear. We need more police officers in the most demanding areas and support for preventive measures at local community level. Surely, we should focus on crime prevention and nipping crime in the bud. The costs to society are too great for us to begrudge spending in this area, and the possible benefits are too great to ignore.

8.57 pm

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this important debate.

Hon. Members may be aware that I am chairman of the all-party group on abuse investigations. During the past four years, I have received a considerable amount of correspondence from the family and friends of individuals who believe that they have been convicted of crimes that they did not commit about the validity and integrity of police and criminal justice procedures. The members of the all-party group have not considered individual cases, but have examined the processes used by the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and other criminal justice structures. Along with numerous professionals working in the criminal justice system, the group's members have grave concerns about the processes currently employed in the system.

It is in that context that I welcome the Bill. I wish to contain my remarks to the following areas: the failure of existing policing arrangements and my concerns about the proposals before the House. To date, I believe that there has been a demonstrable failure by police authorities to share good practice with other authorities. I am sure that hon. Members will be aware that the Attorney-General has referred the Damilola Taylor case for review. I am concerned about the absence of any structure that requires, rather than requests, that police authorities implement the recommendations that will be made following the Attorney-General's review.

I believe that there is a manifest failure among police authorities to review their performance and procedures to ensure that they are effective. Indeed, I note that unless authorities are directed by some catastrophic disaster such as the Stephen Lawrence or Damilola Taylor cases to make recommendations to improve internal practices and procedures, very few of them will do so.

Police authorities have been unable to develop local information databases that reflect significant local circumstances or to produce statistics that could be used to justify local policing plans instead of reflecting national priorities. That is a serious problem.

I am deeply concerned about the failure of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary—HMIC—to improve the effectiveness of police authorities. I have read all the HMIC's reports from 1995, and it seems to spend a great deal of time reviewing how police authorities achieve targets, rather than examining the procedures and practices that the police use to achieve those targets. The reports suggest that the HMIC is more interested in the number of cases coming off the end of the production line than in the quality of those cases.

The failure of the police authority and the HMIC structures to employ and utilise the services of experts who could be instrumental in improving the effectiveness of police authorities leads to a great deal of inefficiency and wasted time. The police must be masters of a particular trade, not try to be jack of all the trades in which a modern, effective organisation must be engaged.

I have great concern about the technical competence of officers. That arises from the number of cases that are repeatedly rejected by the Crown Prosecution Service, which then need to be reworked. I am equally concerned about the number of cases that are subsequently discontinued in court. The current processes are manifestly inefficient, and some authorities seem to be unable to tackle the inefficiencies. I suspect that that is because they do not adequately train staff or retain appropriately qualified staff.

On the failure of the complaints system, I recently asked a series of parliamentary questions on the number of complaints received by the police, the CPS, the Attorney-General, the HMIC and Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service inspectorate. In some cases, no statistics on complaints are collected; in others, the statistics that are collected are not subject-focused. How can people involved in the criminal justice system know what concerns the public if they do not collect the statistics that flow from complaints?

I turn to the Bill. I have grave reservations about the proposal to establish a separate standards unit. Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, with all its faults, should be expanded and required to undertake the activity ascribed to the standards unit—although I recognise that it was the HMIC's inability to seize the initiative on improving standards that led to the proposal. I seek reassurances that the two units will eventually merge. I am normally fundamentally opposed to command from the centre. Can the Minister confirm that the new police standards unit will, in the longer term, be an enabling authority that encourages police authorities to develop more efficient practices and procedures, to share good practices and to work together to resolve cross-border crimes? The unit must encourage authorities to review their own practices and procedures instead of being remotely managed, which breeds managerial ambivalence.

The proposed complaints system addresses some of the concerns that have been expressed and will at least minimise the confusion that arises among the public. Many people are not even aware that they can complain about the police or, if they do so, worry that the police may subsequently take punitive action against them for

raising a complaint. Currently, following a complaint, the Police Complaints Authority refers its recommendations to each police authority, and chief constables can decide whether to accept them. It is regrettable that the Home Secretary needs to avail himself of powers to address that unacceptable situation. Legitimate complaints must lead to changes in practices and procedures. The system discourages many people from complaining, because they believe that nothing will change. We live in a democracy, and the police, as part and parcel of the democratic process, must engage and work with the people whom they are employed to protect. The lack of Home Office intervention so far has allowed police authorities to believe that they are essentially a law unto themselves.

My primary worry about community support officers is their employment terms and conditions. Will the Minister reassure me that they will be not only directed by the chief constable but paid directly by him, not through the local authority?

The White Paper refers to extending the role of the port police. I am sure that the proposal is sensible, but we must ensure that all those engaged in police work are protected under the same terms and conditions as those who are employed by police authorities. That does not currently apply to officers who work in the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company.

I wish that the Bill was unnecessary. However, the great variation in police performance cannot go unchecked. The police authorities have not tried to manage themselves; regrettably, they must therefore be managed.

9.5 pm

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in a high-quality debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), who gave a bravura performance without notes. As a former speech writer, I am always suspicious of that because it puts us out of a job. Nevertheless, his speech was impressive. I also draw attention to the powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron).

We are all trying to tackle the same problem, which I encountered at my surgery on Friday. A gang of local youths are making life a misery for a family who live on a housing estate in Knutsford. The case was serious; the daughter, who was pregnant, had been attacked. The police have arrested six people, but they are out on bail on the same small housing estate. People in estates throughout the country cry out for politicians to respond to their anxieties, put police on their streets, deal with the criminal justice system and tackle the growing problem of disorder in their communities.

I have every sympathy with a Home Secretary who says that he will listen to people, who wants to make policing more visible and says that he will take on some of the ingrained practices of the police. When he announced his great crusade to reform the police within weeks of becoming Home Secretary, many people believed that he would do it because he had the political capital and clout to do what previous Home Secretaries, including Conservative Home Secretaries, had failed to achieve: take on the police, reform their practices and radically change the way in which law and order works in this country.

The political capital has been dissipated and the good will has gone. The Home Secretary, who knows when to take the limelight and when it is important to turn up, is absent. That speaks volumes about the Bill. It is a great shame and a missed opportunity.

I want to concentrate on community support officers. Various Members have got the name wrong; even the Prime Minister occasionally gets it wrong. Hon. Members have spoken about the value of community support wardens in their constituencies. The hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) spoke about their value on an estate in Lewisham. The hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston) spoke about the value of street wardens.

There are street wardens in my community, and they do a fantastic job in Cheshire. They have transformed the life on some estates. Why not simply extend the activities of wardens? We should not create a new category, called community support officers. Wardens should not be removed from the job that they currently do. It is low level and involves picking up litter, reporting vandalism and keeping an eye on the estate. We should not take away that role and replace it with a pseudo-police role.

The Stockport community warden scheme is one of the best in the country and Home Office Ministers often cite it as an example. It is close to my constituency, and the people who run it are suspicious of the proposals for CSOs. They say that there is a risk of turning wardens into pseudo-policemen that might break down the bond of trust that has developed between the local community and the wardens. That may say something about the esteem in which police are held, but there is a danger. The Home Office seems to be trying to get policing on the cheap.

When Cheshire Members of Parliament went to see our chief constable a couple of months ago, and spoke to him about the proposals in the White Paper, he was very concerned that he would not have the flexibility to deploy these community support officers in the way that he wanted to. He would not, for example, be able to send them to riots in Burnley, as he had had to do with his regular police officers last year, or send them to a football match to deal with some of the really tricky problems such as those we saw at Millwall recently. He felt that he would not have that kind of flexibility, and that that would be a great weakness of community support officers. After all, once we start paying them a decent salary and giving them all the perks and pensions, they are going to be almost as expensive as new police officer recruits, but without the flexibility.

I urge the Government to reconsider this proposal. By all means, let us extend the warden schemes and develop the neighbourhood watch schemes. Let us use these examples and build on them. Let us have a broader police family, but let us not try to get policing on the cheap.

Mr. Challen: You just said they were going to be expensive.

Mr. Osborne: Well, they are. There is only one reason that the Government want to introduce these officers: they think that it will save money and put more people in uniform on the streets.

Mr. Challen: Is it not the case that we have promised to have 130,000 uniformed police on the streets by next March? Is that expensive or is it cheap?

Mr. Osborne: Policing is expensive, but the answer is not to have a load of people in uniform on the streets who

[Mr. Osborne]

have sort-of police powers, and who are unable to deal with antisocial behaviour, for example, in the way that the police can. Going into a town centre on a Friday or Saturday night and confronting a group of drunk youths who are causing all sorts of problems might constitute low-level policing in the Home Office's book, but any police officer will say that dealing with unpredictable, violent people is one of the most difficult parts of their job.

The Home Office wants to put community support officers into that role, and to give them one power—the power to detain people for half an hour. In most town centres on a Friday night, giving someone in a uniform that is not a police uniform the power to detain people for 30 minutes until the police arrive is not going to work. The Government think that they are getting policing on the cheap, but I do not think that it will not turn out that way. That is why I reject these proposals, and I hope that the House of Lords continues its resistance to them.

9.12 pm

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): I am very pleased to be able to speak in favour of this bold Bill, not least because it is not an isolated initiative, but part of a pattern of legislative and executive action by the Government to combat crime. It links with other initiatives such as the street crime initiative—which is going to deliver £67 million to 10 police forces across the country, including my own in Blackpool—and the safer cities initiative, which will have important implications for tackling antisocial behaviour through interventions such as pub watch schemes, approved tenancy schemes and antisocial behaviour orders.

The Bill also links with action on victims' rights and the determination to link the Crown Prosecution Service with the police to improve follow-through in the justice system. This represents a sustained, intensive and pragmatic attack on crime, but also a responsive one. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and his team at the Home Office deserve the highest praise for this, and for pursuing this Bill.

I want to speak first about the police standards unit. It is absolutely right that we should pursue this. In his previous incarnation in the last Parliament, my right hon. Friend showed courage, vigour and balance when this principle of inspection was applied in education. I find it bizarre that Conservative Members, whose Government introduced an inspection unit in education in the early 1990s, should now apparently be so opposed to the extension of the concept to the police service today.

Clause 3, which establishes

"Powers to require inspection and report"

is absolutely right. Hon. Members have said today that there is too much variation in the figures. This is not just a question of value for money; it is also a question of performance and accountability. We need to be able to share best practice and joint partnership, as is the case in education. Occasionally, police officers need that little extra push, in the same way that local education authorities do. It is needed if there is to be public confidence, and a feeling that external inspections are being carried out.

We heard a lot of puffed-up rhetoric and false antithesis from the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). Why did he not note the eminent good sense displayed by his former colleague as Attorney-General and Solicitor-General, Lord Mayhew, who said when speaking about the Bill in the House of Lords:

"The Home Secretary cannot be expected to carry the can unless he is in a position ultimately to influence how policing is carried out by chief officers. So a balance has to be established"?—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 5 February 2002; Vol. 631, c. 558.]

I entirely agree with that.

We all know that the police work hard locally and nationally, and that applies not least to the initiative on antisocial behaviour orders; but a further push is needed. The process needs to be streamlined. The new forms of ASBO that the Bill will permit will give police, courts and councils more flexible tools with which to do their bit. ASBOs can constitute a key element in dealing with the destructive swathe of juvenile offenders in local communities.

I have seen how people in Blackpool are made vulnerable by problems such as transience, a relatively skewed demography causing more young and elderly persons to feel at risk, the effect of vandalism on small businesses, and aggressive street behaviour—which, sadly, can be both locally and visitor-generated. I think that that applies to all coastal towns. In that context, ASBOs are not just a response to public concern; they enable time to be "freed up".

I welcome the proposals to increase civilian input, which will, I hope, enable the police to be more sensitive and responsive to home calls. A lady in my constituency was asked, when a crowd of youths were jumping up and down on her elderly husband's car outside, whether it was "a life-threatening situation". The police felt that if it was not, they could not go and deal with it. I do not want to see more examples of that.

In the intervals between not being able to decide whether policing, or the provision of community support officers, was cheap or dear, the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) spoke of the impact on town centres. He missed the point. The point is that the presence of community support officers as part of a network will, in many cases, enable police to be there in the town centres. What people in my community in Blackpool who are not in the tourist area want is a dedicated presence of police, or police support, to provide the necessary reassurance. At present, inevitably, many of those who are present must be taken away to deal with town-centre problems at weekends.

I welcome the extra police numbers we have been given in Blackpool—45 last year and another 10 this year, five of whom have gone on dedicated patrols on a major estate in the constituency. I also welcome the impetus given to ward beat managers and response teams, and the initiative launched by Blackpool police and my local newspaper for the printing of ward beat managers' details. Nevertheless, however well we do in surpassing the targets of 1997, the police will always be stretched. We need community support officers to provide that intensive day-by-day reassurance—to provide that local input.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) mentioned the important things that had been done in a Lancashire pilot. I welcome the Home Affairs Select Committee's support for the proposals, with

safeguards, but we must give practical support to the community support officers. We cannot be left with the toothless CSOs with whom the hon. Member for West Dorset and his hon. Friends would be satisfied. For instance, how would they cope with the problem described by a constituent who wrote to me earlier in the year? The letter states that between 6.45 pm and 8.15 pm on most Fridays

"about thirty youths plus girls met drinking, fighting . . . urinating on the fences, this now seems to be every Friday . . . two youths kicked the door of the electric department at the back".

Conservative Members may say that that is a job for the police. However, without regular policing in communities to get rid of that low-level violence and antisocial behaviour, difficulties will build up into the sort of problems that I have described.

Community support officers will help to build up communities and people's quality of life. They are part of a process that involves area forums, neighbourhood watch schemes, neighbourhood renewal, home zone schemes such as those that operate in the wards of Talbot and Brunswick in my constituency, and even the gating initiatives that are being introduced.

We cannot expect everything to be done by policing. We must accept that parents also have a responsibility in the matter, and that we need to use all the relevant associations and voluntary groups. That is why I welcome the accreditation schemes proposed in the Bill.

However, we must also make sure that we fulfil the debt to people of the older generation on our estates and in our constituencies. They feel most pressured by this low-level activity. Some of the chatterati outside the House who have complained about the provisions in the Bill, or the reborn liberals among Conservative Members, ought to look at the practical implications of what they are suggesting—or, rather, what they are not suggesting—should happen on the estates in our constituencies.

Community support officers will be able to show juveniles the errors of their ways at an early stage, just as the effective enforcement of ASBOs does. The "broken window" effect, which so often leads to the creation of no-go areas and the misery that all hon. Members have seen in their constituencies, can be stopped by that sort of application.

Problems such as I have described are of concern to all of us, but especially to those who are core voters, and those who feel that they are most affected by such problems. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said at an early stage in the Bill's introduction, tackling crime is part of our social renewal agenda. That is why the proposals regarding ASBOs and CSOs are so important, and why I am very pleased to support the Bill tonight.

9.22 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down): I should begin by declaring an interest: 15 years ago, I wrote a critical article about the then Chief Constable of Northern Ireland, the head of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. I married him 13 months later, and five months later he retired, although the two things are not connected.

I am delighted to speak in this debate, as we in Northern Ireland are streets ahead of the rest of the UK. Police reform went ahead in Northern Ireland two years ago, with the introduction of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000. I hope that it will be useful and constructive for Ministers and the House to draw on our experience of police reform.

My first point concerns the retention of officers. The hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) said that we must ensure that we retain police officers. It is essential that the Home Secretary somehow builds up the support of the rank and file members of the police service in England and Wales. The Police Federation of England and Wales and the Police Superintendents Association of England and Wales must support the reforms.

I say that passionately. The House will hear the passion in my voice, but I feel passionate because of what happened in Northern Ireland. The Patten report recommended that the number of regular police officers should be reduced over 10 years to 7,500. The report came out on 9 September 1999. Two and a half years on—nowhere near the 10 years recommended by Patten—we in Northern Ireland are down to 6,900 police officers.

I am sorry to have to say this, but nothing has done more damage to the credibility of the Belfast agreement, and to the support for it, than police reform. I hope that the damage can be repaired, but that will require more resources. It is essential that rank and file members support police reform.

When we gave the Minister a break earlier on and stopped intervening on him, he actually managed to tell us that the target for spring 2003 was 130,000 police officers. That may be the target, but the difficulty is that, without the support of rank and file officers, experienced police officers will drain away and morale will go down, as it has in Northern Ireland. The Government must retain police officers by persuading them that the reforms are worth introducing.

Secondly, I was absolutely delighted when fundamental human rights were put at the core of policing in Northern Ireland. That is where they should be because that enhances people's respect for the police. I am delighted that the United Kingdom has rightly made the European convention on human rights part and parcel of its domestic law. We in Northern Ireland have a new oath for police officers, who now swear to uphold fundamental human rights. I am very pleased that that is mirrored in clause 64. It is essential that the other people to whom the Government intend to give policing or detention powers have human rights training; otherwise the Government will face many legal actions. The respectability of police officers is increased when they have a basic operational understanding of human rights legislation.

Thirdly, it is the responsibility of all hon. Members, not just Ministers, to increase public awareness of police reform. That is key. I am very sorry to say that we politicians in Northern Ireland must bear a lot of the responsibility for not preparing the general public for the reforms, especially the speed of reform, introduced under the Patten report. I do not want that mistake to be repeated in England and Wales. The Government must, please, increase public awareness of the reforms, which depend on public support.

I shall rest my case on my fourth and final point, as other hon. Members wish to contribute. I made this point in an intervention in the hope that it would be taken on board. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has limited powers over policing; we have a Chief Constable

[Lady Hermon]

and a policing board, which includes 10 elected Assembly Members. That arrangement is working very well, but it is not just tripartite—we will have district policing partnerships for every local council in Northern Ireland. I know that our system is easier to manage; we have 26 district councils, and the number may decrease as local government reform is due.

Every district policing partnership will meet the local chief superintendent every month to discuss, advise and consult on local policing issues. Whether considering parades—we are approaching the season for them—or other issues, district policing partnerships represent a real vehicle to enable local councillors, who form the majority of each partnership, to be accountable to the electorate. Those partnerships also represent the means through which ordinary people can have a voice.

I urge the Government to consider those four points and to try to learn from the good lessons of police reform in Northern Ireland.

9.28 pm

Vera Baird (Redcar): I welcome the Bill. It is very timely that the House is considering part 1 in the immediate aftermath of the thematic report, published on 10 April by the inspectorate of constabulary, about the way in which the crime of rape is policed.

The inspectorate examined the way in which rape is dealt with in nine police areas, which represent a cross-section. The disparities that it found among those forces in the operational and investigative standards at almost every stage of dealing with that offence make much of the case for the police standards unit and for the Home Secretary's extended powers under part 1 to direct chief officers to remedy shortcomings and to regulate procedures and practices.

If this were a different debate, I would be arguing that the overall picture concerning rape is very poor indeed. However, what is germane to this debate is that inspectors have found specific examples of good practice in some police forces—not necessarily in the same force—that, if combined, could produce a radical improvement in the current 7.3 per cent. conviction rate. That rate is the lowest ever, and far lower than for any other kind of assault. To be fair to women, such good practices must be disseminated to all 43 forces, and especially to those that are performing poorly. The inspectorate of constabulary is influential, but its role is only advisory, and although the Association of Chief Police Officers has frequently mediated to spread good practice, it cannot ensure its adoption. In that regard, the Home Secretary's powers are also insufficient.

In response to the report on rape, a cross-departmental working group has been set up to try to implement its 80 recommendations. The police standards unit that the White Paper announced is now working, and its core task is the identification and dissemination of best practice. Had it been operating earlier, it would have continuously identified and spread good practice to drive up standards to the best levels of operational performance, and rape convictions would not have fallen so far behind. It would have identified a host of best practices scattered around the country, which I do not have time to itemise.

The PSU will be particularly important for those such as rape victims, whose criminal victimisation is not naturally at the top of the police's hit list. For rape, read domestic violence as well, for which the standards are equally variable. However, centres of excellence do exist that involve officers with special interests. The PSU is operating and does not need legislation, but to implement its recommendations it plainly needs all the powers that part 1 of the Bill gives to the Home Secretary. In particular, it needs enhanced powers to direct police authorities, and to direct chief officers in cases where the Home Secretary is satisfied that a particular force, or part of it, was ineffective or inefficient. That would assist rape complainants. Clause 7 will allow the Home Secretary to issue directions requiring all forces to follow particular operational procedures—in other words, to follow best practices.

Huge variations in performance between forces, and therefore between postcodes, are unacceptable. If women in a given area knew that their rape complaints would be investigated poorly, but a few miles away they would be offered support, assistance and best practice, they would be inflamed with anger to discover that no mechanism exists to enable the Home Secretary to compel such practice in their area. They would not regard the power to drive up standards as interference in the independence of operational command, and nor do I.

I also welcome the advent of community support officers. The beauty of the proposal is that the question whether an area will have such officers, and the powers granted to them, will be determined according to local need by the chief police officer and the local police authority. That is a clear devolution of policing power; what it is not is policing on the cheap. CSOs will do exactly as has been described: support the police—and surely the community, as well—by handling a specific range of antisocial behaviour, including noisiness, litter, dog-fouling and rowdiness. Only recently have we come to realise that such conduct affects people's day-to-day peaceful enjoyment rather more than does armed robbery, for example. It has always been extremely difficult for police to provide a local, targeted response to such conduct, which calls for a much more street-based, mediation-oriented regime. It is an inappropriate task for highly skilled, but differently skilled, officers, who as police are better suited to different duties. CSOs offer a real opportunity for a modern way forward.

Redcar and Cleveland borough council—my constituency is located in that borough—has the largest community support warden scheme in England. Some 45 wardens provide coverage until 10 o'clock each night, and soon there will be 49 of them. Each ward has a pair of wardens, so they are never far away. They have a radio link and mobile phones. They also have vans, but the rules require them to be on the beat 85 per cent. of the time in the evening. They were established as the council devolved its services down to neighbourhood level, so they are the first port of call for anybody who sees a hole in the road or some item of disrepair. The wardens call out the repair team from the local office, and the matter is dealt with swiftly. That helps to alleviate what is called the broken window syndrome—if a minor problem such as a broken window is not fixed, it is followed by others in a spiral of decline.

I am told by Councillor David McCluckie, the lead councillor for community safety, that the wardens also play a very important role in gathering information, some of it very sensitive, about crime. People feel much freer to give the wardens the information than the police, probably

because members of the public could have all sorts of reasons for talking to the wardens. A member of the public might say, "There's a hole in the road over there, and No. 26 is dealing drugs", but as long as the hole in the road is mended no one can take revenge if the other information is acted on as well.

The wardens have byelaw powers to give tickets for dog-fouling and other minor offences. If they observe the stuff of antisocial behaviour, they can make statements and they have given evidence. They do not live in the ward where they work, so they do not face retribution.

A notable aspect of antisocial behaviour is that it involves the young more than any other group in the community. Sometimes the behaviour is deliberate and highly offensive, but sometimes the young people are not aware of or concerned by the effect that their behaviour has on the rest of society. Often they do not have anything else to do, or that is what they think. In a ward called Grangetown, the council has decided to build a youth shelter because two wardens made an informal approach to a group of young lads and found that the nuisance of kicking a ball against the walls of pensioners' bungalows was for want of another surface to kick the ball against that was anywhere near the shops.

Young people know who the wardens are and they do not approach the young people aggressively or judgmentally. The wardens' uniform makes them look like paramedics, and everybody trusts them. The wardens are trained by the police in PACE—the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984—so they know what they are doing. They are also trained in anger management and mediation and how to develop an exit strategy. If they want a name and address and are refused, they are so local that they can ask people nearby for a name, or they follow the person home and deliver the ticket. If they have to withdraw from a confrontation, they can identify the offender through other locals and can go to the home later with a police constable.

Antisocial behaviour has been cut by between 20 and 30 per cent. in the year that the wardens have been working, and the fire brigade locally reckons that the number of hoaxes and fire-raising incidents has fallen by 70 per cent. The wardens are seen as the community's champions. They are proud of that role and they want to retain it. They take pride in their communities.

The picture that I have painted does not show something that is inferior to policing. It is not policing on the cheap. It is a new approach, based in and regenerating the community and with its own virtues. A poll has been taken about whether the wardens would benefit from having powers of detention, and they do not want them. They fear that they would not be safe while exercising such powers and that they would be distanced from the community. However, there is no doubt—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order.

9.39 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Unsurprisingly, the debate has concentrated on two issues—standards and the level of policing. A clear division of views on what to do has evolved. We have heard some very good speeches from both sides of the House, although I detected in some of the Government Back Benchers' speeches a little whiff of the old traditional Labour left-wing antagonism towards the police. That is a pity. Nevertheless, a number of speeches welcomed the present situation, and I will come back to that in a moment.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) spoke about a constituency case that supports the Government's proposed amendment on the Independent Police Complaints Commission, and we welcome that. My hon. Friends the Members for Boston and Skegness (Mr. Simmonds), for Witney (Mr. Cameron), for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) all spoke about centralising powers and the use of civilians as community support officers and community safety accreditation organisations, yet those two issues represent considerably less than half the Bill. It is remarkable that most of the debate has concentrated on a small part of the Bill, with one or two exceptions. The hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) spoke about another issue, which I shall mention shortly. However, almost all the speeches focused on two issues that represent a relatively small part of the Bill.

As a member of the Home Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney said that the Bill failed to address three of the most crucial issues. He said that the police cannot attract and hold good officers and cannot get rid of bad ones, while those in the service are strangled by paperwork.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) brought the wisdom of experience to the debate, for which I am grateful. She stressed the need for the support of police officers when we embark upon change. Unfortunately, the Home Secretary does not seem to have learned that lesson yet.

Much of the debate has been about centralisation. The Select Committee said that the former clause 5 was unacceptable. Even with the proposed safeguards that the Government had planned to introduce, the Select Committee was, at best, lukewarm about it.

In response to an intervention from me, the Minister of State said that there are no existing powers with which police authorities can deal with problems. He is quite right. However, the answer is not to take powers to the Home Secretary but to give them to the police authorities. The whole of part 1 is about taking powers to the centre. Some provisions, such as the regulation of equipment, are perfectly acceptable. However, no one who studies the whole of part 1 can argue that the removal of the original clause 5 has taken away every opportunity for the Home Secretary to intervene when he thinks that things are going wrong.

Clause 2 deals with codes of practice, clause 4 with directions to police authorities, and clause 6 with the regulation of procedures and practices. Clause 77 gives the Home Secretary immense powers over three-year strategy plans. The Bill provides plenty of opportunities for the Home Secretary to take action. My right hon. and hon. Friends all spoke of the need to decentralise.

The issue of community support officers also occupied much of the debate. The hon. and learned Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) brought home to us the fact that a large number of very successful schemes operate under present legislation, using neighbourhood wardens, local guardians and even ambassadors. I have seen a number of such schemes in operation and several other hon. Members described their success in their constituencies.

[Mr. James Paice]

The point is that such schemes are operating, but those civilians do not have a range of police powers. What is more important, they do not have the power of detention.

I have spoken to many support organisations and, without exception, not one has said that it wants detention powers. Indeed, a number say that having such powers would do them a disservice and get in the way of their fulfilling such a role. There would be an obligation to comply more with PACE provisions on training.

What happens after 30 minutes remains unanswered. One or two hon. Members made the point that in their constituencies, the likelihood of an officer being able to reach someone within 30 minutes of detention was remote, and that certainly applies to part of my constituency.

In relation to other powers introduced under schedules 4 and 5, there is the likelihood of a huge variety of provision and immense confusion throughout the country. At present, the schedules do not provide for a fixed system; they offer a pick-and-mix menu. Every chief constable will be able to decide which powers to give to his community support officers or accredited safety organisation. It is possible that where CSOs exist, they will have different levels of power in different forces: in London, the powers may differ between boroughs and, in the case of people employed by an accredited safety organisation, from employer to employer. That is a recipe for considerable confusion. It will give rise to public concern, and there will be a failure to appreciate the role of civilians.

There are some issues that have not been covered by the Bill, including the standards unit. Listening to some of the Labour Back Benchers who were talking about the standards unit, one would have thought that the inspectorate did not exist. However, there is a perfectly competent inspectorate, which, we understand, the Home Secretary has no plans to alter or disband. Like the Select Committee, we cannot understand the necessity for a distinct and separate organisation called the standards unit. That is not to say that we are against raising the standards of all to those of the best or against spreading best practice, but we are asking whether we need two separate organisations. The distinction between their roles is unclear.

The hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne referred to the provisions that would allow blood samples to be taken from people who could not give their consent. I do not detract from her support for that change, but I also know that, for more than a year, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) has worked hard for a change in the law. I welcome it, although we must obviously consider the finer detail in Committee.

Several Members referred to ASBOs. The orders are not the raging success predicted by the former Home Secretary: the most recent statistics showed that just under 500 had been granted. Police officers and other people involved are extremely concerned about the amount of bureaucracy and time required to generate an ASBO. We welcome changes to the system and we welcome the extension of the orders, but there is little in the Bill to address the fundamental reason for their lack of success—the problem of bureaucracy in the criminal justice system.

The Bill includes a provision to remove the obligation for police officers to be British citizens, or citizens of the Commonwealth or Ireland. We can be persuaded of the need to end that rule, but before the Bill completes its passage the Government should publish the exact criteria to be required of would-be recruits, as regards language ability, residence qualifications and so on.

Several hon. Members referred to another absence in the Bill—provision for special constables. In the White Paper, the Government stated that they wanted a revival of the special constabulary. We all agree with that. However, the Bill contains nothing that would achieve that. The Government have a policy vacuum in that regard: they seem to have no idea how to revitalise the specials.

The official Opposition welcome a large part of the Bill, but we object to two points of principle. The first is the extension to civilian officers or officials of police powers of detention. As several hon. Members pointed out, that will put civilians in the front line in the community. We believe that community or neighbourhood policing should be recognised as having the most important role in the police force. That is where problems can be resolved before they get out of hand. We want neighbourhood police to be seen as an elite force, not as a second division.

The other point of principle is the issue of powers being taken by the Home Secretary. I have some sympathy with the Under-Secretary. Anybody who has been privileged to stand at that Dispatch Box knows the temptation to command and control, but that temptation must be resisted, not just because it is wrong but because it cannot work. It is a downward spiral of ever-closer scrutiny and involvement in day-to-day decisions. That is why we will resist moves to restore the original clause 5 to the Bill.

9.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): There is one thing about which I agree with the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice)—there has been a clear division in tonight's debate, which has concentrated on the main areas of disagreement. I would describe it differently, however. There has been a real contrast. On the one hand, there have been thoughtful contributions, mostly, but not exclusively, by Labour Members. Some of the comments of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), for instance, were aimed at Members of Parliament generally and not just at Ministers. Such contributions showed, in the main, a depth of support for the proposals. Coupled with that were the Home Affairs Committee report and contributions by members of that Committee that gave an in-depth analysis of the Bill. There was a clear contrast between that and contributions by Members on both Opposition Front Benches who have been brought in to back up their new alliance in opposition to the Bill. That synthetic opposition was aimed at measures that are absolutely necessary if we are to tackle effectively some of the problems that my hon. Friends have exposed tonight.

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Mr. Simmonds), who was supported in large part by the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), told the House that the police force in this country was demoralised, under-resourced and abused. Those comments were aimed at the Home Secretary. I was in the House when the Home

Secretary challenged hon. Members to give a single item of evidence that he has made comments purporting to attack the police force. I heard not a shred of evidence coming back. Why do Opposition Members such as the hon. Members for Boston and Skegness and for Aldershot continue to peddle such nonsense without providing a shred of evidence for any of their allegations?

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I quoted from a letter from the chief constable of Hampshire, who is the chief constable for the constituency of the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety. The chief constable pointed out that his officers felt that they had been subject to a campaign of denigration. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend is right. There was not a single such quote in that letter, as the hon. Member for Aldershot knows jolly well.

With regard to under-resourcing, let me make the point—it needs to be made again and again—that we are not talking about policing on the cheap. Currently, we have an all-time record number of police officers—128,748, which is planned to rise to 130,000 by next year. Before Conservative Members start talking about policing on the cheap, they should be prepared to say why that resource was never provided when they were in power, as they had clear opportunities to do so.

In the time left to me, I shall be able to deal with the central issues but not with all the other points that have been made. However, I shall briefly refer to one or two of them. The hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission and expressed the view that the proposals would not be adequate for the size of the task. About 1,000 cases will be taken on under the new system, and that is not 3 per cent. of all complaints. It is about 10 per cent. of all the cases that go forward currently and that are not dropped or dealt with at a local level.

The commission will be able to take on cases at its own instigation, so it will be able to investigate cases at its discretion when, as the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) clearly pointed out, it is not possible to name the individual police officer against whom the complaint has been made. We believe that the proposal will be adequate in providing the framework for the independence that will be necessary to deal with police complaints. However, we can discuss this issue with the hon. Member for Lewes in more detail in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) talked about the proposals for blood sampling. I congratulate her on the work that she has done to raise this issue.

One of the main issues of difference that has been exposed tonight is that both Opposition parties are effectively saying that, even with the safeguards that we are proposing in the Bill, the Home Secretary should not be allowed to act even in circumstances in which a chief police officer and a police authority have failed to address serious problems of under-performance. In return for that, they propose that there should be an increase in accountability. However, when those on both Opposition Front Benches were asked to provide details of what they suggest, they refused to answer the question. We can assume only that they are content with variations in performance and are happy to allow the existing situation to continue. It is no wonder that crime doubled when the Conservatives were in government.

The Opposition also claim that community support officers should not be given the powers to detain. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) reached the height of political hyperbole when he opposed the measure and said that such officers should not have the power of arrest. However, they will not have the power to arrest or to bring charges; all they will have is the power to detain for 30 minutes while waiting for a constable to turn up on the scene.

The hon. Member for Lewes opposed our proposals and said that we should listen to and trust local people. However, why will he not trust the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis who said that the police needed community support officers and that such officers needed—it has been specifically asked for—the power of detention? Why does the hon. Gentleman not listen to the Association of London Government, which said:

"If the power to detain is to be used effectively, then a longer period of detention is essential"?

Norman Baker *rose—*

Mr. Ainsworth: I ask the House to give the Bill its Second Reading. I commend it to the House, because it is needed to deal with the issues that badly need addressing in our communities and to provide the clear standards and consistency of performance that are necessary.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

POLICE REFORM BILL *[LORDS]* (PROGRAMME)

Motion made and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Order [28 June].

That the following provisions shall apply to the Police Reform Bill *[Lords]:*

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

Programming of proceedings

2. Proceedings on the Bill (including proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any other message from the Lords) may be programmed.

Standing Committee

3.—(1) Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 27th June 2002.

(2) The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4.—(1) Proceedings on consideration (so far as not previously concluded) shall be brought to a conclusion at Nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Six o'clock on that day.

(2) Proceedings on Third Reading (so far as not previously concluded) shall be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on the day on which proceedings on consideration are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Seven o'clock on that day.

Programming Committee

5. Sessional Order B (programming committees) made on 28th June 2001 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.—*[Dan Norris.]*

The House divided: Ayes 366, Noes 162.

Division No. 225] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Cairns, David
Callon, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Caplin, Ivor
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Doughty, Sue
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Harvey, Nick
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Holmes, Paul
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Inance-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Luke, Iain
Lyons, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr John
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd

Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Speller, Rt Hon John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Rt Hon Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watson, Tom
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. John Heppell.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, John
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Salmond, Alex
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Dr Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Cheryl Gillan and
Mr. Charles Hendry.

Question accordingly agreed to.

POLICE REFORM BILL *[LORDS] [MONEY]*

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Police Reform Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise—

(a) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenses of the Secretary of State under the Act;

(b) the payment out of money so provided of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other enactment; and

(c) the payment of money into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Local Government Finance

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 96) (HC 710), on Special Grants for School Standards and Support of post-sixteen budgets, which was laid before this House on 26th March, be approved.—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

The Promotion of the Use of Biofuels in Road Transport

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 15500/01, Commission Communication and two draft Directives on the promotion of the use of biofuels for transport, and provision for Member States to apply differentiated rates of excise duty in favour of biofuels; considers that the objectives of security of supply and climate change abatement can best be achieved by an approach which promotes renewable transport fuels as a whole, and reflects the individual circumstances of Member States and EU renewable energy policy through the setting of indicative, flexible targets; welcomes the principle of making it easier for Member States to set a lower rate of duty on cleaner fuels such as biofuels; but considers that the detail of the Commission's approach (in particular, the links with current duty rates for conventional fuels and with oil prices) should be questioned—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

Question agreed to.

Hollands Wood Campsite

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

10.16 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): It is customary to begin an Adjournment debate by saying how fortunate one is to have secured—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. Will hon. Members who are leaving the Chamber please do so quickly and quietly?

Dr. Lewis: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I said, it is customary to begin an Adjournment debate by congratulating oneself on one's good fortune in securing the debate.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Quite right.

Dr. Lewis: Indeed, as my hon. Friend observes from a sedentary position, I am lucky to have done so. However, the Minister is also rather fortunate tonight. It is a lucky night for him, because for once this is not a NIMBY debate. This is a debate about people who have something in their back yard already and who want to keep it there, rather than have it removed further from their area, with possibly catastrophic consequences for the local economy.

Let me spell out the background. The Hollands Wood campsite is on the east side of the A337, near the village of Brockenhurst in my constituency. The New Park site is on the west side of the A337, further north towards the village of Lyndhurst, also in my constituency.

One might think that the villagers of Brockenhurst would want a large number of visitors to be congregated somewhat further away, rather than nearer to their village environment, but not a bit of it. In fact, the parish council is totally united against the proposed move to close the Hollands Wood campsite and transfer it to the New Park site, and other parish and town councils in my constituency are also strongly against the proposal. Most important of all, the residents of Brockenhurst are overwhelmingly opposed to the proposed change.

On 7 March I presented a petition on the matter to the House. It contained no fewer than 1,719 signatures out of a possible total of 2,652 people on the electoral register. That was no less than 65 per cent. of the electorate, but in reality only 3 per cent. of the electorate declined to sign, and that understandably included a number of employees of the Forestry Commission. Thirty-two per cent. could not be contacted. In other words, 95 per cent. of those who could be contacted signed the petition, and all that between 9 and 25 February. I pay tribute to Nina Ball, Jean Wingate, John Cockram, John Purkess, Andrew Mitchell and more than 50 other villagers who gained so many signatures in so short a time.

Why is that feeling so strong? There are four principal reasons. First, a major traffic hazard will be created on a busy trunk road. Secondly, the New Forest show will be endangered. Thirdly, more harm than good will be done to the environment. Fourthly, the local economy of Brockenhurst will be gravely undermined.

From about 1930 until the end of the second world war, the Hollands Wood site was the village rubbish tip. From 1946, the then rural district council turned its attention to the site. The tip closed in 1950 and the campsite was created soon afterwards, and so it has remained for half a century.

According to the admirable *Lymington Times* of 1 December last year:

"The Forestry Commission has a total of 3,320 camping pitches in England of which no fewer than 1,860 surround Brockenhurst."

It has been suggested that a European Union directive on the restoration of ancient woodland is forcing the Forestry Commission to close Hollands Wood. It is for the lawyers to decide whether that is the case, or whether a degree of creative "gold plating" has been going on. For once—I hope that the House will note this point carefully—I think that the EU is being maligned.

In reply to our petition, a ministerial response was drawn up, undoubtedly on the basis of a Forestry Commission briefing. The response points the finger at English Nature for having designated the Hollands Wood campsite as part of a candidate special area for conservation under the EU habitats directive of 1992. If that is so, it is a piece of meddlesome stupidity on the part of English Nature that lies at the root of the problem. I am advised that current regulations require only a 95 per cent. implementation of SSSI—sites of special scientific interest—(SAC) target statements. If that is true, it means that there is no necessity to vacate Hollands Wood, as it occupies only a fraction of 1 per cent. of the New Forest SSSI(SAC).

I acknowledge the courtesy of the deputy surveyor, Mr. Donald Thompson, in alerting me and Hampshire county council leader Councillor Ken Thornber early on about the intended move. Two problems immediately occurred to us. First, there was the traffic danger: the A337 is a very fast stretch of single carriageway that is arrow straight, but has periodic dips that can temporarily mask traffic hold-ups ahead and conceal oncoming vehicles from view. By transferring the campsite from the east to the west of the trunk road, the Forestry Commission would create an all-year-round problem of southbound traffic from arriving campers having to cross the northbound flow in order to enter the New Park site. That currently happens on a large scale for three days a year, when the New Forest show is held at the New Park site in July, and would cause major dislocation but for the sterling efforts of traffic controllers drafted in for the occasion. That can be done three days a year, but could not be done continuously.

This leads us to the second problem: the future of the New Forest show. It is becoming abundantly clear that a permanent campsite in New Park will have a crippling effect on the show. The event involves the creation on the site of temporary car parks so vast that people attach helium-filled balloons to their vehicles in the hope—usually it is a vain one—of successfully finding them again at the end of an enjoyable day at the show. The notion that a park-and-ride shuttle scheme for the show might provide an effective substitute for the car parks is, to use a favourite term of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), frankly risible.

It has also become abundantly clear as the controversy has developed that even if Hollands Wood could no longer continue, a move to New Park would be unacceptable on environmental grounds in any case. It may take 100 years to restore Hollands Wood from its present existence as a much-loved campsite in the forest, but it will take a fraction of that time to commercialise and degrade the rural environment of New Park. Not only the farmland New Park site itself will suffer, but—far worse than that—the contiguous unspoilt, ancient and ornamental woodland will be put at risk from such a large development. Some of those adjacent areas are designated sites of special scientific interest and special protection areas. Above all, the riverine woodland between New Park and Brockenhurst village is a rare and highly protected habitat. Indeed, I understand that it is an EU-designated candidate special area for conservation, and thus requires maintenance and improvement, not degradation.

The principle of Occam's razor states that when one has eliminated all other possibilities, that which remains, however improbable, must be the true explanation. We have considered the traffic implications, the New Forest show implications and the environmental implications of building a huge campsite at New Park, all of which suggest that the proposal is fatally flawed, so what explanation remains? As is so often the case, only a monetary one. A big difference between the two locations is that Hollands wood is subject to the authority of the ancient court of verderers, whereas New Park, as Crown freehold land, is not.

The verderers court has been staunch in defending the interests of the people of the forest and its villages from time immemorial. One of the first occasions on which I attended the verderers court was unforgettable. A villager from Ashurst tearfully related how her village shop had had to close because the Forestry Commission had for a period of time allowed illegal sales of products on one of the campsites—the one near Ashurst. By the time the verderers were able to step in to stop it, her trade had already been undermined to the point that the shop could not continue. As a result, the village of Ashurst lost its village shop and the lady lost her living. We all recognise that the Forestry Commission has an important job to do, part of which is to try to generate income. However, there is a history of attempts to allow more and more goods to be sold on campsites—attempts that can be blocked by the verderers anywhere in the open forest except on Crown freehold land. My general line of argument will come as no surprise to the Minister because, as is my normal practice, I took the precaution of advising his office in advance.

Brockenhurst village depends on its shops if its local economy is to continue, and that viability depends in turn on the summer trade and the influx of non-village custom. Even if the Forestry Commission refrained from selling anything extra on a site at New Park, the greater distance from Brockenhurst, the lack of easy access to Brockenhurst by foot and, especially, the location of the New Park site—where a camp would now be—to the west of the A337 would have major adverse effects. Traffic leaving the new campsite would naturally head north to Lyndhurst, adding to its already diabolical congestion at that time of year, not south to Brockenhurst, where trade from the campers is so welcome and important.

The truth is that the Forestry Commission will not resist the temptation to commercialise if it is allowed to build the new site. The experience of the Ashurst village shop will be repeated on a much larger scale, driving a stake

[Dr. Lewis]

through the heart of the Brockenhurst economy. In fact, I understand that English Nature could easily be asked to redesignate the Hollands wood campsite to exclude it from the special area for conservation. That would be entirely in line with the derogation allowed in the habitats directive—introduced so considerately, it must be said, by the European Union—which allows for

"Imperative reasons of overriding public interest, including those of a social or economic nature".

That certainly applies to the effect on Brockenhurst of failing to apply for such a derogation. There is no good reason for closing the Hollands Wood campsite. Even if English Nature and the Forestry Commission succeed between them in doing that, it will provide little justification for a move to New Park, with all that that entails. As so often happens with crafty little stratagems, one can end up with the worst of both worlds.

By failing to resist the closure of Hollands Wood, the Forestry Commission may end up with no large campsite in the area; the villagers of Brockenhurst, however, will be the biggest losers of all.

10.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) on securing the debate and presenting the anxieties of local people about the proposed change. It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate because, as the hon. Gentleman knows, I know the New Forest well and have a long-standing personal interest in it. I talk to representatives of the Forestry Commission regularly, and I recently met the court of verderers.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that I introduced the Ministers' mandate. It was revised in 1999 and it clearly sets out the principles for managing the Crown lands, which cover half the New Forest heritage area, of which Hollands Wood is part. The first objective of the Ministers' mandate is the conservation of nature and heritage. The second includes promoting rural opportunities, providing access and recreation opportunities and increasing public awareness and understanding. The objectives in the mandate are compatible with the Forestry Commission's proposals.

Of course local people's views have to be taken into account, and I have therefore listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman. I want to take them into account because it is important that the reasons for the move are properly understood and debated. I must confess that I was a little puzzled about some of the reasoning behind the hon. Gentleman's anxieties. I shall try to deal with them.

First, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, English Nature requires the closure of Hollands Wood campsite because it is in a site of special scientific interest and a special area of conservation. I have visited Hollands Wood campsite; I walked around it while it was closed so that I could have a clear view. We cannot escape the fact that it is situated in an area of ancient woodland that is important scientifically and from the point of biodiversity.

Of course, Hollands Wood is a popular campsite and it needs to be replaced with an alternative, modern campsite for visitors to the New Forest. We recognise the importance of the New Forest not only to visitors and recreation, but to the area's economy.

New Park is literally across the road. It is a desirable site that is not in the site of special scientific interest or the special area of conservation. It is close to Hollands Wood and ensures that the considerable economic benefits to Brockenhurst are not lost. New Park is a farm that does not have same biodiversity importance as Hollands Wood. There is no comparison. It is next to important riverine woodland; I took the opportunity of walking the length of it the last time I was there when I was discussing the issues with the Forestry Commission.

Part of the proposal for New Park is to establish, at some cost, a buffer zone to protect the riverine woodland. The proposals recognise the potential for increasing conservation and protecting fragile areas. The commission is therefore complying fully with all the requirements of the planning system. A full planning application and environmental impact assessment will be submitted to the local authority. That is also right because we must examine the impact of the proposals, which must be open to public scrutiny.

The proposed campsite will be designed and built to a high standard to take into account the fact that people live close to it; that has also been recognised.

On the New Forest show, I have attended it and I recognise that it plays an important part in the culture and activities of the area and the local communities. I very much enjoyed my visit and was impressed with the range of activities and displays. I do not want the New Forest show to be threatened, and I want to make that point very clearly as the person who oversees the Ministers' mandate for the forest.

The needs of the New Forest show are being carefully considered, and full consultations are being undertaken with the show committee. Following my discussions with the Forestry Commission, I have been convinced that it would be possible to meet the requirements of the show, even if there were a campsite on the ground. I want to make it clear that the New Forest show is not going to be abandoned, and that its importance is recognised by me, as a Minister, and by the Forestry Commission.

I also want to stress that the campsites are very important to the local economy, bringing into the forest a large number of people with considerable spending power. Those people spend their money in the shops and pubs, and on local services such as cycle hire. The hon. Members for New Forest, East and for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) know how important that is for their constituents and for their constituents' businesses.

I am not very clear on the issue of traffic. From what the hon. Gentleman has said, I understand that there is an assumption that the traffic will all turn one way when it leaves the new campsite. I do not believe that that will be the case. There will be the same amount of traffic going into the campsite. As I understand it, there are currently about 600 pitches in Hollands Wood, and about 100 overspill pitches in New Park. So, when the site moves—if it does move—to New Park, there will be about 100 fewer pitches. That would result in there being less traffic turning in and out of the site. I would be happy to examine these hypotheses in greater detail, but, at the moment, I cannot see how moving from one side of the road to the other will increase the traffic.

Dr. Lewis: Perhaps this is an argument for adopting a continental system of traffic flow—I really am being

reborn, here—because if we drove on the same side of the road as they do on the continent, the campsite's move from one side of the road to the other would be a positive enhancement. As we drive on the left, however, it is clear that when people come out of the campsite to shop in the villages, they will turn left, rather than turning right across the busy main road. I am sorry if I did not make that clear enough. More importantly, will they want to come out of the campsite at all when, without the protection afforded by the verderers, the site is developed so that it becomes a rival to Brockenhurst with its self-contained shopping centre? That is the question at the heart of the problem.

Mr. Morley: On that last point, the hon. Gentleman is assuming that some kind of shopping centre is going to be built on the campsite. I am not aware that such proposals feature in the Forestry Commission's plans. Those plans will be submitted for approval, and the hon. Members for New Forest, East and for New Forest, West and their constituents will, of course, be able to scrutinise them. But they should not make that assumption. The Forestry Commission has been very sensitive to the potential impact on the local economy, and I think that that has been reflected in its activities.

On the issue of traffic, I do not disagree that, if people are going into Brockenhurst, they will have to turn right, whereas, before, they would have turned left. That assumes, however, that all the traffic in the campsites always comes from one direction. The traffic comes from both directions, and there is no guarantee that there will be any increased congestion. That issue needs to be carefully examined, and there will be an opportunity to do so as part of the planning process.

Dr. Lewis: I will not reiterate the point about the traffic. I feel, however, that the Forestry Commission has a long history of trying to commercialise its campsites by increasing its sales—given half an inch, it generally takes more than half a mile. The Minister is, therefore, being unrealistic if he feels that, without the guardianship of the verderers to limit this kind of activity, this development will not happen. It will happen, and everyone believes that it will happen.

Mr. Morley: People may believe that. Again, it will be a matter for proper scrutiny during the planning process. I merely say that the hon. Gentleman should not assume that that is the case, or that that is the motivation. I do not believe that it is the motivation. I genuinely believe that there is a problem with a site of special scientific interest and a campsite in ancient woodland, and that someone starting from scratch would not have put the campsite there in the first place. However, when it was opened, there was not the pressure that is imposed on it now by all the people wanting to use it.

As I have said, there will be extensive consultation. Indeed, that has already begun as part of the environmental impact assessment: local individuals, groups and organisations are being consulted. All local people, groups and neighbours will have a full opportunity to comment on the details of the application when it is submitted, and to make objections as appropriate in the normal way.

I ask local people, and the hon. Member for New Forest, East, to consider this. The choice is between a campsite which I do consider to be inappropriately placed in terms of its impact on the special conservation importance of the New Forest, and farmland which, despite its extremely limited biodiversity potential, could be developed in a way that would enhance facilities for visitors to the forest, and indeed designed—I know that this is what the Forestry Commission proposes—to take some of the pressure off the more fragile parts of that ancient forest.

That proposal is, at the very least, worth considering carefully. It is worth looking at the details, and worth recognising that the motivation is right. Of course issues affecting local people, such as traffic and economic impact, need to be taken into account. I want them to be taken into account, but I also want the right balance to be struck between providing for the many visitors who enjoy and love the New Forest and ensuring that the pressures on one of our most ancient and precious natural woodlands are properly managed. I am sure that no one disagrees with that objective.

I believe that the Forestry Commission is motivated by that consideration. I also believe that the proper scrutiny processes that will take place will give local people an opportunity to ask questions, examine the proposals and consider them properly—and, I hope, fairly.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eighteen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 8 May 2002

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

MERSEY TUNNELS BILL (*BY ORDER*)

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Wednesday 15 May.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tuberculosis (Cattle)

1. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): What recent discussions he has had on the risk of the further spread of tuberculosis in cattle to England. [53143]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I regularly meet the Assembly Rural Affairs Minister to discuss a wide range of issues. Policy responsibility for bovine TB in Wales is a matter for my colleagues in the National Assembly, while in England it is the responsibility of Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Ministers and officials in the Assembly and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs maintain close contact on the issue.

Mr. O'Brien: With more than 6,000 cattle slaughtered in Britain in 2001, 2,000 of which were in Wales, this is a desperately serious issue for the dairy and cattle farmers of my Cheshire constituency, who are in the front line of the battle against the spread of bovine TB from across the border in Wales and the west midlands. Even the Labour-dominated Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has called for Government action. Should not the Minister now stop dithering and put in the resources necessary to combat the massive backlog of TB testing in Wales and England, following the suspension of the badger culling trials because of the disastrous foot and mouth epidemic? Why are the Government weak-kneed and complacent about the issue? They should resume the badger culling trials, vaccination research and the transmission tests.

Mr. Touhig: The hon. Gentleman uses 20 words when he could manage with one. Bovine TB is just as likely to spread into Wales from England. Indeed, in Montgomeryshire, the type of TB commonly associated with Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire and west Gloucestershire is prevalent. Bovine TB is a problem and it has been spreading. My colleagues in the Assembly and in DEFRA are taking the issue seriously, but it is important to stress that it does not pose the same contagious problem as foot and mouth disease. Resources are being put in to catch up with the backlog that the hon. Gentleman mentions, because the veterinary service had to be used to cope with the more immediate problem of foot and mouth. Measures have been put in place to restrict cattle movements and cattle on farms that are being restocked following foot and mouth culling are being tested. Key measures are in place to speed up matters, but it will take time. I admit to the hon. Gentleman that the problem will not be put right overnight.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): There has been a serious outbreak of bovine TB in the Raglan and Llantrisant areas of my constituency and certain farmers have had their stock culled, while others are unable to trade or face serious movement restrictions on their livestock. Will my hon. Friend work with his colleagues in DEFRA and the National Assembly to do everything possible to halt the spread of bovine TB?

Mr. Touhig: Yes, I will certainly do that, and I am aware of the problem in Raglan. Indeed, we have seen recent outbreaks in south Ceredigion, central Carmarthenshire, Montgomery and Denbigh. As I said earlier, resources are being made available to speed up the testing of cattle and I can assure my hon. Friend that colleagues in the Assembly and in DEFRA are wasting no time in doing everything that they can—including providing the resources—to tackle the problem.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): The problem of bovine TB is a worrying issue for which the Minister has some responsibility. Is not it the case that Ministers have kicked farmers in the teeth by refusing to claim money from the European Union that would be a great help in addressing the problem? Why have the Government rejected the EU agrimoney package, which amounts to some £72 million? Does the Minister realise that farmers are under siege from all directions, including lower prices, bovine TB and the after-effects of foot and mouth? Now, thanks to his actions, they will be denied European help. The real reason the Government have refused the money is that the Treasury would have to part-finance it. Will the Minister see the Chancellor of the Exchequer and tell him to get out of his office in Whitehall, go to Wales, meet some Welsh farmers and apologise to them?

Mr. Touhig: The right hon. Gentleman is right to underline the concern that we all feel about bovine TB and the impact that foot and mouth disease and other problems have had on the farming industry in the past 12 months. However, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that the European Commission has yet to confirm how much agrimonetary compensation will be made available for the livestock sector. When the amounts have been confirmed, we will consider appropriate cases for payment. Spending on tackling the problem in Wales is now running at about £1.6 million. That shows that the

Government are putting in resources to cope with the problem. As soon as we get information from the European Commission, we will consider where it might be appropriate to add further compensation.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Is my hon. Friend aware that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs told me today that a number of instances of TB have been traced to increased movements of animals around the country as a result of restocking and the reopening of animal marts? Is not it likely that badgers are not responsible for the new increase in cases as they stay in single, small habitats, whereas animals are being moved the length and breadth of the country? Should not we return to the position of a few months ago, when the numbers of animal movements were restricted? At that time, farmers were successfully and cheaply selling animals over the internet and by other means. Such methods did not cause suffering to animals, and avoided the extra risk of infection involved in going to animal markets.

Mr. Touhig: I can tell my hon. Friend that I am given to understand that the most recent outbreak in Denbigh has been among cattle that have just been moved into the area. The Krebs badger culling trials started in 1998, and have been continuing. We expect the results in about 2004. It will then be up to the Government to consider whether those results prove that badgers have been a cause of bovine TB. There is a strong view in the farming community that badgers are responsible, but there are those in animal welfare groups who insist that they are not. Until we have substantive evidence, I cannot comment further.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The House is getting very noisy. It is only fair to the Minister and those asking the questions that they be heard.

Health Provision

2. **Mr. Bill Wiggin** (Leominster): If he will make a statement on ministerial discussions on the effect of the Budget on health provision in Wales. [53145]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have spoken with the Assembly's Minister for Health and Social Services about the increase to the Welsh block consequential on the increases on Government spending on health announced in the recent Budget. The resulting amount for the block for 2007–08 is some £1.8 billion over the next five years, and I am pleased to say that the Assembly intends to spend the full amount on health in Wales.

Mr. Wiggin: On 10 April—*Hansard*, volume 382, columns 3-4—the Secretary of State kindly agreed to ensure that the Minister for Health and Social Services in Wales was aware of the terrible bed shortages in Hereford hospital. Will the right hon. Gentleman say how he got on in those discussions?

Mr. Murphy: We are still in correspondence, obviously, with the Welsh Minister for Health and Social Services. The hon. Gentleman will know that the movement of patients, especially across mid-Wales, to hospitals in Hereford, Shrewsbury and elsewhere is very important. Arrangements are in place to deal with such matters. The hon. Gentleman may rest assured that, when we receive the result of our correspondence, I shall be back in touch with him.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that, in many instances, Wales leads the way. However, given the Budget announcements on health, will he urge the Welsh Minister for Health and Social Services to follow the English example and have independent audit and inspection for health services in Wales to ensure complete transparency?

Mr. Murphy: In both Wales and England, we understand the importance of ensuring that investment goes along with reform. We cannot achieve improvement in the health service unless those two factors go together. I have talked to the First Minister about such matters, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales has also talked to the Minister for Health and Social Services. The Assembly Cabinet and the First Minister are, in principle, very content with and relaxed about the idea of ensuring that there should be a proper audit regime. That regime should be proactive, and not necessarily retrospective on its own. These matters will be discussed in the next few months when we deal with the legislation framing the bodies involved, but my hon. Friend may rest assured that the principles underlying the reforms of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health are the same as those that underlie what the Assembly wishes to do.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Will the Secretary of State say what is the logic in devolving health to the National Assembly for Wales and establishing an audit body that is responsible to this House?

Mr. Murphy: I would have thought that the most important thing is that the patients come first in Wales or England. There is nothing wrong with people in Wales looking at best practice in health trusts in England, comparing notes and seeing what happens. It would be foolish if Wales, a country of 3 million people, did not look across the border to England to see what best practice occurs there. The hon. Gentleman is aware that in other respects, the Assembly is free to do what it wishes. At the end of the day, it is up to the Assembly to decide how best to implement health reform in Wales, but when it sees sensible reform here in England, it should include that as well.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham): Is my right hon. Friend aware that some excellent health care is provided to my constituents by, for example, the Countess of Chester hospital in Chester and the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic and District hospital in Gobowen? The sensible way ahead is for us to work together with English health authorities to bring about the best possible provision of care for my constituents.

Mr. Murphy: I was conscious of that in my reply to the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Wiggin), when I said the same thing. There is an important link between

English health trusts on the border and Welsh health trusts. It is important that we learn from each other, and that applies in north Wales as much as in south Wales.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): In recent days, we have learned the shocking news that patients heading for the accident and emergency unit at the Prince Philip hospital in Llanelli after 5 o'clock were diverted to other hospitals at Swansea and Carmarthen, miles away, because of a lack of anaesthetists, and that patients in need of life-saving pacemaker operations have to wait longer in Wales than those with a similar need in Poland because of a lack of heart specialists in Wales. Are the Government to blame or is the Welsh Assembly?

Mr. Murphy: I would have thought that the Conservative party was to blame as well. *[Interruption.]* Tory Members hold up five fingers, but it was 20 years of Tory Government that led to the underfunding of the national health service.

Of course the hon. Gentleman is right to point, as the *Western Mail* did yesterday, to those two distressing stories. Of course it is important to address those issues. As we heard in the previous exchange, health matters are devolved to the National Assembly for Wales, which has to deal with them as it thinks best. However, things are not as bad as the hon. Gentleman says. Only a week or two ago, the Assembly met its target that no patient should wait more than 12 months for heart surgery. More than 400 extra doctors and 500 extra nurses are being trained this year, and by 2004, more than 4,300 nurses, midwives and health visitors will be coming out of training. Of course it will take time. The Government have given the National Assembly for Wales the biggest increase ever in public spending on the health service. The Assembly itself will carry out reforms. Between the Assembly and the Government, we will have the best health service in the world.

Mr. Evans: Part of the problem is that we have heard all this before. When the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) was Secretary of State for Health, he said:

"waiting lists are rather like a supertanker. It will take time to slow them down, to stop them, to turn them round, but turn them round we will."—[*Official Report*, 17 November 1997; Vol. 301, c.35.]

Since then, the tanker has sunk. In Wales, up to March 2002, the number of patients waiting between 12 and 18 months for a first out-patient appointment had risen by 69 per cent., the number of those waiting more than 18 months is up by 118 per cent and there is a nine-year waiting list for children needing non-cosmetic plastic surgery, yet Government expenditure on the NHS in Wales is £102 more per person than in England. When will the Government ditch the spin, realise that patients will get treatment not through promises but through action, and deliver on an improved health service for the people of Wales?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman knows that the national health service in Wales will receive an extra £2 billion in five years' time. At present, the Assembly spends just over £3 billion on the health service. In five years' time, the figure will be nearly £6 billion. Of course we are putting the investment in, but the hon. Gentleman knows that to ensure that we achieve delivery and improvement, we have to reform the health service. Yet he and his colleagues voted against the reforms of the national health service in Wales in this Chamber some months ago. He cannot have it both ways. When will he tell us what proposals his party has to improve the health service in Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom?

Aerospace Industry

3. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): When he last had discussions with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales on the aerospace industry in north Wales. [53146]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I regularly meet the First Minister to discuss a wide range of issues, including the aerospace industry in Wales.

As I said in reply to a similar question from my hon. Friend on 10 April, I recognise that prospects for the aerospace industry in north Wales and my hon. Friend's constituency are underpinned by the continued success of Airbus at Broughton. I continue to believe that the good working relationship between the management and trade unions at Broughton are vital to the success of that project.

Mr. Chapman: My hon. Friend will appreciate that Airbus at Broughton, where many of my constituents work, along with other parts of the aerospace industry, could have faced problematic times post-11 September. Can he assure me that he is doing all that he can to provide continuing long-term support to the site and to the industry, and that he will bring pressure to bear on the Ministry of Defence to advance the orders for the A340 air tanker to bring further work to the site?

Mr. Touhig: I know well my hon. Friend's commitment to the success of Broughton, and I am sure that he will welcome the good news of orders for the A340 from South African Airways and from Virgin. I take note of his point about the Ministry of Defence and the A340 air tanker, and I shall bring that to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Is the Minister aware of the creation on 26 March this year of Aerospace Wales, which represents the £2 billion a year turnover and 20,000 jobs that the aerospace industry in Wales provides? Would he be willing to meet a cross-party delegation of MPs, Assembly Members and interested parties to talk about developing a coherent strategy and creating a brand for Aerospace Wales, and to discuss a coherent strategy for airports in Wales, which are badly in need of development?

Mr. Touhig: As a Welsh Member of Parliament, I am conscious of the important impact of the aerospace industry throughout Wales. Indeed, it is a very big employer in my constituency and in adjoining constituencies. I would be happy to meet him and the group that he mentions, because it is important that we are all seen to be pulling together to ensure, after 11 September, that the aerospace industry is a success

story. We have a great story to tell in Wales and a good work force. Investment is going in, and let us all pull together to make sure that the industry succeeds.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I, too, welcome the recent launch of Aerospace Wales in my constituency, which combines the manufacturing base in the north with the repair and servicing cluster of industries in the south. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is the time to invest in aerospace training skills in colleges such as Barry college in my constituency, not to cut back on capacity?

Mr. Touhig: I know of my hon. Friend's support for the aerospace industry, and I agree with the point that he makes. I recently met in London a deputation of trade unionists from my area. They are passionately in favour of their company investing in reskilling and upskilling the work force so that it can meet the growing technological demands that the industry will face. I shall certainly do all that I can, working with colleagues in the Assembly and with Ministers to ensure that that is a success, and I am sure that my hon. Friend's college in Barry will make a contribution to that.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Does the Minister accept that the aerospace industry is not only United Kingdom-wide, but an international business? BAE Systems, the main player in the aerospace industry in the UK, is internationally based.

Although I agree with the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) that in the present difficult climate the Ministry of Defence should, where possible, develop projects to guarantee a skilled work force, does the Minister accept that there is a duty and responsibility on Government to minimise additional business costs?

Mr. Touhig: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, the Government stand on their record, which is unparalleled.

I agree that it is important for all arms of Government, especially the Ministry of Defence, to play a part. I have no doubt that it will do so. Certainly, in Wales the MOD has played an important role in the development of the aerospace industry, especially as regards recent announcements about RAF St. Athan. This is an issue that can unite all hon. Members, and we are all working together to the same end.

Economy

4. **Mr. Wayne David** (Caerphilly): What discussions he has had with the Treasury as to the likely impact of measures recently announced in the Budget to improve the performance of the Welsh economy. [53147]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have regular discussions with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on a range of issues, including, of course, the Welsh economy. The Budget included a number of measures that will give a boost to the Welsh economy, including a 0 per cent. corporation tax starting rate, a 1 per cent. corporation tax cut for all small firms, research and development tax breaks for larger firms, further simplification of VAT for small firms and other modernising tax reforms. I am also pleased to note that Wales is posting the fastest fall in unemployment of any region or country in the United Kingdom.

Mr. David: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply. There can be no doubt that the Budget has been a powerful stimulus to the development of the Welsh economy. Unemployment in Wales is indeed at an all-time low, but there are still areas of high unemployment, especially at the heads of the valleys in south Wales. Will my right hon. Friend give an indication and a commitment that the Government will continue to tackle those high rates of unemployment?

Mr. Murphy: Of course I shall give that commitment. I represent a valley constituency myself and understand what my hon. Friend is saying. He is aware that the Assembly, as well as the Government, is doing its best to regenerate our south Wales valleys. In his constituency, for example, there have been 18 new inward investment projects, creating more than 1,000 jobs and safeguarding more than 100 jobs. The unemployment rate in his constituency has dropped, which is part of the general picture in Wales and means that unemployment in Wales is the lowest that it has been for 27 years—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I appeal again to the House to come to order. It is far too noisy.

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford): Last Thursday, the Secretary of State told the House that inward investment was vital to the performance of the economy in Wales. Would he, therefore, care to comment on the fact that, as a proportion of the UK total, inward investment in Wales has collapsed from 19 per cent. in 1991 to only 11 per cent. last year? What has gone wrong?

Mr. Murphy: I remember that the hon. Gentleman took part in the debate on Welsh matters last Thursday. He rightly pointed out the importance of indigenous firms and how they can help to regenerate the Welsh economy. However, I also point out to him that, this very year, the Assembly has the highest level of regional selective assistance grants for seven years; £130 million of RSA has gone into various companies; and 267 investment projects in Wales have benefited from that. There is a combination of two things: we need inward investment and we need to help indigenous industry. That is why, as I said earlier, more people are in work in Wales than at this time last year, despite the loss of manufacturing jobs.

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): The Secretary of State will be aware that in Blaenau Gwent we have some of the greatest poverty in Wales, with some of the highest unemployment and the lowest wages. He will also be aware that, in the next few weeks, Corus will finally close. When he meets the First Secretary will he ensure that the public moneys that he has just mentioned, and which are so generous this year, are directed to those areas in Wales where poverty is greatest, and are not lost, as is often the case, in Cardiff in general and Cardiff bay in particular?

Mr. Murphy: I am very much aware of my hon. Friend's views on these matters. I believe that we can do both in Wales: we can see that the regeneration of our capital city goes ahead, while ensuring that we put proper

resources into Blaenau Gwent and the other south Wales valleys. Only a Labour Government, working with a Labour Assembly, can do that.

Student Debt

5. **Mr. Hugo Swire** (East Devon): If he will make a statement on student debt in Wales. [53148]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I meet regularly with colleagues to discuss a range of issues, including student finance.

Mr. Swire: Student debt has doubled since Labour came to power in Wales. Since the establishment of the Welsh Assembly, and with the support of the Liberal Democrats, the situation has deteriorated further. Is that appalling record the fault of the Welsh Assembly or is it something for which the Government are prepared to take the blame?

Mr. Touhig: The hon. Gentleman must have forgotten that when his party was in power there was a considerable problem of student debt. We have reformed the whole system of student loans, making it much easier for students to access funds, and we have related the repayment to their earnings. The Government, working in partnership with the National Assembly, are aiming at their target, which is to increase the number of people entering higher education. The Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported never succeeded in doing that; we are going to achieve it. We will achieve it quite soon.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Middle East

Q1. **Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister of Israel. [53173]

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): I have had many discussions with Prime Minister Sharon over the past weeks and months.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am sure that the Prime Minister would join me in condemning both the suicide bombing attacks that have taken place on Israel and the attacks on the Palestinian people by the Israeli armed forces. Will he, however, make it clear to Prime Minister Sharon that the only way to bring about a long-term, realistic peace in the region is for Israel to withdraw from Palestine; to accept United Nations resolutions on Palestinian self-determination; to allow an independent United Nations investigation into the massacres of Jenin; and to recognise a Palestinian state? Until that position has been achieved, will my right hon. Friend ensure that the British Government cease all arms sales to Israel?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the whole House would like to join me in condemning totally the appalling outrage that has happened in Israel, in which 16 innocent people have lost their lives. That takes the total, incidentally, of Israeli civilians who have been killed since the beginning of March to 100. And for those people who sometimes do not understand the strength and depth of the feeling in Israel, I hope that this latest outrage reminds them of the precise extent of the pressure that Israel and Israeli people are under. At the same time, of course it is right, as my hon. Friend points out, that many Palestinians—many hundreds of Palestinians—too have lost their lives

There has been a strong statement of condemnation from the Palestinian Authority about this latest terrorist attack. But it needs more than simply a strong statement. There must also be action. And I want to make it clear that, as far as we are concerned, we the British Government—and, I hope, the wider international community—are prepared to work with the Palestinian Authority in any way that is possible, in order to ensure that they have the proper security apparatus that they require and that that is properly enforced throughout the Palestinian Authority, because we cannot have a situation where every time it seems as if there is some hope of political progress, that progress is immediately derailed by a terrorist attack.

Unless the fate of any political process is to be in the hands of the latest suicide bomber, we must do more than ensure that a political process can be restarted properly; the most immediate task now is to ensure that we have in place proper security measures within the Palestinian Authority that allow those in Israel some confidence that, if they start to talk, they will not carry on suffering these appalling outrages, for which there can be absolutely no justification whatever.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Will the right hon. Gentleman of course express, when he next meets Mr. Sharon, the sympathy of the entire House for the latest outrage that has been perpetrated in Israel? Will the right hon. Gentleman also say how pleased we are that Mr. Sharon does seem to be moving towards some dialogue, and that we all hope that that will lead to peace within Israel?

However, can the right hon. Gentleman confirm whether he has seen copies of the documents that were captured by the Israelis in Ramallah, which clearly appear to implicate Mr. Arafat himself in the funding and organisation of these terrorist atrocities? Does the right hon. Gentleman think that, on that basis, Mr. Arafat can form part of any further discussions?

The Prime Minister: We will of course study the documentation that has been provided by the Israeli Government. I believe, though, that what is important is that we have some means of ensuring that the claims about the Palestinian Authority and their complicity in acts of terrorism are properly adjudicated upon, so that we do not have claim and counter-claim every time one of these terrorist attacks occurs.

There is no doubt at all, therefore, that the immediate task—because otherwise I believe that political progress is impossible—is to try to find some way of ensuring that there is a verifiable security apparatus in place inside the Palestinian Authority and their territories. If that cannot be done, it is very difficult for Israel to negotiate, if it

believes that Chairman Arafat and the Palestinian Authority are indeed complicit in terrorism. On the other hand, if the condemnation by the Palestinian Authority is genuine, we have indeed a true tragedy, where we cannot make any political progress, and where each time one of these terrorist attacks occurs, whatever progress there is immediately dissipates. We have to find a way through that.

In relation to the lifting of the siege of Ramallah, we have tried as a Government to play our part in providing some means of ensuring that, if people are alleged terrorists, they are properly and verifiably under lock and key. But we need to make sure that we build on that and try to put the same type of process in place right across the Palestinian Authority; otherwise we will be faced with this situation time and again. In the end, the casualties are clear: there are innocent Israeli civilians dying in very large number, and there are innocent Palestinian civilians dying as well. It is a tragedy that is now pretty much a catastrophe, not just for that region, but for the world.

Engagements

Q2. **Mr. Chris Mullin** (Sunderland, South): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 May. [53174]

The Prime Minister: This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further meetings later today.

Mr. Mullin: May I draw the Prime Minister's attention to the case of a 14-year-old boy in Sunderland who was shot in the back last week by an out-of-control youth with an air weapon and to the fact that the doctors are unable to remove the pellet from his back? Is my right hon. Friend aware that that is only the latest in a series of incidents involving air weapons and out-of-control youths? Does he think that the time has come for us to take a look at the regulation of air weapons?

The Prime Minister: I recognise my hon. Friend's interest in this area and his work in it, too. I should perhaps point out that, under the Firearms Act, it is already an offence to give an air weapon to a person under 14 or to sell one to a person under 17. It is also an offence for anyone to have a loaded air weapon in public. As my hon. Friend will know, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation has, in conjunction with the police, launched its own campaign on air weapon safety. However, I agree with my hon. Friend that this is a serious and growing problem, and in the context of doing everything we can to bear down on the issue of street crime and antisocial behaviour, we will certainly look urgently to see what more is required.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): May I join the Prime Minister unequivocally in his comments on the tragedy today and condemn those who have perpetrated that outrage? May I also join him, without any gap whatever, in saying that the important need is for short-term security for those in Israel and for a settlement at the earliest opportunity?

On a more domestic issue, though, the Transport Secretary, with characteristic candour, writing a little while ago, said to his constituents that, among other things,

"an honest, open style have made Stephen Byers a respected representative."

Does the Prime Minister agree with that characteristic honesty?

The Prime Minister: Of course I do.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Well, the Prime Minister might like to cast his mind back to February, when the Transport Secretary made a statement to the House. I remind him that it was entitled, "Resignation of Martin Sixsmith". Only yesterday, the Transport Secretary's own Department issued a statement saying,

"The Department accept that Martin Sixsmith . . . did not resign".

Why is the Transport Secretary therefore still in his job?

The Prime Minister: Because I do not accept that people were misled at all. *[Interruption.]* The facts were set out in Sir Richard Mottram's statement of 25 February, to which the Secretary of State referred in his statement of 26 February. It was clear that the Secretary of State had been told that Mr. Sixsmith had agreed to resign. It was equally clear that Mr. Sixsmith disputed that he had resigned. Therefore, the parties were not in agreement. Therefore, there had to be a negotiation. All of that was actually set out in Sir Richard's statement of 25 February and repeated by the Secretary of State on 26 February. Terms have now been agreed, and he has indeed departed.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Oh what a wondrous web we weave when first we practise to deceive. Let me remind the Prime Minister what the Transport Secretary actually said:

"The statement that I have made . . . reflects accurately the sequence of events that have taken place".

He also said:

"I will be held to account for the comments that I make in the House".—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 574.]

We now learn that Mr. Sixsmith did not resign; he remained a salaried employee in the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. The taxpayer will have to pay £200,000 to secure his release. Before he was elected, the Prime Minister said, "No more lies." Why has he not dismissed the Transport Secretary?

The Prime Minister: For the simple reason that, if the right hon. Gentleman looks at the agreed statement, what blows a hole in his argument is that it makes it clear that any dispute with Mr. Sixsmith was in good faith. The right hon. Gentleman cannot rely on the agreed statement between the Department and Mr. Sixsmith on the one hand and dispute it on the other. It had been agreed in good faith, and, as the Secretary of State made clear on 26 February, Mr. Sixsmith was to leave on terms to be agreed. Those terms have now been agreed, and the truthful point is that the reason why the right hon. Gentleman wants to raise all these issues is that he has nothing to say about the serious issues of the day.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I really do think that the Prime Minister is keeping very bad company these days.

Most people out there know that they would have been dismissed from their jobs for half of what the Transport Secretary has done. There is a different rule for this Government, however. I remind the Prime Minister that he said:

"This is your chance to get rid of the . . . lies, broken promises and sleaze . . . Please vote for Stephen Byers on 1 May."

I agree. It is an opportunity to get rid of the lies and broken promises: he should dismiss the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions right now.

The Prime Minister: It does not surprise me that, yet again, what the right hon. Gentleman wants to do is to raise any issue other than those that matter to people. As I said, both sides accept that any misunderstanding was in good faith. I suggest that we get on and debate the real issues concerning the people of this country—transport, health, schools, crime and the economy. On all those issues, of course, he has nothing whatever to say.

Q3. [53175] **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): One more missed deadline, and still the Wembley project stumbles on. After this extra time, will there be a penalty shoot-out between Birmingham, Coventry and London? What does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister have to say about the continuing debacle to the 85 per cent. of English football fans who live outside London? Does not this show that our party is still too susceptible to the metropolitan elite? Being told, "All's well apart from the finance," is like asking, "Apart from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the opera?"

The Prime Minister: First, let me thank my hon. Friend for that question. Secondly, there are those who make a perfectly good case for siting the national stadium in Birmingham, in Coventry or in other parts of the UK—

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Bolsover.

The Prime Minister: Or, indeed, in Bolsover. But in the end, these are decisions for the Football Association. The only way that the Government can take this decision ourselves is if we end up financing the whole project. We do not intend to do that. It is therefore a decision for the FA. It has agreed the funding in principle, and it should be allowed to get on with that. The point that my hon. Friend makes about the siting of the stadium may be perfectly reasonable, but it is not a decision for the Government. It is for the FA, and it should be left with the FA.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): On 27 February, the Prime Minister replied to me here that he retained full confidence in the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions because of his statement to the House on the previous afternoon. We now know that a vital aspect of that statement is materially inaccurate. Will he now explain to me, under his terms, how he still retains full confidence?

The Prime Minister: I gave the answer a moment ago. When the Opposition were all crowing about the agreed statement that had been made between Mr. Sixsmith and the Department, I pointed out that the statement makes it perfectly clear that any misunderstanding was in good faith and, therefore, the allegation that somehow the Secretary of State had misled Members of the House was wrong.

Mr. Charles Kennedy: The reason for the statement from the Transport Secretary to which the Prime Minister referred was to correct the misleading impression that the Transport Secretary had given in an earlier television interview. How many goes does the Transport Secretary get? The Prime Minister is very fond of, "Three strikes and you're out." Should the Transport Secretary not be out?

The Prime Minister: No, Mr. Speaker, for the reasons that I have already given.

Tony Cunningham (Workington): I recently met members of my local mountain rescue teams. This year is the International Year—*[Interruption.]* Obviously, there are supporters of my mountain rescue teams on the Opposition Benches. This year, the teams are busy promoting the international year of the mountain. Bearing in mind that many areas in mountain regions suffered badly as a result of foot and mouth, will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the skill and courage not only of the mountain rescue teams in my constituency—the Keswick and Cockermouth mountain rescue teams—but mountain rescue teams throughout Britain, who I am sure the whole House will agree do an absolutely fantastic job?

The Prime Minister: They do, indeed. I would like to congratulate my hon. Friend and his constituents on all the work that is done in Cumbria on mountaineering. I had an opportunity to see that myself last July when I visited the national mountaineering exhibition at Rheged. I remember it very well, and I was immensely impressed by the work that the teams do. I am sure that they will make a very valuable contribution to the United Nations international year of the mountain.

Q4. [53176] **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): If the misunderstanding referred to earlier was in good faith, will the Prime Minister authorise the expenditure of public money to enable the Secretary of State for Transport to sue for defamation against *The Daily Telegraph*, which this morning described him as

"a liar, unfit for office in any government department"?

The Prime Minister: For the precise reasons that I gave, those allegations are false. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State goes on to deal with the issues that really concern the people of this country. I note that, when the Leader of the Opposition had the chance to ask me about transport, he did not ask one single thing about the performance of transport, but merely went on with this issue, with which I have already dealt.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Cunninghame, South): In my constituency, a group of women have formed Mothers against Drugs, which is an admirable organisation that fights all forms of drugs, drug taking and drug pushing. However, a young mother came to see me with a despicable product known as "freekee drops", which her five-year-old had purchased from an ice cream van and

with which the child had then mimicked the actions involved in taking drugs. The drops come in a packet shaped like a syringe.

Every Member in the House has a responsibility to drive the product from shops in the United Kingdom. Moreover, given the fact that the drops are produced in Spain and that the Spanish hold the presidency of the European Union, will my right hon. Friend hold discussions with his counterpart in Spain to get him to cease the production of this product? If my right hon. Friend cannot do that, will he at the very least embarrass the importers into not stocking the product on the shelves in their shops?

The Prime Minister: I understand that this issue has been raised with the trading standards agency in Glasgow, where the issue first came to people's notice, and with the Food Standards Agency. I shall certainly look into the issue and get back to my hon. Friend. I understand the problem to which he draws attention. In particular, we must make sure that no young person is tempted into drugs through this route. That would obviously be wholly wrong and wholly inconsistent with everything else that we are trying to do.

Q5. [53177] **Bob Russell** (Colchester): The award of the Queen's Jubilee medal to members of Her Majesty's armed forces is welcome. However, is the Prime Minister aware that the Retired Officers Corps seems to have been overlooked? Given that many of those men and women have served upwards of 30 years and that they still serve Queen and country—often wearing uniform in military bases—will he use his influence to ensure that members of the Retired Officers Corps receive the Queen's Jubilee medal?

The Prime Minister: I understand entirely the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. He will know that members of the armed forces who retire are no longer serving members and become civil servants. That is the technical reason for the decision. I know that not many people are in those retired officer grades and it is worth looking into. However, the problem is whether there would be a read-across into other areas and instead of taking account of one very exceptional case, we end up having to take account of many other exceptional cases too. If I may, I will look into that and get back to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart): I welcome the Government's commitment to making parents accept responsibility for their children's behaviour. However, can the Prime Minister assure the House that any proposals to penalise parents will not disproportionately affect the poorest households while allowing better-off parents to escape relatively scot free?

The Prime Minister: I entirely agree that any proposal must be neutral in terms of the family's income. It is a question not of whether the family is middle class, poor or wealthy but of whether the parents have failed to exercise proper responsibility in respect of antisocial behaviour and truancy. I agree that we must ensure that the measures we take bear down on any families, irrespective of their level of income, who are allowing the situation to continue. My hon. Friend will know that there is much support, right across the country, for ensuring that we bear down in every way that we can on the menace of antisocial behaviour in our communities which causes so much needless distress.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Does the Prime Minister think it right that NHS patients waiting for tests for illnesses such as cancer or heart disease should be excluded from the official waiting list figures as they are right now?

The Prime Minister: I think the NHS waiting list figures should be the same under this Government as they were under the last Government and, as far as I am aware, they are exactly the same. We are applying the same tests in exactly the same way as the previous Government, which is what should happen.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Well, the National Audit Office made it quite clear that they are not the same, so let us get back to the facts. Some 250,000 people are waiting for angiograms, scans, endoscopies and body scans. The King's Fund says that, if anything, that is an underestimate. We know that hospitals up and down the country already collect those data, so why does not the Prime Minister simply answer this question: why does he not instruct his Health Secretary to include those people on the waiting lists as they should be?

The Prime Minister: Because the waiting list figures are done in precisely the same way as they always have been done. Of course I accept that people are waiting for treatment, but I point out to the right hon. Gentleman that there are now something like 25 per cent. more heart operations every year; there are 40 per cent. more cardiologists, and 20 per cent. more cancer consultants; and more than 90 per cent. of people with suspected cancer who are urgently referred by their GP see a consultant within two weeks, as opposed to just over 60 per cent. when we came to power. In addition, as regards the in-patient waiting list, virtually every single indicator is now in the right direction.

I agree entirely that much more needs to be done, and as we are on the subject of policy at long last, let us ask the right hon. Gentleman what he would do. Our response to the problem is to invest in the national health service. We want to see more money invested in the health service—more consultants, more doctors, more nurses and more equipment. Will the right hon. Gentleman please tell us what he wants to see?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): On the subject of money, has my right hon. Friend had a word with the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the past few days to ensure, as he said a little earlier, that everyone carries the same burden? Will the Chancellor introduce rules to change the Tories' 1993 Act that exempted certain people from having to pay inheritance tax? Will he bring the royal family into the net, in jubilee year?

The Prime Minister: Just for a moment there, I thought that that was going to be a helpful question.

I am sure that the Chancellor has heard what my hon. Friend said, but I do not think that he will have anything to comment at this stage.

Q6. [53178] **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford): On the question of money again, does the Prime Minister care to reflect on a parliamentary written answer that he gave me on 10 April? Can he explain to the House why last year the Department of Health spent £93,000 on entertainment when the combined budget of No. 10 and Chequers was £21,000 less?

The Prime Minister: If anything really indicates the state of the Tory party, it is that question. I am sorry, I do not have a detailed record of the entertainment budget either of the Department of Health or of Downing street or Chequers, but I tell the House what I do have—I have a plan to get money into the NHS to improve the service for people. The fact that the hon. Gentleman used to ask me about how bad the health service was in his area but is now unable to do so is an indication of the progress being made.

Jim Knight (South Dorset): In the last week, I have seen for myself in my constituency the success of drug treatment and testing orders, referral orders and the youth offending team, but in places such as Swanage and Portland, antisocial behaviour continues, along with complaints about the cost and bureaucracy of implementing antisocial behaviour orders. Is the Prime Minister confident that local authorities and the police have the tools necessary to deal with this scourge in our community?

The Prime Minister: Drug treatment and testing orders are a very important weapon in the hands of the courts which give people a very clear choice: if they repeatedly commit offences and are on drugs, they can either go to prison or take proper drug treatment. I have found from talking to magistrates around the country that those orders have been very successful where they have been applied; however, we need to start to extend the concept so that we make sure that where people who are drug addicts are charged with offences and have a criminal record, they also, if possible, receive drug treatment. Otherwise, they will be back out on the streets committing the same types of offences.

Antisocial behaviour orders have been successful where they have been applied, but we need to ensure that there are more of them. The Home Secretary is in the process of making sure that we slim down the bureaucracy associated with them, and it is important that they are seen as one of a range of measures to deal with the menace of antisocial behaviour. I am only sorry that neither the Conservatives nor the Liberal Democrats are supporting us on these measures.

Q7. [53179] **Mr. Mark Hoban** (Fareham): Why will the Prime Minister not commit to deliver to the people of my constituency the same standards of health care that people in other European countries routinely experience?

The Prime Minister: It is at about this time that one needs a planted question, I always feel.

That is exactly what we are working on: we are trying to get money into the NHS, which is why we now have more doctors, nurses and consultants, why waiting lists are falling and why new hospitals are being built—they are being built now. Indeed, in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, the NHS has received in the region of £98 million extra. With great respect to him, I think that his was an excellent question. He is right; that is precisely what we have to do, and I only wait for the moment when he starts to cross the Floor.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): I thank the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer for their visit to Belfast last Thursday. I very much welcome the investment and reform initiative that further consolidates the new institutions in Northern Ireland. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the formal agreement between the Police Service for Northern Ireland and the Garda Siochana in the Republic of Ireland, which will facilitate the pursuit of terrorists and organised criminals? Will he, after 17 May—the date of the election in the Republic—have further urgent talks with the new Government of the Republic with a view to implementing fully outstanding matters from the Good Friday agreement: the north-south parliamentary forum, the north-south consultancy forum and the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland? Will he undertake to pursue those vigorously?

The Prime Minister: We will of course pursue all aspects of the Good Friday agreement. The work that the Northern Ireland Policing Board has already done is remarkable. Although there is great concern in Northern Ireland at present—I am sure there is—for understandable and obvious reasons, there is a clear need to demonstrate clearly on behalf of all parties associated with paramilitary organisations that they have indeed given up violence for good, properly and totally. The agreement reached and announced last week by myself and the Chancellor, along with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, indicates the degree of progress that can be made when the political process is continuing and people have a chance to lead their lives in some sort of normality. I still believe, whatever the problems, that we have to carry on making progress, and I can certainly provide an assurance that we will do everything that we can to implement the remaining stages of the Good Friday agreement.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, I raised in the House the matter of the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am listening to a point of order.

Mr. Forth: I raised the matter of the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, who has just scuttled out of the Chamber. He was in the Tea Room earlier—a sure sign that he must be in trouble—and he has just sat through Prime Minister's questions in the Chamber. However, the House has not been able to hold him to account for what in the press today has been a humiliation not just for him, but potentially for the House.

Mr. Speaker, how long are you or we going to allow the matter to go unresolved while everybody in the country knows that something has gone badly wrong in the relationship between Ministers and the House of Commons? "Erskine May" is clear, as is the ministerial code. Can you advise me on what we can do to bring to account a Secretary of State whom everybody in the land believes is being dishonest with the House of Commons?

Mr. Speaker: If the right hon. Gentleman feels that there has been a contempt, he must write to me. If he wants further advice, I remind him that on some occasions when I need advice, I go to him; he knows his way round the rules of the House and well knows how to bring a Minister to account. I urge him to look at his own experience.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I want to bring another Minister to account on an issue that is rather less serious, but nevertheless serious enough. Yesterday, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears), who is in the Chamber—I told her that I was going to raise this point of order—a question about community or cottage hospitals in Lichfield. Replying to my supplementary question, she may have inadvertently misled the House on two points. First, she said that there would be

"52 in-patient beds, rehabilitation facilities, out-patient, diagnostics and X-ray equipment, a pharmacy, a minor injuries unit, a renal satellite dialysis unit and, I hope, a maternity unit—all under Labour."

However, we have those already. In fact, the plans for the new hospital simply provide for them, but not other existing services, so there will be a reduction. Far more seriously, however, the Under-Secretary went on to say:

"I am pleased that on his website he said that the Budget was good for the NHS."—[*Official Report*, 7 May 2002; Vol. 385, c. 4.]

The Under-Secretary left it like that, but are her remarks honourable, Mr. Speaker, when they mislead the House? In fact, my website says:

"The Chancellor of the Exchequer is gambling that the Government will finally be able to reverse the downward trend in the NHS services . . . It's a good budget for the NHS—if only it works. But even by 2007, the Government will still be paying less than Germany or other countries pay for their health services which operate more efficiently."

The point is, Mr. Speaker, that the hon. Lady quoted selectively and misled the House. Perhaps everyone should look at www.michael.fabricant.mp.co.uk to learn the truth of the matter.

Mr. Speaker: That was not a point of order.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. On 26 February at column 574 of *Hansard*, I asked the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions:

"Will the Secretary of State say whether Mr. Martin Sixsmith was a civil servant in his Department on 22 February?"

He answered:

"As I said earlier, Martin Sixsmith offered his resignation, which was accepted, on 15 February."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 574.]

How can the Secretary of State stand by the statement that he made to the House of Commons?

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let me answer. I am not responsible for the Minister's replies; therefore I cannot be drawn into the argument through points of order.

Mr. MacKay: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. You, like all of us, are responsible for not bringing the House into disrepute. Outside in the country, the fact that a Secretary of State has misled the House in a major statement and has not been called to account at the Dispatch Box has brought the House into disrepute today. Many of us would like to know what is going to happen.

Mr. Speaker: I cannot add to my previous statement on the matter.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is not there an honourable custom in the House that if a right hon. or hon. Member inadvertently misleads the House, they seek to make a personal statement? If the Secretary of State should ask you for permission to make a personal statement, would you grant it?

Mr. Speaker: I would look at the matter.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. On 21 March, in a written question, I asked the Home Secretary about the abolition of the special vouchers scheme. When last week—six weeks later—I had not received a reply, I tabled a further written question asking when I might receive a reply. Yesterday I received a response from the Minister which stated: "I will reply as soon as possible." It is now seven weeks since I tabled my original question. Can you give some guidance to me and to Ministers about acceptable time frames for responding to hon. Members' inquiries?

Mr. Speaker: I will look into the hon. Gentleman's complaint.

Performance of Private Hospitals

3.37 pm

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require private hospitals to publish independently audited information on clinical performance and on complaints from patients on the same basis as that required of NHS hospitals.

A couple of weeks ago, I was at a children's tea party with my son when I started talking to Peter Touche, who was there with his twin sons, Charles and Alexander. The Bill is inspired by the tragic case of their mother, Laura Touche, who died three years ago of a brain haemorrhage after giving birth to the twins at the private Portland hospital in London.

In January this year, a jury inquest found that Laura had died of

"natural causes contributed to by neglect".

The natural causes included high blood pressure, which led to the brain haemorrhage; the neglect referred to the fact that no basic medical checks were carried out by staff at the Portland hospital for two and a half hours after her caesarean operation. It was only when Laura herself alerted medical staff to the fact that she was feeling very unwell that anyone realised that something was wrong. She was rushed to a specialist NHS neurology hospital, but never recovered.

I know from my own son's recent birth at St. Mary's, Paddington, after caesarean section, that in the NHS a mother's blood pressure is checked regularly. It is checked every 15 minutes for the first hour after birth, every 30 minutes for the second hour, then hourly for the next three hours. In the country's leading private hospital, Laura's blood pressure was not checked at all. If that most basic of medical procedures had taken place, she may well have been alive today, and her children, Charles and Alexander, would have their mother.

But for the courage and determination of Laura's husband, Peter, the truth would never have been known. It has taken a three-year legal battle in the High Court and the Court of Appeal for the full story of Laura's neglect at the Portland hospital to emerge. It is sometimes said that individual cases make bad law, but Laura's death and her husband's struggle to uncover the truth reveal a more endemic culture of secrecy in many private hospitals, and it is that culture which my Bill seeks to attack.

Of course, cases of medical accidents and neglect sadly happen in all kinds of hospitals—NHS and private. One has only to look at the NHS's annual litigation bill to know that. It is often difficult for patients and their relations to get to the truth, regardless of where they are treated. A constituent of mine is still trying to find out what happened to the retained organs of her son, who died 30 years ago in an NHS hospital.

I hope that in the NHS at least, public scrutiny is at last prising open the closed, clam-like world of the medical profession, where few admit to a mistake and no one rats on a colleague. The inquiries at the Bristol royal infirmary in Alder Hey have certainly helped; so too has the requirement for NHS trusts to publish data on how they perform in relation to, for instance, waiting times, trolley waits, cancelled operations, hospital cleanliness, post-operative deaths and emergency readmissions.

As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I have seen how the performance data—especially on such things as waiting lists—can be distorted and fiddled, often under intense political pressure. I hope that the new Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection will be sufficiently robust and independent to ensure that that no longer happens. Nevertheless, I am happy to commend the Government on the pressure that they have put on NHS trusts to be open about their performance. It must be good for patients and for taxpayers that NHS trusts find it more and more difficult to sweep their problems under the carpet.

With the Bill I want to extend that pressure to the private medical sector, where there are not the same incentives to be open and transparent. The website of the pressure group Action for the Proper Regulation of Private Hospitals, to whose work I pay tribute, is full of examples. The problem is more general, however. In evidence to the Select Committee on Health three years ago, the Independent Healthcare Association said:

"there is frequently an undue emphasis on hotel standards such as decor and not sufficient emphasis or expertise into inspecting standards of treatment and care".

The Minister might say, if there were an opportunity to respond today, that a much stricter regulatory regime for private medical care has been introduced in the last month. That is undoubtedly true, and welcome. As of the beginning of April, all private hospitals are subject to new standards and to inspection by the National Care Standards Commission. They are now required, for example, to ensure that the risks of proposed treatment are fully explained to patients. They also have to have a proper complaints procedure, which would have helped in the Touche case.

However, there is still no requirement in the regulations for any private hospital to publish any data on its clinical performance. Unless the hospital volunteers the information, it is impossible to know how many deaths occur within 30 days of surgery or how many emergency readmissions take place, yet information of that kind is now freely available in the NHS. Although private hospitals now need to have a proper complaints procedure, there seems to be no requirement for them to publish complaints in the same detail. Other prospective patients therefore cannot judge the hospital's record for themselves.

My Bill deals with all those deficiencies in a straightforward way. It simply requires private hospitals to publish the same independently audited data on clinical performance that NHS hospitals now have to publish. It also requires private hospitals to publish, in the same detail, complaints from patients. I note in passing what officials have probably already told the Minister—that these requirements could be achieved through regulation under existing legislation—but sadly the option of a ten-minute rule regulation is not available to Back Benchers, so I am forced to propose primary legislation.

Most private hospitals have nothing to fear from being open and transparent. The staff who work in them do a great job, and many would actually welcome public recognition of the high standards of care that they offer. The Bill will, however, make life much more difficult for private hospitals with something to hide.

Some may ask why this is any business of Government. Does not private medicine mean exactly that—a private matter in which the state should not become involved?

[Mr. George Osborne]

But the state is already involved. More and more people are being forced to turn to private hospitals for their treatment. Last year, more than 1 million patients had surgery in the United Kingdom's 230 private acute hospitals, and the number continues to rise.

The state will become even more involved in the private medical sector, if the Secretary of State for Health is to be believed. Last week he announced that he was giving primary care trusts "full discretion" to commission care from

"wherever it is best provided . . . from the public, private or voluntary sectors".

He said:

"the provider of care is less important than the quality of care provided".

I agree, but how can a primary care trust assess the best quality of care available, regardless of provider, if not all providers publish the same performance data?

If the Health Secretary means what he says about commissioning care from where it is best provided—I hope he does—that must also mean NHS patients routinely receiving treatment in private hospitals. Surely those patients have a right to know how those hospitals perform, just as they now know how NHS hospitals perform. Surely patients and primary care trusts have a right to be able to compare for themselves on the same terms the quality of care that is provided in two different hospitals. Surely the taxpayers have a right to see that their money is properly spent.

My Bill gives patients and taxpayers those rights and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. George Osborne, Mr. Parmjit Dhanda, Fiona Mactaggart, Chris Grayling, Dr. Andrew Murrison, Mr. Boris Johnson, Mr. Mark Field, Andrew Selous, Mr. Hugo Swire, Mr. Richard Bacon, Mr. Gregory Barker and Mr. Bill Wiggin.

PERFORMANCE OF PRIVATE HOSPITALS

Mr. George Osborne accordingly presented a Bill to require private hospitals to publish independently audited information on clinical performance and on complaints from patients on the same basis as that required of NHS hospitals: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed [Bill 135].

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

VALUE ADDED TAX

That the Value Added Tax (Buildings and Land) Order 2002 (S.I., 2002, No. 1102), dated 17th April 2002, a copy of which was laid before this House on 17th April, be approved.—*[Mr. Boateng.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Finance Bill

(Clauses 4, 19, 23, 26 to 29, 87 to 92, 131 and 134 and Schedules Nos. 1, 5 and 38)

Considered in Committee.

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair.*]

Clause 4

REDUCED RATES OF DUTY ON BEER FROM SMALL BREWERIES

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

3.47 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I should like to make a brief contribution on the clause before we consider the detailed amendments, as I think that we need to debate the principle of the Government's proposal to introduce progressive beer duty. We will deal with some of the problems through Conservative amendments that will have Liberal Democrat support. In introducing a new tax relief, we should debate the underlying principle before we deal with the detail that is the subject of the clause.

The Financial Secretary will be aware that the issue of progressive beer duty has had a long gestation before coming to the House. There has been a long campaign, and the introduction of such a duty has had many supporters in the House and outside, whether among brewers, beer drinkers or members of the Campaign for Real Ale. Hon. Members who have spoken to CAMRA members in their constituencies will know of the passion that is felt by many people about the new relief. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Government have been considering the issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones), who is very active in the all-party group on beer, has been a champion for such a move in my party.

The question, however, is whether the proposed move is right. The key argument used in its favour has been that we need a level playing field for the brewers who will benefit from the measure. The idea is that there is currently no level playing field between the microbreweries and small brewers—the traditional brewers—and the very large breweries. The rationale for the lack of a level playing field is that the larger breweries can obtain many economies of scale. They can use fairly aggressive discounting methods. Sometimes, the question is asked whether those are against competition. Therefore, people have argued that reform is needed in the brewing industry to create a level playing field. Another important argument relates to competition: many proponents of progressive beer duty have argued that it will achieve greater proliferation of real ales and greater choice.

The previous Conservative Government and, indeed, this Government have considered reforms of various aspects of the beer industry to try to create a level playing field and to increase choice. We have seen the beer orders and Office of Fair Trading inquiries. Different measures and ideas have been put forward to try to create extra competition. The Government's analysis for reform is based, I hope, on that notion. Many past reforms have not

worked. Therefore, in deciding whether it wants to go down this road, the Committee must ask a few pertinent questions and put the policy to a few stringent tests.

The first obvious question is whether the duty reform will maintain and indeed increase the choice of real ales and the quality of beer available to consumers. Will the rebate enable that? What financial analysis has Her Majesty's Treasury done to show that the relief is needed to meet those objectives? Will the relief improve the position of the brewing industry and improve choice for consumers?

I assume that the Treasury has undertaken such research. Clearly, before one spends taxpayers' money, one will want to be certain that the policy is going to produce the benefits that it is alleged it will produce. I hope that the Minister can reassure the Committee that the research has been done. Moreover, I hope that he will promise to publish that research, so that it is in the public domain and so that, before we get to Report, we will all have a chance to examine what the boffins in the Treasury have been working on to justify the policy.

I hope that the Minister will go further and reassure the Committee that the relief will be examined to check that it is meeting its objectives. We all wish it well. We all hope that it will work, but the Government need to ensure that when reliefs are created they are meeting their objective.

The evidence that we have seen from sources in the industry, from consumers and from CAMRA is fairly compelling. We have looked at that research and been fairly impressed by it, but the Government have a different job if they are to represent the interests of the taxpayer. They must ensure that the research from the industry and from CAMRA is valid. They must do independent research to convince hon. Members on both sides of the Committee that the relief would be a good use of taxpayers' money. I hope that the Minister can assure us that the research has been done, and that this was not a last minute, tabloid-pleasing, rabbit out of the hat policy decided at the last minute, with the World cup taking place this summer.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster): The hon. Gentleman suggests that the argument for the proposal is compelling. What proportion of British beer would be covered by clause 4?

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for that intervention. I believe from research that I have seen that less than 2 per cent. of beer brewed in the United Kingdom will benefit, but that will not necessarily go against the thrust of what the Government are doing, if their research shows that the proposal will improve competition and choice. It will have a big effect on more than 350 breweries, so it may be welcome, but we need to see the evidence to be reassured.

Let us be clear. If Parliament passes the clause and the schedule that is linked to it, it will agree to expenditure of £15 million, which is an awful lot of money. It is also being asked to agree to put on the statute book nine new pages of tax law to back up the £15 million tax concession. We should also bear it in mind that private sector companies and Customs and Excise officials will have to spend hours ensuring that the money works properly and is not abused. In due course, as the wily minds of the private sector find ways around the nine pages before us, we will doubtless be asked to pass anti-avoidance legislation.

Although I am trying to provoke a debate on the principle behind clause 4, I do so in a spirit of acceptance of the policy. I hope that it will bring about the claimed advantages, and that the Minister can reassure us that it is well researched. Who in this House would oppose cheaper beer and greater choice in the pub? It is a popular notion that we would want to support in general terms, but we need reassurance on the detail.

I have one final point for the Minister. According to some sources, the Chancellor's presentation of the policy on Budget day was rather misleading. He implied that it would result in a 14p reduction in the price of a pint of beer, but those hon. Members who have examined the policy in detail will know that the cut in duty is unlikely to be passed on to the consumer. Many brewers have told me that they are concerned about the way in which the policy is portrayed. They believe that most breweries will try to invest the money, given that they—particularly small independent microbreweries—operate on very tight margins. That would be a laudable use of the money, and with that in mind I hope that the Minister will present the policy in a slightly different way to that deployed by the Chancellor on 17 April.

If the policy will not in fact result in a 14p reduction in the price of a pint of beer, those beer drinkers who, hopefully, will be watching us massacre Sweden in the World cup will want to know why they cannot buy beer at that price. If the answer is that breweries will invest the money in providing a greater choice of beers, in premises through which to sell beer, and in independent outlets, that might well be a good thing, but we want to know whether that was the Government's intention. We do not want to hear the spin that we heard on Budget day; we want to know the reality behind the proposal. I hope that the Minister can give serious answers to those serious questions.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I am delighted to hear that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) supports our amendments, and we, too, support clause 4. He was in fact being rather kind to the Government in arguing that the Chancellor has said one thing but that the reality is rather different. I wonder whether he is aware of today's statement by the Independent Family Brewers of Britain, which consists of 33 family-owned and family-run brewers and pub retailers:

"The way the Chancellor announced the reductions was a complete con. We estimate that approximately 0.5 per cent. of pubs will be able to take advantage of the change in beer duty—any England fan looking for cheaper beer at the time of the World Cup will have a very long (and thirsty!) search. The public has been misled into believing that village pubs will offer cheaper beer and that is only the case in a tiny, tiny minority."

In identifying the fact that, as so often in the past, the Chancellor's Budget is all clever words designed for a wider audience, the hon. Gentleman has made a good point. As we always say, we must look at the small print. The Chancellor said in his Budget statement:

"I have decided that the duty paid on their own beer will be halved. This is a cut equal to 14p off each pint, to be implemented for village pubs and small breweries by this summer—in time for the World cup."—[*Official Report*, 17 April 2002; Vol. 382, c. 584.]

However, that is far from the truth.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): As usual.

Mr. Chope: As my hon. Friend says, that is usual. I hope that we will hear an explanation of why the Chancellor spoke at such length to give the impression to people listening to his Budget that they would be able to get cheap beer after 1 June, when the reality is very different.

I shall not say any more about clause 4, because it is important to get on to the amendments. If we accept the principle, we need to ensure that we come up with a workable system. At the moment, it is not workable.

4 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Paul Boateng): The Opposition were characteristically carping, cavilling and mealy-mouthed. After many years of campaigning for this change by many sectors of the industry and the pub-going public—backed by some Liberal Democrat and Conservative Members—when the day finally arrives, we hear nothing but whining and attempts to undermine a real achievement for the industry. It will bring new hope to nine out of 10 UK breweries, which will make savings of up to £120,000 as a result of this measure. That includes all microbreweries and local breweries.

What we should have heard from the Opposition was some acknowledgement that they supported the change. Successive Governments have sought to support the diversity of the British beer market, notably by use of regulations allowing independent brewers access to tied estates. As the number of tied estates has fallen and pub companies have come to the fore, it has become increasingly difficult to promote diversity and market access through regulation. When we are asked for the rationale behind the scheme, it is an attempt to meet that concern and recognise the particular difficulties that small breweries face when seeking to grow their business and compete for access in today's beer market.

We estimate that the savings will help small breweries to remain profitable when selling beer to pub companies at discount rates and, for many, will allow them to invest in their own pubs, which will offer them a more secure and stable outlet for their products. Of course, the choice is theirs; it is not for the Government to dictate how small breweries should make use of the savings now available. Some may choose to cut their prices, but others will seek to re-invest the savings to enable them to compete against medium and large breweries. That is why we, too, found convincing the arguments put to us by the Small Independent Brewers Association.

The scheme has been under active consideration by successive Governments since at least 1989, when it was recommended by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. Indeed, we have been in close consultation with the brewing industry since announcing that we were considering the scheme in the 2001 Budget. That consultation demonstrated exactly what we have announced and the veracity of the rationale that lies behind the measure. The suggestion by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) that this was a Budget wheeze thought up a few days before to grab some headlines does not do him justice. He gives these matters greater consideration than that cheap jibe would suggest. I hope that he does not intend to continue in that vein for the rest of the consideration of this Finance Bill.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I hope that he does.

Mr. Boateng: The shadow Chief Secretary says from a sedentary position, "I hope that he does." I wonder how often the hon. Gentleman will turn up in Committee. He will not have to endure the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton—

Mr. Bercow: I will be there.

Mr. Boateng: Good. We look forward very much to the continued attendance of the shadow Chief Secretary, as we want to put him to the test. He has not had any testing yet, and it is time that he had some.

Mr. Edward Davey *rose—*

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Boateng: I see the shadow Chief Secretary is itching to respond, but he will have plenty of time to do so in the Committee's deliberations. He must restrain himself just a little longer, while I give way to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton.

Mr. Edward Davey: I am grateful to the Financial Secretary for giving way, although I am sorry to stop him in his rather tedious tracks. So far, he has failed to say whether he will publish the analysis performed by the Treasury before the policy was decided. The right hon. Gentleman has said that there has been consultation. Have the results been published? If so, where are they available? If not, when will they be published?

Mr. Boateng: I am not going to fall for that one. I would not want to be tedious and bore the Committee this afternoon in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests. I am only too happy to write to him to outline the general nature of the consultation, but I do not intend to publish the details. The hon. Gentleman can do what he will with the letter that I shall write to him on the subject, but he needs to understand why the small breweries so welcome the measure.

The measure will help to level the playing field. Small brewers will be able to compete more effectively with the big regional and national breweries. They will be able to use the savings that they make to invest in their own pubs, or to offer increased discounts when selling their beer.

The proposed relief will provide support for small brewers throughout their growth—from the first barrel that they produce until they reach the £2.5 million turnover of regional brewers. The relief is focused and will meet the needs of those who require it most. It will retain for the UK the rich diversity of its brewing industry, and protect consumer choice in an age when multi-million pound pub companies dominate the retail market.

We want a beer industry in which 500 brewers have access to the market, and not just the largest 50. That is why the small brewing industry has welcomed the measure with such warmth. The proposal is right in principle, which is why it will be capable of withstanding the detailed scrutiny of the Committee.

I commend the principle and its outcome to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1

BEER FROM SMALL BREWERIES: REDUCED RATE OF DUTY

Mr. Chope: I beg to move amendment No. 17, page 110, line 32, at end insert—

'(3) Beer produced in a small brewery for export shall not count towards the maximum production levels specified for small breweries elsewhere in this Part.'.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 4, page 112, line 2, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 5, page 112, line 14, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 7, page 112, line 17, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 6, page 112, line 20, leave out from "that" to end and insert—

'beer produced under licence is not small brewery beer'.

No. 8, page 112, line 26, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 9, page 113, line 9, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 10, page 113, line 13, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 11, page 114, line 19, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 12, page 115, line 10, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 13, page 115, line 13, leave out from "that" to end and insert—

'beer produced under licence is not small brewery beer'.

No. 14, page 115, line 22, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 15, page 116, line 42, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

No. 16, page 116, line 46, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".

Mr. Chope: The amendments would introduce common sense into the eligibility rules entitling small breweries to a reduced rate of duty on their first 5,000 hectolitres of production. In this debate, we shall have to refer quite a lot to hectolitres. People following the debate may wish to know that a hectolitre is 100 litres—almost 22 gallons, or 176 pints. Unfortunately, the Bill refers to hectolitres.

Amendment No. 17 would exclude from the calculation of annual production for the purpose of assessing eligibility production for export, which is already exempt from the penal rates of beer duty on domestic sales. However, the amendment is not as far reaching as amendment No. 4 and the consequential amendments Nos. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15 and 16. Those amendments would extend relief to all brewers producing up to 200,000 hectolitres per annum, instead of limiting it to those producing up to 30,000 hectolitres per annum. It is because amendment No. 4 goes to the core of the argument that I shall seek to divide the Committee on that amendment rather than amendment No. 17.

Amendment No. 4 would make about another 25 small breweries eligible for relief at a cost to the Exchequer of about £3 million or £3.25 million—about one tenth of 1 per cent. of total beer duty yield. The Financial Secretary referred to regional brewers as though only they were excluded from this scheme. He may be interested to know about the Ringwood brewery, close to my constituency. It is not a regional brewery but a popular local brewery and it produces between 40,000 and 50,000 hectolitres per annum. It is a family firm, founded in 1978; it originally had one employee and now employs 44 people. Within any definition, it is a small business and a small brewer. It was gravely misled, because it assumed that the benefit would apply to it, but it will not.

The Chancellor told the House and the nation in the Budget that he would

"encourage one group of small businesses, the nation's small breweries".

He went on to say:

"I have decided that the duty paid on their own beer will be halved."—[*Official Report*, 17 April 2002; Vol. 382, c. 584.]

The Ringwood brewery thought that it would be one of those small breweries, but the small print shows that it does not qualify.

The situation is pretty serious, not just for the Ringwood brewery but for a number of other independent family breweries. The Independent Family Brewers of Britain says:

"We had asked the Government to follow the European model and allow tax relief for small brewers producing up to 200,000 hectolitres a year . . . The 30,000 hectolitre limit proposed in the Budget affects under 2 per cent. of the market and will leave many small brewers out in the cold."

The letter continues:

"We are delighted that the Conservatives are asking the Chancellor to help brewers like ourselves and fully support their suggested amendments to raise the production threshold for tax relief to 200,000 hectolitres from the proposed 30,000 hectolitres and also to allow beer produced in small breweries for export not to count towards these maximum production levels."

That is a good third-party endorsement for the common sense encapsulated in the amendments.

Mr. Edward Davey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, especially after reading out that press release. Did it go on to say what it thought about the Conservatives' record in failing over 18 years to introduce a reduced rate?

Mr. Chope: No, it did not. I understand that my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Cope went to Europe and signed a document on this in 1993 or 1994. Unfortunately, he was not in a position to bring a measure before the House. However, it ill behoves the Government to suggest that they have been quick to remedy the situation.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Five years.

Mr. Chope: It has taken them five years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) says. What did they do when they first got into office? They added 2p duty to a pint of beer—a further anti-competitive measure introduced by this Government. Now, late in the day, after five years in office, they propose this measure. Although we welcome it, let us not delude ourselves into thinking

[Mr. Chope]

that the Government were quick off the mark as soon as they got elected in 1997. I am sure that, had we been returned to office in 1997, we would have introduced such a measure much sooner.

4.15 pm

One of the key elements of the proposal is a cliff edge that will adversely affect breweries as soon as production exceeds the 30,000 hectolitre point. A brewery that crosses that threshold will immediately forfeit £120,000 in duty relief. I have been advised that to compensate for that, a brewery would have to double its production to about 60,000 hectolitres before it became worthwhile to stay in business at that level of production, instead of reverting to a production level of less than 30,000 hectolitres. That is why the measure is so damaging to breweries in the production range of 30,000 to 60,000 hectolitres. It will act as a perverse incentive on those breweries to reduce their production, which is quite the reverse of what the Chancellor seemed to intend. Moreover, it will provide no incentive whatever for breweries that are below the 30,000 hectolitre limit to push up their production and expand to beyond that level.

Mr. Key: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. What were once microbreweries have grown, and the cliff-edge approach is wholly wrong. I thank him, on behalf of the management, work force and customers of the Hopback brewery in my constituency, for tabling the amendment. The Ringwood brewery is pretty good, but of course Hopback is much better, and is acknowledged to be so all over the country.

The amendment is wholly sensible, and I hope that the Minister will listen to our argument. The tapered approach is much more likely to achieve what the Chancellor wants—a level playing field for smaler brewers.

Mr. Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and pay tribute to the work that he has done with the Hopback brewery in promoting the amendment and in trying to get the Government to listen. That brewery is expanding, and wants to do so in order to become significant in the marketplace.

Total production by breweries that produce less than 200,000 hectolitres a year is only about 5 per cent. of overall total beer production. Only the six very large breweries, which are largely international, and six or seven other large breweries, which are quoted on the stock exchange, have production levels of substantially above 200,000 hectolitres a year. If the Government are really interested in helping small breweries, they should extend the definition of a small brewery to cover all those with production levels below 200,000 hectolitres. European legislation refers to that 200,000 limit. As we have by far the highest beer duty of any country in Europe, why are the Government so churlish about introducing the European maximum level for allowing such concessions to be made? That would not involve much cost to the Exchequer.

I hope that the Government will accept this common-sense amendment, which would allow the Bill to work to the advantage of small and growing breweries and redound to the benefit of those breweries and their loyal customers.

This is not a matter only of breweries in general or of beer in general; it is very significant for those of us who enjoy real ale, because about half of the total production of real, or cask, ale comes from small independent brewers. They are the ones who have introduced choice; they are maintaining a key element of our British way of life. Some of their beer may be served warm and some of it may be served at cricket grounds where our former Prime Minister can sip it as he watches the game.

The amendments, if accepted, will ensure that there is more growth in cask ale production than heretofore. They will be good for British brewing. I commend them to the Committee.

Mr. Edward Davey: My right hon. and hon. Friends and I support the amendments proposed by the Conservative Opposition. If it is right to support small and microbreweries, the Government must get the legislation right. They must get their analysis right, which is why, in our previous debate, I called for their analysis to be published. At least we would then have information that would help us to debate the issue.

If the Financial Secretary to the Treasury writes to me with acceptable evidence, there will be no problems with the schedule on Report. However, like the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), we have some concerns about what the Government are doing. The 30,000 hectolitre limit seems wrong. Not only does it run counter to the European directive that allows an upper limit of 200,000 hectolitres—it is surprising that the Government have not given the industry the support that it is allowed under that legislation—but it is a bizarre use of taxpayers' money. In the first year, the 30,000 hectolitre limit will cost the taxpayer £10 million, and in subsequent years, £15 million.

Evidence from the brewing industry shows that raising the limit from 30,000 to 200,000 hectolitres would cost only a further £3.2 million. If the Government challenge that figure, perhaps Ministers will give us further information on those costs. There are only 27 breweries in that sector of the market, while 350 breweries would fall below the 30,000 hectolitre limit. The tax advantage would apply only to a small number of breweries, so the extra cost would be relatively small. There cannot, therefore, be a cost argument against increasing the limit as the cost is marginal.

The brewing industry is concerned about the measure's impact on competition. The hon. Member for Christchurch touched on that, but did not go into detail. I do not pretend to be an expert on the brewing industry, but it seems to be divided into three groups: at one end, there are microbreweries—small local breweries and pubs that brew their own tipple; at the other end are the huge brewing companies that have developed during the past decade or so; and in the middle, there are medium-sized independents. Some of them have a brewing capacity of more than the 200,000 hectolitre limit, so they would not benefit from the amendments. However, at least such breweries would accept the restrictions imposed by the EU legislation.

The 27 breweries to which I referred include Brakspear, St. Austell brewery, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor), Harveys brewery, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) and Hook

Norton brewery. Those breweries would benefit if the Government extended the limit. In order to ensure that an important segment of the brewing industry is not disadvantaged and that we do not create distortion in the market, the Government would be well advised to accept the amendments.

On a political point, I would counsel the Government not to be too concerned by the contents of the press release that the hon. Member for Christchurch read out. Although the amendments were tabled by Conservative Front-Bench Members, I believe that they enjoy the support of hon. Members in all parts of the House; I hope that Labour Back Benchers will take part in the debate. If the Financial Secretary realises that, he will not be frightened out of accepting the amendments simply because they were tabled by Conservative Front-Bench Members.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I am not familiar with the economics of running breweries, although I have toured two in my time, but it seems possible that economies of scale are much more critical for very small breweries than they are for the breweries that the hon. Gentleman is speaking about, and that the Government's proposals are aimed at helping very small breweries to survive and proliferate—we hope, to make beer even more varied than it is now.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair argument, but if he talks to those particular brewers he will find that they still have problems competing with the larger breweries, who have huge economies of scale and huge selling power, and can therefore operate at an extreme competitive advantage. Thus many of the breweries that we are arguing for tonight would benefit. Moreover, many of them, because they are traditional brewers, occupy very traditional premises, which are in themselves almost part of the cultural heritage. If they are to reap some of the modern benefits of economies of scale that the hon. Gentleman referred to, many of them would have to move premises, leave their traditional roots and, possibly, their local setting, which often gives its name to their brew. If the hon. Gentleman were to talk to brewers in that category, he would be reassured.

Finally, I want to raise a point of principle. Obviously, any limit creates distortions against growth, because some brewers will naturally come up against that limit as they expand. However, we have a cross-Europe limit, imposed by the European Union, of 200,000 hectolitres, so it is odd that the Government have chosen a lower one.

Mr. James Staughton from St. Austell Brewery Company Ltd. explained to me that his brewery was currently looking to expand. Its total production is just under 30,000 hectolitres, so it would benefit, but if it expands as it intends to, its production would go over the limit. The company is in the very difficult position of having to decide whether to halt its planned expansion in order to get the benefit of the reduced duty rate, or go ahead with the expansion and lose that new advantage. Thus the limit has already affected a commercial decision by that brewer.

I am sure that many other brewers, either currently or in the future, will have to make that difficult decision. It is bad when the Government produce a tax relief that affects ordinary commercial decisions. There would be a logic to a 200,000 hectolitre limit, because that would fit EU legislation; there is no logic to the 30,000 hectolitre limit.

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that subsection (10) of proposed new section 36C on page 112 would not create the cliff-top situation mentioned by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) earlier? Actually, the individual brewery will receive the benefit up to 30,000 hectolitres in that year, and then will pay duty only on the amount in excess of the limit. Future decisions might be affected, but in the specific year the brewery will not suddenly face that collapse.

Mr. Davey: The information that I have received from the brewers is that many will have their commercial decisions affected in the way that I describe, so I cannot necessarily agree with the hon. Gentleman. There is a taper in the new relief, but it applies below the threshold, not quite in the smooth way that he seemed to imply above the threshold.

4.30 pm

Moving away from the principle behind the amendments, may I seek clarification from the Minister on one or two specific points? Many brewers who are reading the Bill do not understand what the Government are trying to do. For example, the first condition, which is set out on page 114 in proposed new section 36E(4), refers to the eligible amount of beer produced in the previous year. Obviously, breweries can calculate that amount from their sales figures, but the second condition refers to the amount that is expected to be brewed in the future. Brewers will have to try to work out whether they are eligible for that relief, but they are not sure which production level will count. So they need guidance from the Minister, or from Customs and Excise officials, to work out whether they will be eligible. What baseline should they use to judge their eligibility?

Other concerns have been raised with me. For example, some people have queried the fact that the Government have chosen to use the figure 365 in the calculation that appears on page 114 in proposed new section 36E(5). Obviously, that figure refers to the number of days in a year, but the Independent Family Brewers of Britain informs me that no brewer brews every day of the year. That association wonders why the Government have based their calculation on something unrelated to brewers' production schedules.

The final point on which various brewers have asked me to seek clarification relates to proposed new section 36C(3), in which the Government try to define a relevant brewery—for example, whether it can consist of a group of breweries and how the brewery is formed. The concern is that the Government suggest in part of that section that the definition relates to the employees. If an employee is a member of a brewery or a group of breweries, he or she can attract the relief. However, the implication is that if that person decides to change jobs in that year and works for another brewery that is not a member of the group of breweries, the first employer will not be entitled to the relief.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) laughs, but that is the commercial reality. People want to know whether their employment decisions and the

[Mr. Davey]

decisions that their employees take will change their eligibility for the relief. I hope that the Government will provide clarification on that matter.

Mr. Boris Johnson (Henley): I rise in wholehearted support of the amendment moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope). I speak on behalf of one of the 27 breweries not to be favoured by the Bill, unlike the other 320 that are to be favoured by it. Like my hon. Friend, my heart leapt when I heard the Chancellor speak of measures in the Budget to help small breweries, because I thought that he must mean Brakspear in my constituency.

Hon. Members will be familiar with Brakspear's bitter. If they are not, they jolly well ought to be. I do not mean to cast aspersions on any of the other excellent beers that are brewed in my hon. Friends' constituencies, but they will agree that Brakspear's is the finest because it is brewed by the traditional double-dropping method and therefore contains a higher quotient of hops than most normal beers. Indeed, when I was at school, my school had a contract with Brakspear. We were supplied with Brakspear's beer every Sunday. I am a living testament to the benefits of that drink.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield): It was not Ashdown house, was it?

Mr. Johnson: No, it was not Ashdown house.

Imagine how surprising and saddening it is not just for me, but for a great many people in my constituency and elsewhere, to find that Brakspear is now, after more than 200 years, at serious risk of ceasing to brew. It is highly likely that Brakspear will no longer be able to brew the bitter for which it is famous. Inspector Morse used to drink Brakspear's bitter. It is a great shame that that traditional English beer should be coming to an end.

Why is it coming to an end? Brakspear is facing adverse trading conditions in many different ways. I had a long conversation on Friday night with a chief executive who is extremely alarmed about the national insurance hikes, and so on. He is extremely upset by the Chancellor's decision to favour 320 microbrewers and not to favour the 27 other brewers about which the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) spoke eloquently. Plainly, the 27 others—including Brakspear—should be included in the exemption outlined in the Budget. I see absolutely no reason why the threshold cannot be raised to 200,000 hectolitres, given that, as has been repeatedly pointed out, that falls in line with European Union recommendations anyway.

Brakspear is a small brewery, it is a local brewery and it is under serious threat of ceasing production. It makes an absolute nonsense of the Government's claims to favour choice, diversity and old businesses to push through a measure that could expedite its closure. It should be helped, and I hope that the Financial Secretary will respond creatively and imaginatively to the sensible amendments that have been supported by both main Opposition parties, and do his level best to save Brakspear in Henley from ceasing to brew. That would be a great disadvantage not just to my constituency but to the brewing community and to the drinking public.

Mr. Boateng: Tempting though it is, I shall not be drawn into discussing the merits of individual brews and breweries—

Mr. Bercow: Go on.

Mr. Boateng: The shadow Chief Secretary will appreciate the problems of discussing the individual tax affairs of individual companies at the Dispatch Box. He would be the last person to encourage me to go down that route. Hon. Members who have breweries in their constituencies are perfectly right to raise their constituents' concerns, however, and I know that Customs and Excise is still in discussion with several of those breweries. We await with interest and eager anticipation the outcome of that discussion as to whether those breweries qualify, at least in part, for relief.

I have heard the heartfelt pleas of the hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Johnson), who opined about the imminent demise of a brewery that served his alma mater. I would hate to go down in history as the Financial Secretary responsible for depriving the boys of Eton college of their favourite brew. Deprived and underprivileged as they are, to deprive them of their beer would really be the last straw. We have all heard, with varying degrees of sympathy, the pleas made by hon. Members about individual breweries, but they will understand why I cannot deal with those individual cases.

Mr. Bercow: I am just a poor state school product from Finchley, so I would not know about the highfalutin matters being described by the Financial Secretary. The commercial pressures faced by brewers on the one hand, and the financial costs incurred by beer drinkers on the other, represent the context of our discussion. Will the Financial Secretary therefore demonstrate his grasp of the issue by telling us, for the current financial year, what proportion of the price of an average pint of beer is accounted for by tax and excise duty?

Mr. Boateng: It would be most unwise, in considering this question, to suggest that small regional breweries are likely to go out of business as a result of anything that this Government have done. *[Interruption.]* I shall come to the hon. Gentleman's question in a minute. However, it is hard to accept that a brewery with an annual production of 70,000 hectolitres and a turnover of £8 million will be threatened if it does not receive relief worth just 1.5 per cent. of its total turnover. It is similarly hard to accept that such a brewery will be priced out of the market because brewers with a turnover of less than half that receive some relief. To suggest that, as a result of the measure, some brewers will be put at a competitive disadvantage is to over-egg the pudding a bit.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): My right hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. Can he explain the logic behind the Opposition's argument? They suggest that the measure will not result in a fall in the price of the beer produced by small brewers and yet they claim that the fall

in the price of the beer produced by small brewers will put slightly larger brewers out of business. How can the Opposition sustain both propositions at the same time?

Mr. Boateng: I find it very difficult to fathom the logic in the arguments of Opposition Members. They are opposing for the sake of opposing, and that is their right. I suppose that, if we were in their position, we would do likewise. However, we are not likely to be in their position for a very, very long time—partly because of the success of the measures outlined in the Budget.

What got me in the questions of the hon. Members for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) was the suggestion that this Government were something other than the friend of the beer drinker and the brewer. I hope that the hon. Member for Buckingham knows what has happened to duty, because it is dangerous to ask a question the answer to which one does not already know. That is why his question is surprising. I feel constrained to point out to him that duty, as a proportion of the retail price of a pint of beer, was 32 per cent. in 1991. Today, it is 29 per cent. That is a fall of 3 per cent. Beer duty has been frozen for the last two Budgets, and that has saved British beer drinkers a very large amount of money.

I challenge the hon. Member for Buckingham—perhaps he will be so good as to take note of the challenge—to write to me to show whether, in any period of the Conservative Administration, he can point to a similar record of support for the industry.

Mr. Bercow: I will do that.

Mr. Boateng: Good. The hon. Gentleman is going to take me on. He will have plenty of time in Committee to share with us the outcome of his research.

Mr. Edward Davey *rose—*

Mr. Boateng: I must make progress, because I want to come to the points that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) raised.

The hon. Gentleman asked why the limit has been set at 30,000 hectolitres. It is an interesting question, because there are at least 115 reasons in an early-day motion that show why the limit should be set at 30,000 hectolitres. The early-day motion has been signed by Members on both sides of the House, including leading members of the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Bercow: Is there such a thing?

Mr. Boateng: Yes, there is. We must be fair to the Liberal Democrat party. It has some distinguished members, and a number of them have signed the early-day motion. However, I do not see the signature—perhaps I have missed it—of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton. Still, all who signed the motion call for a limit of 30,000 hectolitres, and that is not surprising. They show a great deal of good sense by calling for that limit, because it is supported by the Society of Independent Brewers. Hon. Members know that that society rather than any other represents small local brewers. It is the voice of the small local brewer and the measure is designed to support them.

4.45 pm

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton said that he does not know much about the beer industry but thinks that it is divided into three sectors. It is possible to do that. The 400 microbrewers and the local brewers are usually described as small brewers. If we link them with the 40 regional brewers and the handful of national brewers, that makes three sectors. It is, of course, also possible to divide the industry into four sectors if we disengage the microbrewers and the local brewers, as some people would prefer.

We know, however, that the 40 regional brewers and the handful of national brewers have a different interest from the local brewers and microbrewers. We need to be open and up front about that. The measure is designed to benefit local brewers and microbrewers. Although there is undoubtedly some overlap at the margins—perfectly fair points can be made about that—it is generally accepted that the break between local brewers and regional brewers is at about 30,000 hectolitres.

Mr. Bercow: I think I have got the point.

Mr. Boateng: Good, because in that case the Conservatives will not divide the Committee.

Mr. Bercow: We will divide the Committee.

Mr. Boateng: So the Conservatives will divide the House even though they have got the point. That simply does not make sense.

Mr. Boris Johnson: I do not understand how the right hon. Gentleman can repeat that the measure is intended to benefit local brewers when it is clearly playing a part in expediting the demise of Brakspear's brewing in south Oxfordshire, something that it has done for 200 years. How can that be helping local brewers?

Mr. Boateng: I understand and applaud the hon. Gentleman's perseverance on behalf of his local firm, but when he reflects on the measure and the figures, he will realise that the suggestion that it will put his local brewer out of business is a travesty of the truth.

Mr. Edward Davey: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Boateng: I want to finish the point. At 30,000 hectolitres, brewers have a turnover of more than £2.5 million. It is fair to say that a measure to benefit small businesses should focus on a break off point of about £2.5 million. I do not think that that is unreasonable, as I hope the House will recognise in the fullness of time.

Mr. Davey: The right hon. Gentleman told us that the Government have listened to the Society of Independent Brewers. I do not want him or his colleagues to doubt that we applaud the fact that, unlike the last Conservative Government, they have listened. In that spirit, therefore, and as part of their desire to be open to argument, will he agree that if the amendment is withdrawn and there is no Division, he will consult the brewing industry further to

[Mr. Davey]

determine whether the welcome reduction in beer rates can be extended in the small way that is proposed, and allow us to debate the matter again on Report?

Mr. Boateng: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman did not table the amendment and he is in no position to make such an offer. I see no response to his suggestion from the hon. Member for Christchurch. It is Liberal Democrat presumption at its height.

Amendment No. 17 attempts to reduce the amount of beer that is taken into account when assessing eligibility for a scheme by excluding exports. Whatever its merits, it would have the fatal drawback of being outwith EC law, the very law that Opposition Members pray in aid in relation to the higher limit and the very law that governs the scheme.

Mr. Bryant: Is it not also true that the argument of the hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Johnson) holds water, or perhaps beer, only if Brakspear is determined that any competition from microbreweries—those we are keen to support—will be a problem for it, so it is trying to prevent competition?

Mr. Boateng: I must maintain my self-denying ordinance and not comment on the tax arrangements for specific sectors and companies in the industry, but my hon. Friend makes a trenchant point in his usual trenchant way.

Roger Casale (Wimbledon): I simply want to confirm to the Minister that I have today spoken to the Society of Independent Brewers, and it has confirmed that this measure will help independent brewers to survive and flourish. Furthermore, they have been fighting for this measure for over 21 years; indeed, this Bill will amend the Alcoholic Liquor Duties Act 1979. Year after year since then, at Budget time the society made suggestions to Conservative Governments, but those suggestions were rejected and the society was not listened to. Now we are introducing the measure that will help independent brewers, and that is exactly the moment when the hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Johnson) opposes it.

Mr. Boateng: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. I could not have put it better myself. On that note, I ask the Committee overwhelmingly to reject the amendment.

Mr. Chope: The Minister says that amendment No. 17 would not work because of European law, so obviously I accept that and I will seek to withdraw the amendment.

The problem would not be so bad if the limit were lifted from 30,000 to 200,000 hectolitres. I am disappointed that the Minister has not addressed the point about small local breweries. The Ringwood brewery is a small local brewery; it is also a successful brewery, which is why it can produce as much as it does with only 44 employees. If the Minister takes the view that a brewery with 44 employees is the equivalent of a regional or international brewery and should be exposed to unfair competition from much smaller breweries, he has failed to address the arguments. Ringwood is a founding member of the Society of Independent Brewers and of the campaign for progressive beer duty, and it falls pretty hard on it now to find itself disadvantaged by the measure.

The Minister was unfair to my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Johnson), because he was articulating the views of the management of that fine brewery, Brakspear, not off the top of his head but as they were expressed in a press release on 19 April. Jim Burrows, the chief executive, said:

"This clumsy tinkering with beer duty could eliminate the very British heritage the Chancellor claims to defend."

He went on to say how vulnerable his firm will be to unfair competition from microbreweries.

The Government are obsessed with microbreweries' competition with slightly larger breweries, such as Ringwood and Brakspear. The biggest problem in brewing and the pub trade is the dominance of the very large breweries. By accepting amendment No. 4 and the other consequential amendments, the Minister would enable this great cohort of expanding independent brewers to expand even further and to make an even larger collective impact on the market. They would be able to take on the large breweries that get a great deal of protection because they can offer deep discounts.

I am disappointed by the Government's response and the fact that they have not listened to our points; I hope that the Committee will vote for amendment No. 4 and, when it has a chance, will look at early-day motion 1047, to which the Minister did not refer; 61 Members support a duty on production of up to 200,000 hectolitres, with a concession for brewers producing beer less than that volume. The signatories include quite a lot of Labour Members; it will be interesting to see whether they join the Minister in the Lobby or vote for amendment No. 4, which is consistent with the early-day motion.

On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment No. 17.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment proposed: No. 4, in page 112, line 2, leave out "30,000" and insert "200,000".—*[Mr. Chope.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 206, Noes 316.

Division No. 226] **[4.56 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Gregory *(E Lond'y)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*

Davis, Rt Hon David *(Hallemprice)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, Rt Hon Iain
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, Dr John
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Cheryl Gillan and
Mr. Desmond Swayne.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Bell, Stuart
Bennett, Andrew
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret

Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Lyons, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Rt Hon Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watson, Tom
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and
Mr. Tony McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Clause 19

REGISTERED VEHICLES ETC

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Flight: I would expect cross-party agreement on the need for effective measures to deal with the problem of abandoned cars, of which there are some 350,000 each year. The Government's proposals amount, broadly, to clause 19, which implements the terms of schedule 5.

The crucial issue is whether the proposals will be effective. The problem of abandoned cars is growing because scrap yards are not interested in taking clapped-out cars and tend to demand payment for doing so. In turn, that has resulted from the fall in scrap prices. There has been broad support for the DTLR consultation and broad agreement that measures are needed to incentivise and provide proper arrangements for the disposal of old cars, and to ensure that the keepers of cars are made responsible for the registration formalities of transfer and disposal.

Without reform and implementation by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency of a proper receipting system, clause 19 and schedule 5 will not satisfactorily address the problem of abandoned vehicles and could indeed compound it. At the heart of the matter is the fact that the DVLA does not have a records system that carries accurate real-time information to enable the tracing of vehicles' owners at the time of abandonment.

The problem is major. There are some 12 million old vehicles on the road without proper registration papers. For example, the number of vehicles registered in 1989 totalled some 2.3 million, of which about 624,000—some 27 per cent.—are not accounted for. That takes into account all those that have already been scrapped or for which SORN—statutory off-road notification—has been given.

The DTLR has indicated that the schedule 5 measures, which clause 19 implements, may be used to pursue the last keeper on record if the car in question is not taxed or recorded as being off the road. Many of the cars making up the numbers that I have just cited will have changed

hands several times through the back door or may be sitting on rotting land. We take the view that it would be a monstrous travesty for the last official recorded keeper of such a vehicle, who may be entirely innocent, to be accused and charged with non-payment of road tax and failure to notify that the vehicle is off the road, and even given speeding fines, when that person may be two, three or four people back in the vehicle's chain of ownership. Indeed, the measures could worsen the problem of car abandonment, as there is a greater incentive to dump non-roadworthy cars rather than store them on private land in order simply to avoid vehicle excise duty liabilities.

If the proposals are to be practical and not potentially unfair, the DVLA must be reformed significantly and be in a position to issue and record accurate receipts of information about change of ownership, so that individuals who have duly notified it of changes have evidence to show that they have done so. I understand that a recent court case on that territory found against the DVLA. Hon. Members will be aware that the Automobile Association has advised that it would be wrong to press ahead with the proposals until the DVLA can offer a real-time customer service and provide receipts on change of ownership.

5.15 pm

There are other problems. The liberal UK vehicle registration system allows any name to be recorded as the keeper, even a child's, which can make deliberate false registration relatively easy. If the proposals are to work, we need a timetable on DVLA modernisation. Vehicles that have not changed hands since March 1997 have old registration papers, which do not provide for dual registration. Again, that issue needs to be dealt with if clause 19 and schedule 5 are to be implemented fairly and effectively.

The abandonment problem requires a carrot-and-stick approach. It also probably needs the provision of easy and free take-back facilities for cars that have reached the end of their lives, and it needs effective but fair pursuit of the owner at the time cars are dumped. That can happen only if the DVLA has the necessary records.

Is the intent of clause 19 and schedule 5 to include veteran cars and cars that may have been kept on a farm all their lives? I still find the wording unclear, but there is the implication that both might be covered.

We believe that much more consultation is necessary, especially on the detailed proposals in schedule 5, which if implemented as they stand could have a contrary and grossly unfair impact on innocent parties. We fear that the Government may be rushing through measures in the name of spin—to be able to say that they are doing something about abandoned vehicles—and without reforming the DVLA to ensure that the necessary information is available.

We would like to hear that the Government will consult further before they implement clause 19, noting the latitude given to them in terms of implementation, and that in principle they do not intend to implement the clause and schedule 5 until the DVLA has been reformed adequately. We will want to return to this issue on Report. If the issues that I have raised are not satisfactorily addressed, we will want to oppose the proposals, but we cannot imagine that the Government intend to implement these measures without the necessary reforms of the DVLA.

Mr. Edward Davey: The Liberal Democrats sought to have clause 19 debated in a Committee of the whole House because we are extremely concerned about the problem of abandoned vehicles. We recognise that the Government have taken action and that the clause is part of the strategy for dealing with the problem.

My constituency of Kingston and Surbiton has experienced an epidemic of abandoned vehicles, which has caused huge problems for many residents. They are literally fed up of contacting the council or the DVLA and getting nowhere. I have many examples. *[Interruption.]* Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) says that it is a Liberal Democrat council. It is a Liberal Democrat council now because last Thursday the Liberal Democrats made 11 gains and took over from an incompetent minority Tory administration in Kingston upon Thames. As we now have a Liberal Democrat administration in Kingston upon Thames we will see improvements in the removal of abandoned vehicles.

The problem of abandoned vehicles is exceptionally serious, as such vehicles give rise to significant health and safety concerns. Children are often hurt playing on them, and they are sometimes set alight by vandals, causing significant damage. The Financial Secretary and the Paymaster General should therefore not make light of this serious issue. To some hon. Members, it may seem like pavement politics, but it is a real issue.

The Government are to be congratulated on the consultation document—published last October by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, to which I responded on my party's behalf—which proposes various ways of tackling the problem of abandoned cars. It contains many measures that I support, such as reducing notice periods for the removal of abandoned vehicles, and for their destruction once removed. I am particularly in favour of empowering local authorities to remove unlicensed vehicles; currently, such powers lie only with the DVLA. As the DVLA is rather stretched and does not have as great a local presence as councils, unlicensed vehicles often remain undealt with. Under current legislation, local authorities cannot deal with such vehicles because they are not abandoned. Bizarrely, the problem is ping-ponged between statutory agencies, one passing the buck to the other. The Government have recognised that fact in the consultation document and are taking steps to deal with it.

Another key proposal that I fully support is giving local councils greater access to the DVLA's database, which I have advocated for my constituency for many years. I once persuaded the then head of enforcement at the DVLA, Haydon Madoc, to travel from Swansea to witness the epidemic of abandoned vehicles in my constituency. One solution that I discussed with him was enabling my local council to access the DVLA's database. It took a long time, but I believe that that key solution is now in place.

The consultation document contains many useful proposals, and although the proposal before us is a step in the right direction I have some concerns about the detail.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

I make that point in a spirit of genuine, constructive and effective opposition. The document states that the Government wanted to consult widely, and it mentions some of the measures now included in clause 19 and schedule 5, but it describes them as longer term. I shall quote from it to give hon. Members an idea of the Government's thinking last October. Paragraph 36 of section 5, headed "Longer term proposals", states:

"In the longer term, the Government believes that stringent measures are needed to ensure that all vehicles can be associated with a registered keeper who has clear responsibility for ensuring that the vehicle is operated legally, and who remains responsible for civil and criminal penalties arising from misuse of that vehicle while it is in his possession."

The document predicts that the Government will consult on the measures before us, but to my knowledge their conclusions have not been published. They have not responded to the consultation process, or to submissions from people such as me.

I share the concerns of the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) that the Government are ploughing ahead without hearing the results of the consultation. They may be going in the right direction, but as long ago as October we were told that the changes were longer-term reforms on which the Government would consult. I should like to see the results of the consultation before we enact the new powers.

Clause 19(2) says that the provision

"shall not come into force until such day as the Secretary of State may appoint by order made by statutory instrument".

Therefore, the Government are allowing extra time for consultation. They have produced the enabling legislative framework and will introduce the orders bringing the provisions into effect later. The Government may have realised that they are acting too quickly, but there is a protection against that in clause 19(2). If that is the case, I would like the Minister to say so. When will the Government introduce the orders in question? Will it be before the summer recess, and what will happen before the orders are considered by the House? We need to know, because they could implement significant changes.

The Government need to consult on the orders beforehand. It is right to require people to retain fiscal responsibility for a motor vehicle unless and until they register the fact that they have sold the vehicle or it is no longer used on the road. However, if the Bill is passed, it will be the first time that VED will apply to vehicles not kept on the public road. What will that mean in practice? Will it mean that all the exemptions that currently apply—whether to classic cars or any of the other long list of exemptions in schedule 2 (a) to (q) of the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994, which I shall not list but which includes vehicles used on tram lines and electrically assisted pedal cycles—will continue to apply? I hope that the Minister can assure us that they will.

The effect of the provision will be to enable excise duty to apply to vehicles not kept on public roads. I hope that that is only a device to ensure that abandoned cars that are not on the public road have to be registered so that the owner can be tracked down and held liable for any fines. Can the Minister reassure us that the Government have no intention of extending the tax net? If that is the object of the exercise, many right hon. and hon. Members will object.

The most serious concern is whether the proposals introduce an element of retrospection. Many people in the last 10 or 20 years might have passed on a vehicle to a relative or friend but not registered the change in ownership properly and, when the change took place, the extra duties and penalties were not in force. Those people could be linked to one of the many millions of vehicles no longer on the DVLA's register and thus fall foul of the new legislation. The Government need to convince the House that they will not apply those provisions in a draconian way.

5.30 pm

The Minister could reassure the Committee by saying how many licensed vehicles are on the DVLA register. Of that number, how many have statutory off-road notification? For how many vehicles has there been no recent activity or registration? A note from the Library leads me to understand that there may be as many as 2 million vehicles in the latter category. As a result, if we are not careful, 2 million owners could become liable for fiscal penalties under this retrospective measure.

The matter is complex. I read through the 1994 Act and must admit that I had to put a hot towel around my head to understand its intricacies. However, it is clear that some proposals in the Bill may not have been thought through as completely as might be necessary.

My final point touches on a matter, raised by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs, that is key to the Government's aim of using the Bill to deal with abandoned cars. The hon. Gentleman noted that the DVLA does not provide receipts when cars are registered: a person who notifies the DVLA that a car has been sold on receives no receipt for that notification.

The problem was at the heart of the court case to which the hon. Gentleman referred. In November last year, Mr. Phil Davies from south Wales took on the DVLA in the magistrates court, the county court and the Court of Appeal. Eventually, he won the case. The DVLA had tried to fine Mr. Davies £35 for not returning a form in July 2001. Mr. Davies was adamant that he had returned the form, but he cold not prove it as the DVLA issued no receipt for it. However, the Court of Appeal finally found in favour of Mr. Davies, on the grounds that the DVLA had been remiss.

If the Government are trying to use the Bill to deal with the problem of abandoned cars by developing continuous licensing, they will probably enjoy the support of the House. However, the problem with continuous licensing is that the DVLA would need to work out how to provide receipts for those members of the public who wanted to receive them. The receipts would prove that a person had notified the DVLA of a transfer of ownership.

I suggest that the question of issuing receipts is at the core of the clause. I hope that the Minister will assure the Committee that the Government will take on board the legitimate concerns that have been expressed. If they do, they will enjoy the support of hon. Members of all parties. The move is important, and such an assurance would allow the Government to promote the objectives of their policy that much more strongly.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): Abandoned cars are a blight on the landscape, and action is clearly needed. Some local authorities find the cost of dealing with the

problem to be great. I do not see why local council tax payers should have to foot the bill when irresponsible citizens dump their property in public places. Therefore, I begin by saying that I wish the Government well in their quest for a solution to the problem, but I share some of the doubts expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) about whether—I hope that the Minister will pardon the pun—the proposed measure is the correct vehicle for dealing with the problem.

The proposal seems rather akin to a sledgehammer. Will the Minister say why the Bill does not contain a requirement that the duty would be payable only when a vehicle had clearly been abandoned, or left on a public highway or on public land? I am worried about the scope of the provisions. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure the Committee that my fears are groundless.

Clause 19 refers to schedule 5 of the Bill, which provides

"for vehicle excise duty to be charged in respect of vehicles registered under the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 that are neither used nor kept on a public road,

for vehicle excise duty to be charged in respect of things that have been but have ceased to be mechanically propelled vehicles".

Does the phrase "to be charged" necessarily mean that a fee has to be charged? Alternatively, when a particular class of registration under the 1994 Act gives rise to payment of a nil duty, would the clause also give rise to payment of a nil duty? My concern is about historic, classic and veteran vehicles. Not every Member may be aware that such vehicles are classified under a different category.

Most right hon. and hon. Members who travel to this place by car do so in a vehicle that is registered under the class "private light goods". To put that vehicle lawfully on the road, one has to pay an annual fee to obtain one's tax disc. In 1994 or 1995, when my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was Chancellor of the Exchequer, a new provision was introduced whereby a vehicle that was roadworthy but was more than 25 years old could be classed as "25 year exempt". That category has since been renamed "historic". Owners of vehicles manufactured before 1 January 1973 must still go through the process of producing their insurance documents and MOT certificate for their vehicle to obtain a tax disc, but they do not pay a fee for it.

It used to be the case that as soon as a vehicle became 25 years old, it was entitled to claim exempt status, but the present Chancellor of the Exchequer froze the exemption so that only vehicles manufactured before 1973 can claim historic status. It is not automatic, however: the owner must go through the process of changing the taxation class on the logbook. Will the Minister give us an assurance today—or if he cannot, will he look at the issue and come back before Report—to make it clear that it is not the Government's intention to use the clause to introduce taxation on historic vehicles that currently pay a nil duty?

The Bill's wording gives me cause for concern. The provisions will catch not only the historic vehicle owned by a member of the public but every vehicle housed in a motor museum or other historic collection. Many of those vehicles are not in working condition. They may look pristine, but in many cases the engine or part of the fuel system has been removed, usually for insurance purposes.

I hope that the Minister is prepared to say that the Bill is not intended to hit those who own, maintain and cherish historic vehicles, and that it will not do so.

Mr. Boateng: We should, I suppose, be grateful to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) for giving us the opportunity to debate the clause. However, it is always the way with Liberal Democrats that even as they enable us to share with the wider world the benefits of an action taken by this Government alone to tackle the menace of dumped and abandoned cars, one is struck by the piety, self-satisfaction and smugness that all too often, I am afraid, characterises Liberal Democrat interventions in any debate. I am afraid that this debate is no exception.

I detected something else that all hon. Members who are to serve on the Standing Committee will want to bear in mind. I am thinking particularly of the shadow Chief Secretary, the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who will share our many hours of deliberation on these matters. As Liberal Democrat Members share their reflections in Standing Committee, we will find time and again that every word they utter is designed to be replicated at street level in "Focus". The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton gave that impression: I sensed "Focus" coming on. It is therefore only right, to lighten the hours that lie ahead of us, that we should introduce what I would describe as "Focus"-watch. A prize should be initiated for the member of the Standing Committee who is able to identify the most frequently repeated strictures that show a direct link with subsequent publication in "Focus".

Roger Casale: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. He has issued the sort of challenge that I find almost irresistible. However, I should tell him that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) is genuine in his desire for measures to aid the removal of abandoned cars. His constituency borders mine, and he has visited with me abandoned and dumped cars in New Malden on my side of the border. I have done likewise on his side of the border. I hope that the support that he gives to the measures that we are taking to deal with the problem through the tax system will be replicated when we discuss the other measures that we are taking to make it easier for local authorities and other bodies to work together to remove abandoned cars—an exercise in joined-up government to tackle this pernicious problem in our communities.

Mr. Boateng: Liberal Democrats are often genuine—they have a genuine desire to see their good works replicated in "Focus". I promise to donate to the member of the Standing Committee who identifies the most frequent references for subsequent publication in "Focus" one twentieth of a hectolitre of real ale produced in a micro-brewery of their choice, in any constituency. I fear that I must exempt Liberal Democrat Members from that genuine prize, because that would undermine the whole point of it.

With that challenge, I turn to the substance of the points that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton raised. Hon. Members on both sides of the Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Roger Casale) rightly drew attention to the no doubt genuine concern of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton—have long been worried about the menace of dumped vehicles. We issued

[Mr. Boateng]

a consultation paper on the matter. As the hon. Gentleman should know, in March this year the summary of responses to that paper was published and placed in the Library. It was entitled, perhaps not surprisingly, "Report on responses to the consultation paper on Abandoned Vehicles 2001–2002".

5.45 pm

The provision must be seen in the context of the wider range of measures for tackling the problem of abandoned vehicles announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions on 10 April. They include powers to remove vehicles abandoned on the street anywhere in England after 24 hours, instead of the present seven days; increased opportunities to work with the DVLA to remove unlicensed cars; powers to dispose more quickly of unlicensed vehicles removed under DVLA powers after seven rather than 35 days; and easier tracing and clarification of vehicle ownership through additional funding from the invest to save Budget. That will be seen as a comprehensive response to the menace.

I want to reassure the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) and the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) that the new measures in no way affect current policy on vehicles that are exempt, for whatever reason, from payment of vehicle excise duty. That includes classic cars manufactured before 1973. The right hon. Gentleman has a distinguished track record as regards his interest in the preservation of historic cars. Keepers of classic cars who want to take their vehicles off the road, thus paying no duty, will continue to be able to do so, provided that they make a statutory off-road notification, as required at present. There is no intention to bring classic cars into taxation. I hope that reassurance sets minds at rest.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs suggested that DVLA systems might not be capable of handling the proposed change. The DVLA makes strenuous efforts to ensure that the information on its vehicle record is as up to date and accurate as possible. However, we are all fallible; there is always the risk of mistakes at the DVLA, as there is in every human institution. Most vehicles are relicensed at post offices and errors might also be made there. We are taking steps, including the piloting of measures such as the use of bar codes on licensing reminder forms, to ensure that the vehicle record can be updated instantly when the vehicle is relicensed.

We have no intention of hitting the honest trader or dealer. If the vehicle is taxed, or if the DVLA has been notified of changed circumstances that mean that tax is no longer due, there is no risk that an offence will be committed. I do not accept the charge that this is a motorist-bashing measure, although, to be fair, I do not think that the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs was making that claim.

The measure is certainly not designed to catch people who have genuine reasons for licensing their vehicle a few days late. We are not out to hit the honest motorist, but we believe that the motorist who plays by the rules has everything to gain when those who abuse the system are brought to book. Honest motorists will welcome the reforms. Motorists are citizens, too, and they are affected by that abuse.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs asked what would happen to vehicles currently wrongly recorded, and said that it was unfair to go after the keepers. It is not our intention to act against keepers who have acted in good faith. We shall need to consult with motorists' organisations and others on the best and fairest way to implement clause 19. It is our intention to consult. We shall focus our attention on ensuring that vehicles that are correctly recorded do not become incorrectly recorded.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton asked about issuing receipts; that suggestion could certainly be considered as part of our further consultation. I repeat that we recognise the need to protect the keeper who acts in good faith.

Mr. Flight: In addition to vintage cars, I raised the issue of cars that are used on farms. May I also ask what would be the position of firms whose business is dealing in second-hand cars? I understand that, under the measures, in future they would need to pay VED while such cars were on their forecourt pending sale.

Mr. Boateng: I will certainly write to the hon. Gentleman on the latter issue. I believe that in his speech he referred to vehicles that have lived on farms all their lives, which raised the spectre of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. I am sure that, with this measure, it is not our intention to bring into the arena those vehicles that were previously outside it, but we must ensure that we have an effective regime, whose integrity is respected. I will write to the hon. Gentleman on those points to ensure that we get things absolutely right.

Bearing in mind our intention to ensure that we get the clause right and to consult with the motoring organisations and others on the detail of its implementation, I am sure that, on reflection, hon. Members will find that it has much to commend it. Before finalising the details of the system and bringing it into effect, we will consult on the implementation of a supplementary penalty for late renewal or non-renewal, and the levels of that penalty. Those will be subject to affirmative resolution, and the House will have an opportunity to debate them in due course.

We are adding this measure to the series of practical measures that are being taken to address a menace that, we have all agreed, can be the bane of our constituents' lives. It degrades the quality of life in all too many communities and is a spur to crime, including arson and vandalism. Action in this area is long overdue and I commend the clause to the Committee.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for the Financial Secretary's reply, which has reassured me on many points. I am glad to hear that he is consulting. When he and his colleagues and officials consult, will they particularly look at retrospection, which he was not able to deal with in his reply?

Will the Financial Secretary deal with another issue? I have been told by people in the AA that it is an increasing practice for people to register vehicles at an address that they do not live at. The solution is not

legislative change but tighter practices governing registration at post offices or by post to the DVLA to ensure that identity is checked more rigorously. I hope that the Financial Secretary will ensure that that point is also covered in the consultation.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 19 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 5 agreed to.

Clause 23

FLAT-RATE SCHEME

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Boateng: The clause represents the latest and, I believe, the most significant step that we have taken to simplify the administration of VAT for hundreds of thousands of small businesses.

Since VAT was introduced, the vast majority of registered firms have been obliged to keep a record of the VAT charged on each individual purchase and sale, and go through the often laborious process of totting up their inputs and outputs when filling out their VAT return. The flat rate that is being introduced on 25 April does away with that requirement for more than 500,000 small businesses with turnovers of up to £100,000. Instead, those businesses will have the option to work out their VAT liabilities as a simple percentage of their total turnover. Instead of making hundreds of calculations each quarter, they will simply have to make one. Instead of spending hours sorting through old receipts, they will be able to concentrate on running their business.

Mr. Chope: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Boateng: May I just develop the argument a little? We estimate that, by reducing the time that those businesses spend filling in forms and reducing their reliance on accountancy services, the scheme will cut compliance costs for the average business by up to £1,000 per year.

Mr. Chope: Does this scheme already apply beyond the 32,000 small manufacturers, 15,000 small agricultural firms, 11,000 small pubs and 22,000 transport companies that, I have been informed, are the only beneficiaries of the scheme at the moment?

Mr. Boateng: I do not quite follow the point. The scheme, which I should have thought anyone would welcome, reduces for 500,000 small businesses with turnovers up to £100,000 the burden of making those calculations and digging out old receipts. If the hon. Gentleman suggests that we should be doing more, he is of course entitled to say that, but to him must go the question, "What did you do when you had the opportunity to make a difference by relieving this burden on small businesses?" and answer comes there back, "Not very much." I do not think, therefore, that at this stage it would be right for the hon. Gentleman to cavil at what the Chancellor announced in the Budget, because what—

Mr. Chope *rose—*

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Gentleman will have his opportunity.

What the Chancellor made clear in his Budget—in response, in some sense, I suppose, to the point that the hon. Gentleman makes—is that we intend to go further next year, extending the scheme to a further 200,000 businesses with turnovers of up to £150,000. Therefore, from next April the scheme will be available to some 700,000 small firms in total: more than 40 per cent. of all VAT-registered businesses.

This is one issue on which it should be possible for the whole House to say, "Good; there is something here that is of benefit to small and medium-sized businesses and not something to cavil about." Anyway, we shall find out when we hear Opposition Members' speeches.

Let me give the Committee a sample of the reactions that the Budget announcement has received from individual businesses. Jamie Rowland, who set up a bike repair shop in Gwynedd in Wales—he did so last year, so he is still wrestling with the issues—said:

"The extension of the flat-rate VAT for small business will definitely help me and others, because sorting out VAT takes up a lot of time. The more time I can put into the shop in the early days the better."

Joanna Marshall, who runs a business designing and making ties in Nottingham, said:

"I think this is an excellent idea for small businesses. I set up my company two years ago and there is a lot to learn. Taking away a burden like this will make a big difference."

This valuable and radical measure has been much welcomed by small businesses and their representative groups. It will remove a compliance burden that has been in place for the past three decades. In that spirit, I commend it to the Committee.

6 pm

Mr. Chope: I am sorry that the Financial Secretary mistook my request for information as cavilling. I asked him for information because I have an article written by someone called Richard Murphy and I was unsure whether what he states in his article represents a misunderstanding. However, he asserts that

"the scheme is only available to 32,000 small manufacturers, 15,000 small agricultural firms, 11,000 small pubs and 22,000 transport companies",

making a total of about 80,000 firms. Yet the Financial Secretary referred to about 500,000 small firms, so has Mr. Murphy got it wrong?

Mr. Boateng: Mr. Murphy is absolutely right to identify four categories in that 500,000, in giving an approximation of the numbers concerned.

Mr. Chope: I am grateful to the Financial Secretary for that information. Is Mr. Murphy also right to imply that no other group of firms yet qualifies?

Mr. Boateng: Mr. Murphy is not quite right. Slightly more than 500,000 small businesses in all sections of the economy will benefit from this measure.

Mr. Chope: I am grateful to the Financial Secretary for that clarification. I hope that he will now be equally

[Mr. Chope]

helpful in answering a question that has been asked by someone whose daughter owns a hairdressing salon in a small town. He says:

"Under current VAT rules she pays to Customs & Excise around £7,500 per annum on a turnover approaching £70,000 after deducting the VAT on her supplies etc., and in her own spare time keeps all the required books and receipts."

He says that under the

"new scheme she would not keep any records, but would have to pay about £9,000 to Customs & Excise. What sort of help is this?"

He questions how a scheme has been designed that is

"meant to help someone where they end up paying more"

and how has it been worked out

"that 13 per cent. of turnover would be less than anyone's current VAT payment"

in the hairdressing business. He also says:

"To be of any help to my daughter the flat rate for hairdressing should be about 10 per cent., which would leave her about £500 better off. She could then give herself a pay rise of £10 a week, something which she has not had for the last 4 years."

I make no political point, but I hope that the Financial Secretary can deal with that specific example.

If the scheme turns out to provide a significant reduction in the burden on business, it will be very welcome. I notice that the estimates as to exactly how much time will be saved have changed significantly from the earlier estimate, but any time that small businesses save is valuable and worth while. However, I should be grateful to the Financial Secretary if he could explain what happens in relation to the records that have to be kept for income tax and corporation tax purposes. If a firm does not have to keep VAT supply invoices for the purposes of VAT accounting, is it exempt from having to keep them for other accounting purposes? If not, what is the purpose of the exemption? Again, that issue has been greeted with some scepticism by several people involved in the very important small business sector.

Mr. Edward Davey: We welcome the clause.

Mr. Boateng: Let me deal with the hypothetical question asked by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) in relation to the need still to collect receipts for other taxes. There will still be a need to do that because VAT is a real-time tax; people will not need to collect receipts for that purpose, but they may well have to collect them for another purpose.

The specific issue is that small businesses are understandably concerned that they are collecting the tax on our behalf—that we are using them as tax collectors. We are recognising that fact and saying that, because VAT is a real-time tax, they do not have to collect receipts for that purpose, but they may well have to do so for the other purposes.

The hon. Gentleman's specific example of a hairdresser strays into individual tax concerns. I do not feel that it would be appropriate for me to give advice on such matters at the Dispatch Box, but I will happily ensure that Customs and Excise writes to him, or indeed to the individual taxpayer, to outline the proposal's impact on that individual. However, Customs and Excise has given me an illustrative example of the categories of people who would benefit from this measure, and it estimates that hairdressers will save about £1,000 in compliance costs. As that information does not relate to the hon. Gentleman's specific example, it is right to share it with the Committee, but I shall write to the hon. Gentleman about it in the way that I have outlined.

On the general point about small businesses paying more tax, the proposed flat-rate scheme will operate on an optional basis, so only those businesses that believe they will benefit from joining the scheme will opt to take part. Therefore, some businesses may well say that they do not want to take part in the scheme because they and their accountants have calculated that it would not benefit them to do so. Businesses that do not believe they will benefit can continue to account for VAT in the way that they always have done.

The rates have been calculated to produce a broadly revenue-neutral outcome in each sector, but that clearly means that there will be a net reduction in the amount of tax many businesses pay, as well as significant compliance cost savings. For all those reasons and bearing in mind the general, broad welcome that the measure has received in all quarters, I commend it to the Committee.

Roger Casale: I wish to make two or three brief comments on the clause. I welcome the new measures, and I am pleased that the Opposition welcome them too, but I rise to speak because the welcome has been distinctly tepid and lukewarm from the Opposition Benches. If the truth were known, there is probably quite a lot of repressed enthusiasm for the measure. After all, it will save small businesses much time and cost. Small businesses make up a growing part of our economy, especially in the service sector, and are great creators of employment.

That is certainly the case in my constituency, as I know from my dealings with the Merton chamber of commerce, the Wimbledon business group and other small businesses, not least Ad Hoc Business Support, which helps me in my work when I have a particularly heavy case load. I have seen that business grow in the past three to four years. One of the things that held it back initially was the onerous task of having to work out its VAT liability. Indeed, being eligible for VAT at all held it back in the early stages. Increasing the threshold and introducing the flat-rate scheme will save that and similar businesses a great deal of time and could save it up to £1,000 a year, which will make a difference to its competitiveness. I hope that that will underpin such companies' future success.

My second reason for wanting to speak in favour of the new measure is that it is part of a series of measures that the Government are taking to boost competitiveness and to support small businesses. For example, there was a recent statement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the reduction of bank charges for small businesses. There are many thousands of small businesses in my constituency, and they will disagree with us about some things, but on the other side of the equation they will also recognise that we are taking a raft of measures, of which this is one, that demonstrate that we are on the side of small businesses, that we want to support them and that we will make the necessary changes to the tax system, as we are doing now in relation to VAT, to cut red tape and to cut business costs. All of that has come from the dialogue between this Government and the

small business community, which was completely unknown under the previous Administration. In that regard, I mention the work of the Small Business Council in particular.

I was in touch with the Federation of Small Businesses just today, and it welcomed the measure. It has always made the point that many small businesses feel that they have the onerous task of acting as tax collectors in relation to VAT. This measure demonstrates that we have taken their concerns on board. The small business community wants to work with the Government to improve things, not just in its own interests but because it recognises, as we do, that small businesses will continue to drive our economy in the future and create jobs, and that, by working together, we can reach a solution that works for everybody.

I very much welcome these measures, which come out of that dialogue between the Government and business. As I said, they are one more demonstration of this Government's support for and commitment to the small business community, and our determination, when possible, to introduce the changes necessary to make small businesses more successful and more competitive in the future.

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham): I welcome the introduction of a flat-rate scheme for small businesses, although I want to raise one concern in that regard.

One of the issues that small businesses in my constituency have raised with me in recent months is the administrative burden of VAT. Any action taken to lift that burden will be welcomed by those businesses. My only caveat is the process by which the flat rate is set for particular businesses, and what consultation there has been with trade bodies on whether that rate is appropriate. One of the issues that small businesses will consider—my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) referred to the circumstances of a hairdresser who would lose out as a consequence of adopting the flat-rate scheme—is whether they would feel obliged, on a regular basis, to calculate their VAT liability if they did not elect to use a flat-rate scheme. Would compliance costs continue because businesses would feel the need, every so often, to re-check whether they would be better off using the flat-rate scheme or the more conventional scheme?

I hope that the Financial Secretary will speak to trade representatives to ensure that the flat rate that is set is relevant to those businesses and encourages them to take advantage of it, so that they benefit from the lower compliance costs on offer through this scheme.

Mr. Mark Field: I, too, would like to speak briefly on this point. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Roger Casale) feels that the Opposition's support for this measure is somewhat tepid. In principle, we are comfortable with the measure, which is a positive step forward. The small business sector, in which I operated prior to joining the House, has not been terribly well served by this Government. It is not fair to say that there is a monopoly of good will towards the small business sector on either side of the political divide. It is fair to say, however, that, in essence, these changes, although welcome, represent only a small part of the burden faced by many small business people.

VAT is one matter on which I have spoken previously in the House—I always felt that I was one of the worst paid pro bono for my tax-collecting skills when I dealt with VAT in my business—and it is an important fund raiser for the Government. There are great concerns, however, about the amount of time that must be spent by any small business man on the various other payroll taxes, which are not affected by the measure.

Much as I understand the Government wishing to make much of this measure, it is very small. As has been pointed out in various interventions, there will no doubt still be a great burden on many small business men in terms of having to deal with receipts for Inland Revenue purposes, if not necessarily for Customs and Excise. I would be interested, however, to receive guidance from the Financial Secretary on his comments to the effect that the whole process would be revenue neutral. Will he tell us which businesses are likely to suffer under the new provision?

6.15 pm

Mr. Boateng: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Roger Casale) for stressing the importance that the Government attach to consultation with industry, business and the relevant affected sectors. I first recall meeting him many years ago, when I was an Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson on Treasury affairs. If he was not then a parliamentary candidate, he was at least very active in Wimbledon, and he was noted, at a time when it was not as commonplace as it is now, as someone who always bothered to reach out to small businesses in his constituency and to learn and listen to their concerns. I have no doubt that that contributed to his subsequent success in 1997 and to his re-election last year. That is a lesson that the Labour party has learned, and that we sometimes had to learn the hard way in the years of opposition.

We have been engaged in a process of consultation in order to arrive at these rates. In response to the points made by the hon. Members for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), the rates are based on information from previous VAT returns submitted by all traders who would be eligible to join the scheme. The rates have been calculated on the basis of producing a broadly revenue-neutral outcome across each sector. We consulted on all these rates, talked to the sectors concerned, and, in some cases, responded to the consultation by reducing the rates proposed for an individual sector. For example, we now have two rates for construction services, instead of one. That was a result of listening to the industry and its concerns to ensure that we got it right and that we met its needs.

For reasons that hon. Members on both sides of the House have outlined, it would have been a nonsense to set a single flat rate for all small businesses. Either it would have been set so low that there would be a substantial loss of revenue, or so high that the sector would simply not opt to participate. We want businesses to have a real choice. The rate for a particular business will therefore depend on what trade sector it is in, but, clearly, there will be only one rate for each business. If a business is engaged in two or more sectors with different rates, the flat rate to be applied will be that for the main business sector based on turnover generated. The businesses and trade associations that we consulted felt

[Mr. Boateng]

that that was the best solution to this problem. I think that we have got it right, and we are determined to make sure that it is helpful to small businesses.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon said, the measure should be seen as part of a wider Government commitment to support small businesses and to promote an entrepreneurial culture. No doubt there is still more to be done and we are determined to do all that is necessary to ensure that we have a culture that promotes the creation of jobs, that helps bridge the productivity gap, and that recognises the vital role that the entrepreneurial spirit plays in creating a sound and dynamic economy.

I hope that, as a result of this debate, the enthusiasm that—as my hon. Friend pointed out—Conservative Members have so ably repressed will re-emerge. One does not often associate the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) with repression in any sense of the word; his enthusiasms are normally plain for all to see. It is unusual for his enthusiasm to be as successfully repressed as it has been on this occasion. However, in the many hours that lie before us in Committee, we will no doubt draw out that enthusiasm. My hon. Friends the Paymaster General and the Economic Secretary cannot wait to have a go at drawing out—"repressions" may be going too far—the enthusiasms of the hon. Member for Buckingham. With that, I commend the clause to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 23 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 26

CHARGE AND RATES FOR 2002–03

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Edward Davey: I and my colleagues wish to debate this clause because it goes to the heart of the Budget strategy and the choices that faced the Chancellor and his team in preparing the Bill and the Budget. We agree with the Government that extra resources are needed for the national health service and for public service investment in general—in our schools, police forces, transport system and care homes. There is a long list of where investment is needed, and there is some agreement that services, particularly the health service, have been deprived of essential investment for far too long. It is our understanding from the analysis in the Wanless report and from the brouhaha and trumpeting of the Budget that it is the Government's intention to find extra resources. We are delighted that, at long last, they have admitted that and have found the money.

It is interesting that we are debating a clause that introduces the income tax charge and rates for 2002–03. On the same clause in previous Finance Bills, I and other Liberal Democrats have argued the case for extra investment in our public services, such as the health service and schools. We have led the debate and the political argument for extra resources funded by fair taxation. In previous Budgets, we have argued for the rates to be higher than proposed or to reverse the cuts that have been proposed in previous Finance Bills. We did that to try to ensure that precious resources were available for investment in public services.

This year, the debate is slightly different, because the Government have found the resources in another way. The debate on this clause is about how we should find the resources and about which taxes should be increased so that we can put money into public services. As is well known, the Government have chosen to do that by increasing employees' and employers' national insurance contributions, and we differ from them on that point. We accept their objective of increasing investment, but we are concerned about their tax strategy and about the taxes that they have chosen to increase.

Although we are forced by the procedures of the House to vote on clause stand part, we would ideally have liked the clause to contain a proposal to put up the basic rate of income tax by 1 per cent. to fund education investment. There should also be a new top rate of tax of 50 per cent. on incomes of more than £100,000 a year to raise the resources that are needed for the investment that we have talked about. Unfortunately, the procedures of the House do not allow us to table such amendments, so we have to signal our intentions by voting on clause stand part. That is what we have done in previous years, and our approach is totally consistent with that.

Why are we suggesting a different tax-raising strategy from that adopted by the Government? If one compares the proposal for an increase of 1p in the basic rate of income tax with an increase of 1 per cent. in employees' national insurance contributions, we believe that it becomes clear that the income tax rise is fairer and more efficient. It is clear from the analysis carried out after the Budget by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and others that the rise in employees' national insurance contributions involves a narrower net and imposes a burden on a narrow group of people. It excludes pensioners and those who live off unearned income or who have substantial unearned income.

Most pensioners would not pay the extra penny on income tax. They are not income tax payers, because of the age allowances. However, pensioners with substantial incomes would pay the extra penny in the pound and the wealthiest pensioners would pay the most. We are willing to argue the case that, if pensioners are wealthy, they should contribute as well. We believe, like the Government, that the poorest pensioners and those on modest incomes should be protected, and they would be protected under Liberal Democrat proposals just as they are under Government proposals. However, the wealthier pensioners would escape under the Government's proposals but not under ours. We do not see the justification for the Government's approach. In the Budget debate and on Second Reading, we asked them to justify why wealthier pensioners were excluded, but justification came there none. That means that we must debate the issue again tonight.

More serious for the Government—I am sure that Labour Back Benchers, in particular, feel this—is the fact that those with a significant unearned income are excluded from the rise in employees' national insurance contributions. They are not being asked to contribute any more towards the health service, and that is difficult to understand. We agree with the Government that resources must be raised to turn round the years of underinvestment and underspending in the health service, so we should surely ask the better-off in society to make their contribution. However, the Government's Budget strategy deliberately excludes some of the wealthiest people in

society, and that is why we stand firm in saying that a 1p increase in income tax is the best approach. It would ensure that everyone, particularly those with the greatest means, would be asked to contribute to a service that is provided to people equally and according to their need.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): I do not want in any way to support the principle of tax increases. However, does the hon. Gentleman accept that—in contrast to the national insurance route—his argument would place an increased tax burden on, for example, a pensioner with an income of £10,000 to £12,000 a year? That burden will not occur if the Government proceed with their proposals.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, right. However, the amount of money asked from those on modest incomes would be relatively small because, as I am sure he will accept, income tax is a proportionate tax. People on low incomes will, by definition, pay a very small amount. Most pensioners do not pay income tax, because they are protected from it by the higher age allowances. Therefore, the vast majority of pensioners would not pay under our proposals.

6.30 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I know the hon. Gentleman is aware that only four out of 10 pensioners pay tax, but is he also aware that nearly 3 million pay it at the 22p rate which, by definition, means that they are on a low income? He is proposing to hit that group of people on fixed low incomes. Only 230,000 pensioners pay the higher rate of tax. His argument about spreading the burden does not work because he would spread the burden disproportionately on pensioners on fixed incomes.

Mr. Davey: That last phrase is incorrect. We are talking not about spreading the burden disproportionately, but about asking a wider group of people to pay. I am more than prepared to admit that the Liberal Democrats would ask more people to contribute than the Government are asking. I am not hiding that fact. Indeed, I was the person who raised it in the first place; it did not require an intervention to drag that information out of me. Our proposal is fairer. The extra amount that pensioners on £10,000 would have to pay would be tiny. Extremely wealthy pensioners, however, would pay much more under our proposals.

I note that the Paymaster General did not say why wealthy people with a larger share of income from investment income—unearned income—should be protected from making an extra contribution. It is extraordinary that they are not being asked to contribute to the important endeavour to put the health service in a sounder fiscal position.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman still misses the point about the financial predicament that many pensioners face. They have retired on fixed incomes, perhaps with a small pot of savings. The income from those savings has fallen as interests have decreased to an historically low level. They have experienced yearly increases in council tax which are vastly above the rate of inflation and have no ability to increase their income. So every time another slice is taken out of their income, it is another handicap to them making ends meet. That would be the consequence of the hon. Gentleman's proposal. It is easy to get caught up in an attempt to deal with the very small number of high earners, but the hon. Gentleman's proposals would have an impact on lower-income pensioners.

Mr. Davey: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman mentions council tax. The Liberal Democrats are the only ones who have pledged to abolish council tax and to replace it with a local income tax. That would significantly help pensioners. They would be much better off as a result of the combination of our policies. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that many pensioners on fixed incomes are significantly hit by council tax. That is why we need to reform that pernicious tax, which his party introduced.

The second part of the Government's tax strategy in the Budget is the 1 per cent. increase in employers' national insurance contributions. We propose a new top rate of tax of 50p in the pound on incomes above £100,000, which would raise an amount similar to that in the Government's proposal. Indeed, it would probably raise more on a net basis because the Government would not have to pay the higher tax for the many people who are employed in the health service and other public services. Our proposal would liberate an equal amount or more for public service investment. In addition, it would be fairer and more efficient: fairer because it would ask those people who can afford to pay to make their contribution, and more efficient because it would not increase the costs of business.

We all know from the press reports and the analysis after the Budget how worried business is by the increase in its cost base because of the increase in employers' national insurance contributions. It is a real concern that that might hit jobs, investment and the competitiveness of UK plc. Once again, the Government have ducked out of the hard decisions. They have put a major burden on business when they had an alternative way to raise revenue. That is why I urge Members on both sides of the Committee to ask the Government to think again about their tax strategy by voting against the clause.

The Committee knows that the Liberal Democrats have been consistent on this matter since, I think, 1989. That is 13 years of consistency on tax policy. In that time, we have argued for increases. Our plans have been fully costed and we have put them before the British people a number of times. Although a majority have not voted for them, some of them have proved in opinion polls to be the most popular policies. We believe that had the Government adopted them, they would have received much greater support and would not have lost the support of British business in particular.

I do not know whether the Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen will participate in the debate, but if they do I hope that they tell the Committee how they will find the money for the NHS, our schools and our police. If they do not do that and then vote against the national insurance legislation, they are being disingenuous—indeed, dishonest—with the British people. They say that they want to back the money for the health service, but they do not will the means. Both before and after the Budget, we stood by our election manifesto proposals of June last year to show where the money would come from to pay

[Mr. Davey]

for our policies. Like the Government, we think that the investment is vital. The Conservatives have yet to produce proposals on that.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is uncharacteristically confused. For the avoidance of doubt, I put it on the record, as has been articulated by my right hon. and hon. Friends before, that it is the position of the Conservative Opposition that although this country needs to spend more on health, it is by no means clear, through an examination of the systems of health provision across continental Europe, that that expenditure is best made on the basis of moneys raised through tax. Unlike the hon. Gentleman, who has a closed mind, my hon. Friends and I have open minds. We will explore the alternatives, see what is best and produce a credible, detailed, costed and attractive alternative to the failures of the Government, which is a damn sight better than the Liberal Democrats have ever managed.

Mr. Davey: I am delighted to have provoked the hon. Gentleman. That is what I intended to do, but he has failed to clarify the Conservative party's policy. As usual, he promised us that some day soon—or perhaps not so soon—we will hear how they propose to raise the billions of pounds.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Davey: I will give way if the hon. Gentleman holds steady for a moment.

It is all right for the hon. Gentleman to say that the Conservatives will clarify their policy in a year or two, but what about the billions that are needed now for the health service? How would he ensure that the billions going into the health service over the next one, two or three years are funded? It is fine if he supports the Government's approach or our approach, but if he does not support either because he does not support a tax-funded NHS, he needs to say how the money would be found now. If he cannot, the implication is that there would be cuts to the health service in every constituency up and down the country. He has to have an alternative. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members groan in their usual way, but they have to tell the people where the money would come from. Will the hon. Gentleman tell me where it would come from this year?

Mr. Bercow: The problem from which the Liberal Democrats suffer is that they have been undergoing a process of intellectual retardation without interruption for some years. If the hon. Gentleman is in the business of offering to the Committee his prescription to remedy the ills of the health service before there has been a proper diagnosis of what those ills are, I can only say that it is extremely fortunate that he did not opt for a career as a general practitioner. At the moment, large sums of money that are allocated to the Department of Health are not spent. As a consequence, treatments that could be provided are not being provided. We will do our homework. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that it is sensible, 11 months after losing the last election on the last manifesto, to be expected to produce tonight the contents of the next, that only underlines why his party is the minority party and why it will remain so.

Mr. Davey: If the hon. Gentleman continues to perform like that, I will continue speaking and provoke him even more because it will elucidate for the Committee more information, or lack of information, about the Conservatives' position. The Liberal Democrats are engaged in a major policy review of our public services. We have already produced a consultation paper, which went to our conference in Manchester.

The Temporary Chairman (Mr. Joe Benton): Order. The hon. Gentleman can continue his party competition outside the Chamber. I should like us to return to clause 26.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for that remonstration, Mr. Benton. I was just trying to help the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), but of course I will return to the matter in hand. The Committee will be pleased to learn that I was just coming to a conclusion.

The Government did not adopt our proposals for income tax increases instead of national insurance increases simply because of the little card that they had at the 1997 election. It is about grubby politics, and not about what is best, fairest and most efficient for this country, and I deeply regret that.

Dawn Primarolo: In advancing his views, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) often talks a good talk, but he does not always follow through. It is a regular claim of the Liberal Democrats that they thought of an idea first, but when looking at this Government's investment, particularly in the health service, we find that we have, at every point, invested more than the Liberal Democrats wanted, and more than would have been yielded by their 1p on income tax or any of their other little ruses.

The hon. Gentleman says that he does not disagree with the Government that extra money is needed for the NHS, but he disagrees about the method of investment, and he focuses tonight on income tax rates. He says that he would have liked to table amendments to raise the 22p tax rate to 23p and to increase to 50 per cent. the tax on annual incomes of £100,000 or more. What is extraordinary is that he tabled an amendment, which was not selected, to put an extra 1p on the 22p rate, but he tabled no amendment on a 50 per cent. rate for incomes of £100,000 or more.

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who intervened on the hon. Gentleman, made the point, which the hon. Gentleman did not seem to understand, that because of the freezing of allowances, pensioners on higher incomes will be contributing, but when we consider the distribution of income among the small number of pensioners who pay tax on their fixed income, we see that the vast majority would be hit by the 1p rise in the 22p rate which the hon. Gentleman advances.

As we have said a number of times, the Government's view is that ever since Beveridge, the national insurance system has depended, rightly, on the principle that people contribute while in work for the benefits and services that they need when they cannot work—a sound principle that is being continued by this Government.

6.45 pm

Chris Grayling: I suspect that this point is symptomatic of the Liberal Democrats' ability to change their story according to circumstance, but is the Minister

aware that the 1p on income tax to which she refers was, at the last general election, designed to be spent entirely on education? I am therefore slightly at a loss as to how the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) relates that 1p to the health service tonight.

Dawn Primarolo: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's prompting. I was going to come to that point next, but I also wanted to make a point about savings. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton talks about pensioners who have savings, but he makes no proposals in his speech or in any of the documents that the Liberal Democrats have produced to change the taxation rates on savings, which would be an issue for pensioners.

The point made by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell is also very interesting. The Government have specifically said that the rise in the national insurance rate will directly contribute to extra spending in the five-year plan for the NHS. The Liberal Democrats have put together a package of amendments on tax, and they spend the money everywhere. They do not match the extra spending that the Government are giving to the NHS; nor do they match our spending on education. Those amendments are just convenient little soundbites in which the Liberal Democrats fail to do precisely what they have implored the Government to do—be direct about what tax is being raised and what it will be spent on.

The Liberal Democrats then come up with the most extraordinary proposition. Income tax is an annual tax; it has to be renewed annually. Those who vote against this clause seek to prevent the Government from setting any rates for income tax, at a cost to the Exchequer of £102 billion this year and £117 billion next year. The hon. Gentleman needs to decide how he wishes to engage in this debate. My right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary said earlier that much of the Liberal Democrats' engagement in debates is not designed for a sensible discussion of the way forward; it is designed so that they can give the soundbites that will go into their "Focus" magazines to misrepresent the true choices facing the people of this country.

The Government say that a comprehensive health service, free at the point of need, will be funded through the Beveridge principles. We also say that we need more investment in our public services, and with all the work that we have undertaken to build a stable economic framework for growth and for sustainable public services, what is required now is a freeze on allowances and the setting of the tax rates this year at 10p, 22p and 40p again, as we promised at the election.

We said that we would use the tax credit system to help those in greatest need, to recognise the burdens and extra expenses of having children and to ensure that revenue is put aside for sustained investment, year on year, in the NHS to give us the first-class service that we need. It is about time that the Liberal Democrats stopped playing around with their 1p and faced up to the true magnitude of the investment in our public services that is necessary to make them first class. On that basis, I commend the clause to the Committee.

Mr. Edward Davey: That was a disappointing reply from the Paymaster General, who chose not to mention the fact that 60 per cent. of pensioners on low and modest incomes would not be hit by our proposals. She could have told the Committee that under parliamentary procedures it is impossible to table an amendment to increase the rate of income tax.

Dawn Primarolo: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could explain why he tabled an amendment to increase 22p to 23p, even though it was not selected for debate.

Mr. Davey: The amendment was included on the Order Paper so that people could be clear about our policy. Having taken advice from the Clerk, I knew when I tabled it that it was not selectable; I hope that that answers the Paymaster General's point. We want to get our policy on the record. Unfortunately, parliamentary procedures prevent some amending of expenditure and tax Bills—I am very much against those procedures—which means that one has to try to make one's point in other ways, which is what we did. The Paymaster General therefore does not have a strong case.

The Paymaster General and the Financial Secretary share an antipathy to "Focus" newsletters, which have been effective in Brent and Bristol, where Liberal Democrats made net gains last Thursday—*[Interruption.]*

Dawn Primarolo: What irritates us so much is the fact that, in many of our constituencies, Liberal Democrats campaign locally on not increasing taxes and cutting public services, but in Committee their representatives have the audacity to argue exactly the opposite.

Mr. Davey: There are some areas where council tax—an unfair tax supported by the Government and the Conservatives who introduced it—is too high and hits pensioners. Our Liberal Democrat colleagues around the country are right to campaign both to replace council tax and to cut it. In the House, we have argued for increases in fair taxes that spread the burden of the cost of paying for public services, and we shall continue to do so. That proposal is now before the Committee, which should consider whether it supports increases in the health service budget funded by an inefficient, unfair mechanism or increases funded by a fair and efficient method. I advise Committee members not to support the clause, and urge them to join the Liberal Democrats in the lobby to vote for a fair and efficient way of raising money for our health service.

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 452, Noes 53.

Division No. 227] **[6.52 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Graham
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Barker, Gregory
Barnes, Harry
Baron, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Bennett, Andrew
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel

Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, John
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anné *(C'bridge)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chaytor, David
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cran, James
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, Rt Hon Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Flook, Adrian
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoban, Mark
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Illsley, Eric
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Key, Robert
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lammy, David
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leigh, Edward
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, Oliver
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Luff, Peter
Lyons, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Mercer, Patrick
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norman, Archie
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Palmer, Dr Nick
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris

Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prisk, Mark
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Ernie
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Ruffley, David
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simmonds, Mark
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Streeter, Gary
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trend, Michael
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaz, Keith
Viggers, Peter
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Walter, Robert
Ward, Ms Claire
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Watson, Tom
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Wilshire, David
Winnick, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Heppell and
Mr. Graham Stringer.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Bruce, Malcolm
Cable, Dr Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Doughty, Sue
Ewing, Annabelle
Gidley, Sandra
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Holmes, Paul
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David
Llwyd, Elfyn
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Price, Adam
Pugh, Dr John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Willis, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Bob Russell and
John Thurso.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 26 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Benton. Presiding, as you are, in the Chair so superbly, you may well not yet have heard the rumour that has been circulating over the past couple of hours, and which has also reached the media, that it is possible that the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions may seek to make a statement later this evening. That would be a welcome development, were it to be true. You will appreciate the slight difficulty that that would appear to cause: as we are in Committee under your excellent guidance, could you advise the Committee what procedure might be available, were the Secretary of State to make his expected statement and therefore come to the House at last and be accountable for his actions over the past few months? Such guidance would be very helpful not only to the Committee, but perhaps even to the Secretary of State.

The Temporary Chairman: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the House is in Committee. It is therefore inappropriate for me, as Chairman of the Committee, to comment on any of the issues that he raises in his point of order. It is not for me to express an opinion as to what might happen after the Committee has finished. I say simply that I know nothing of the matter to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. I am here as Chairman of the Committee of the whole House considering the Finance Bill, and I cannot rule on the matter.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Further to that point of order, Mr. Benton. Respecting your position as Chairman of the Committee considering the Finance Bill, but noting that you represent the authority of the Speaker in the House of Commons at this moment, may I ask you to relay two questions from me, and from other Members, to the Speaker?

First, would it not accord with all precedent in the House for a Minister wishing to alter, withdraw or correct a previous substantive statement in the House to seek to do so in some way in the House? Is it not extraordinary, therefore, that the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions should do so in a statement made solely to the press, and then slink from the Chamber this afternoon while Members were pressing him to come here?

[Mr. William Hague]

Secondly—

The Temporary Chairman: Order. I think I have already ruled on this. I am happy to convey the right hon. Gentleman's wishes to Mr. Speaker, but I cannot do more than that, and I am sure that Mr. Speaker will have heard about this himself by now. I now propose to return to the Finance Bill. The Question is—

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Further to that point of order, Mr. Benton. It was quite correct, I am sure, for you to point out that you are chairing a Committee of the whole House. You mentioned the possibility of the Secretary of State's coming here at 10 pm. There are suggestions in the Lobby and elsewhere that there will be a statement at 10 pm, but, as you know, in Committee the debate on the Finance Bill can continue until any hour. Is there a facility that allows the Secretary of State to come here at 10 pm in those circumstances?

The Temporary Chairman: I made no reference to time, or to a statement. If and when a statement is appropriate, the right hon. Gentleman will know in due course.

I do not propose to take any more points of order on this matter. I ask Members to leave the Chamber quickly and quietly.

Clause 27

INDEXED RATE BANDS FOR 2002–03: PAYE DEDUCTIONS ETC

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Flight: Clause 27 postpones the normal date for the implementation through PAYE of revised indexation of personal reliefs—17 May—to 17 June.

First, I want to know the reason for the delay. We realise that the Finance Bill was presented rather later this year, but the basic indexation data must surely have been available to the Inland Revenue in the expectation of its normal implementation. Secondly, I want to be absolutely sure that the month's delay will sort itself out over the year, and that citizens can expect the normal 12 months in relation to the new indexation. I assume that that is the case, but clause 27 does not make it entirely clear.

Dawn Primarolo: The period for notification following the announcements in the Budget, and hence the necessary delay, are to allow all the tables and other material to be printed and collated, and properly checked, and to enable instructions to be issued to the 1.3 million employers involved. That is obviously necessary.

There is also provision for a CD-ROM version of the guidance and the tax tables, in accordance with the Carter recommendations. Employers will be given a pack, which we hope will encourage them to let computers do more of the work for them, that work being the administration of PAYE.

The delay, then, is simply a consequence of the later Budget. It is also intended to ensure that information given to employers is accurate, is in a form usable by them, and gives them enough time to forward the instructions. That will be the only consequence of the change.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 27 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 28

PERSONAL ALLOWANCE FOR 2003–04 FOR THOSE AGED UNDER 65

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

7.15 pm

Mr. Flight: Clause 28 effectively abandons the 1977 Rooker-Wise amendment in relation to the indexation of personal allowances for 2003-04.

The freeze in both the national insurance primary threshold and personal allowances will raise £700 million in 2003–04 and £850 million in 2004–05. May I ask the Paymaster General whether there is any proposal to freeze the amounts for 2004–05 as well? That would raise an extra £1.6 billion in that year.

Our objections are based partly on principle, and partly on the fact that approximately 1 million more people—960,000, I think—will be paying top-rate tax. That is an increase of some 50 per cent., which will hit policemen, nurses and teachers particularly hard and, inevitably, is likely to drive up pay demands in the public sector. Moreover, although the official figures show an increase in the tax take between 1996–97 and 2006–07 of 35.3 to 38.3 per cent., there will be an increase of 5 per cent. if we take into consideration the accounting changes made since 1995.

I think we have made it abundantly clear that, while we accept the need for additional spending on health care, we oppose the raising of tax without a package of reforms that will deliver improved health care and ensure that the extra money is used effectively rather than simply resulting in extra costs. Only about 60 per cent. of the money raised through tax increases will be spent on health; 40 per cent. will go on tax credits, if we allow for the accounting fiddles in that regard.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart): The hon. Gentleman says he opposes tax increases specifically to fund the health service unless reforms are made, yet his party and its Front Benchers have refused to specify the reforms that they want. Is it not the case that they are simply opposed to extra investment in the NHS, full stop?

Mr. Flight: No, that is not the case. In all sincerity, hon. Members other than me have made the point many times. It involves an issue of principle. While we have a Soviet-style system of delivering health care, while hospitals do not have adequate independence to run their affairs properly and while only some 17 per cent. of expenditure is getting to the front line and there are more administrators than hospital beds—the statistics show clearly that that is the case in Scotland and Wales—merely increasing expenditure will not result in improved delivery.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Flight: Not for a second.

Our proposition is extremely simple: until we have in place a programme of adequate reforms that will do its best to ensure that extra expenditure delivers better health care, expenditure will risk being wasted. We have made the position clear many times—in essence, it is the reason why we are opposed to this little stealth tax of freezing personal allowances. Furthermore, the particular group that the measure hits is one that the Government are ill-advised to hit and, as I implied, the additional revenue that will be raised is likely fairly substantially to be swallowed up by additional pay demands.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Although I am certainly in favour of the Government increasing taxation so that they can invest more in the health service, I am very unhappy with the clause, which freezes the personal allowance.

I believe that far too many poor people are paying tax. Rather than freezing the personal allowance, the Government should be increasing it in order to take people out of tax. Some 69 per cent. of people on a third of median male earnings are paying tax. That is nonsensical; many people are paying tax and then having to rely not on tax credits, but on existing means-tested benefits.

That arrangement is unnecessarily complex. We need reform of the tax system substantially to raise the personal allowance and to reform tax rates so that they are simple. We need to raise the threshold at which middle income earners pay the higher rate of tax. We also probably need a rate of about 30 per cent. in the middle to compensate for the reduced tax that would result from a substantially higher tax allowance. I also believe that there should be a higher rate of tax than the current 40 per cent. and that such taxation should strike high earners, not moderate ones.

Such reforms are not on offer, but in the meantime, I will not support the clause or the abolition of the changes that took effect following the introduction of the Rooker-Wise amendment.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this interesting debate.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones), who I know takes a particular interest in tax matters, made a point that is central to this debate: in justifying the proposal, the Government have not declared any strategy about the number of people who should pay tax. Effectively, the measure has an impact on those who will remain at the basic rate or the 10p starting rate—points that I shall develop in a moment.

As the Paymaster General will recall, on page 75 of the Red Book, at paragraph 4.56, the Government have included a passage entitled "Making work pay for all":

> "The Government has introduced a series of reforms to help make work pay at all levels of the labour market, but especially for those on low incomes."

In justifying that position, the Government pray in aid their 22p basic rate of income tax. I was delighted to read that that is the lowest rate for 70 years and to see that the Government are moving towards a basic rate of 20p in the pound, which was a Conservative policy. The paragraph also comments on the 10p starting rate.

If the Government are so proud—at paragraph 4.56 of the Red Book—of saying that they want to make work pay for all, why did they choose the method set out in the clause to raise revenue? People whose personal allowance is part of a gate-keeping exercise as to whether work pays will find that work pays less than it would have done if the allowances had been indexed. The policy seems to fly in the face of the Government's chosen course of action of making work pay.

As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak indicated in her very perceptive remarks, the clause is about the number of people who are brought into the tax system and have to pay tax. I am intrigued to know why, even though only a small amount may be involved, the Government seem to have no regard to the fact that they are bringing into tax a few more people than would otherwise have been included.

While I considered the implications of the measure, I discovered one or two interesting things on which the Paymaster General might like to comment. Looking back to 1991–92, we find that the number of basic rate taxpayers as a proportion of the labour force was 91 per cent. By 1996–97, that level had fallen to 61 per cent., but under the current Government, it has risen to 74 per cent. We are finding that more basic rate taxpayers are in the tax system than were under the previous Conservative Government. If the number of basic rate taxpayers as a percentage of the labour force is rising, one way of avoiding that process would have been to index the allowances and seek other ways of raising the revenue.

Mr. Hendrick: Are not more people working now than ever before? As there are so few unemployed people now by comparison with 1990 and 1991, is it not probably a desirable consequence that more people are paying tax?

Mr. Jack: If the hon. Gentleman had listened, he would have heard me use a proportionate measure rather than an absolute one. If I had used an absolute measure, his line of argument would have been entirely correct, but I was aware that if I were to fall into that trap, an argument would be advanced to destroy the point that I am making. With respect to his analysis, he is wrong. I welcome the fact that there are more people in the labour force, which always has a beneficial effect on the tax take, but that is why I used a proportionate measure.

It is interesting to consider the number of basic rate taxpayers as a percentage of all taxpayers. That proportion was 94 per cent. in 1991 and 63 per cent. in 1996, and it went back up to 76 per cent. in 2001–02. The Government seem to have ignored that rise in the number of basic rate taxpayers, for whom the indexation of allowances at the margin is very important. They must do rather better than simply announcing the stark fact that the measure will happen, which is what the Red Book says; it effectively states merely that personal allowance rates will remain the same. No doubt the Paymaster General will try to justify the measure on the basis that it will raise an extra £700 million in 2003–04 and an extra £850 million in 2004–05, to help the Government's efforts to raise revenue for the health service.

There are, however, other ways in which the Paymaster General could raise substantially more, especially in relation to her responsibility for the indirect tax system. She could do so if she got to grips with the billions of pounds that seem to be disappearing out of the VAT system, as witness the recent report by the National Audit Office. The Government will no doubt respond that they

[Mr. Jack]

have invested more resources at our ports to deal with smuggling, and that the Bill contains measures to tighten up on VAT, just as previous Finance Bills have done. But even with all that tightening up, it is calculated that over £7 billion is going missing. The question I would like to know the answer to is: what will the investment return be if the Government put in yet more resources? If they will get £7 billion, they can afford to spend £1 billion or £2 billion.

7.30 pm

When we were in power, we were challenged about our spend to save initiative, but the principle remains. As the Paymaster General will know, over the years the application of more qualified senior inspectors at the Inland Revenue to some of the more difficult and complex areas of tax, particularly those involving large companies, has yielded considerable amounts of extra tax—well within the scope of this measure. If the Government are going to break faith with the low paid by not indexing their allowances, they have to explain to them why a relatively modest investment in extra facilities to bring in indirect taxes could not surpass by a large measure the amount of money that this proposal seeks to save. If the Government wish to remain true to their cause of making work pay, they have to do quite a lot of explaining of why they are asking the Committee to agree with a proposal that goes fundamentally against that chosen course of action.

Chris Grayling: The measure completely confuses me. I cannot for the life of me understand why a Labour Government are pursuing a policy that will clearly damage people on low incomes.

Let me tell the Paymaster General a story about a lady who came to my constituency surgery a couple of weeks ago. She was very confused about her tax affairs. She said, "I do not understand. I seem to be paying tax and I do not have much of a pension. I received bereavement allowance, which I have now lost, and I am paying £200 a year in tax. I have a low income, and £200 a year is lot of money to me."

We looked through that lady's papers. I am not a qualified tax expert but at first glance it looked as if her tax affairs were correct. Her income was just high enough to pay £200 year in taxation. However, I appreciated why she felt frustrated trying to make do on a low income in an environment where many other costs, such as council tax, are rising sharply. Gas prices have recently jumped upwards. I could understand why she felt under pressure financially.

Why on earth, then, have the Government introduced a measure that will put that lady's tax bill up? Freezing the personal allowance will mean that she will pay tax this year or next year that she would not otherwise have to pay.

Roger Casale: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has left out part of the story. Perhaps he would tell the Committee whether, when the pensioner came to see him, he informed her about the pension tax credit, which raises the income of people on modest incomes. I hope that he took the opportunity to point out that valuable benefit to her.

Chris Grayling: That may well be so. Indeed, for that lady's sake, I hope that she does manage to get back some of the money that she is paying in extra taxes; but she will have to get to grips with an extremely complex application process of forms and difficult bureaucracy in order to get back some of the money that the Government are taking away.

Dawn Primarolo *rose—*

Chris Grayling: Perhaps the Paymaster General can tell me the logic of taking money away and giving it back again.

Dawn Primarolo: To help the hon. Gentleman out, we are discussing clause 28, which freezes the allowances. Clause 29 increases the personal allowances for pensioners. Pensioners are not included in clause 28.

Chris Grayling: Perhaps the Paymaster General can clarify the matter. My understanding is that the significantly increased amount is for those aged 75 and over. However, even if she is correct, let us look at the gamut of people on low incomes: a student nurse starting her first job, someone earning £4 or £5 an hour in McDonald's, a new graduate in their first job earning a relatively low salary, or someone who has left school and is following an apprenticeship. Freezing the personal allowance this year will increase the tax burden on those people, which should never happen. It is a tax on the low paid and on low incomes. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) has said, it will do nothing to help to get people into work; it will create a disincentive to work. It will create a burden on those who can least afford it.

Mr. Hendrick: On the concern about the low paid, why did the hon. Gentleman's party oppose the minimum wage and say that it would cost 1 million jobs, when in fact we have created 1 million jobs?

Chris Grayling: I remind the hon. Gentleman that during the years we were in government, year by year, Conservative Chancellors made a virtue of increasing the personal allowance, often above the level of indexation that was required, and of taking people out of taxation. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde has pointed out, that tide is being reversed. More and more people are being caught by basic rate tax than were before.

Mr. Jack: Does my hon. Friend accept that, with their work in the field of family credit, the previous Conservative Government showed their regard for those who were in work but on low wages, and it is a tribute to that that the credit has now formed the basis of the various working families and successor tax credits that the Government have adopted?

Chris Grayling: I thank my right hon. Friend for those comments. He highlights a fair example of good Conservative practice being adopted by a Labour Government, but none of that explains why this Government have chosen to target a tax change on the

lowest earners in society—on people with genuinely low incomes who have difficulty making ends meet. It makes no sense.

Mr. Flight: May I make the point that a father on pay of about £13,000 will pay some £2,500 in tax and get back some £2,700 in child tax credit? What on earth is the point of that?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Too much of what the Budget does involves taking with one hand, giving back with another and creating bureaucracy in the middle, which must ultimately cost money and reduce the amount available for spending on other services, or increase the amount that people have to contribute in taxation.

This measure represents an unwelcome extra burden on the low paid. It is a second tax burden on public servants and other people who are not in particularly highly paid jobs and who will pay extra as a result of the national insurance increases. As a result of the Budget, a student teacher on £14,000 or £15,000 a year, a student nurse on the same salary, a new policeman and a new doctor will face an additional tax burden of many hundreds of pounds a year. This measure will simply increase the burden on them. It will erode a part of our tax system, the indexation process, that has been there for a generation.

Mr. Jack: Does my hon. Friend find it odd that the present hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) is opposing the actions of the previous hon. Member for Preston, the co-proposer of the Rooker-Wise amendment?

Chris Grayling: I thank my right hon. Friend for that interesting piece of history. It is certainly food for thought for the hon. Gentleman.

I commend the honesty and commitment of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones), who has rightly pointed out that this is an attack on people who should not be placed in that position. Her concerns are shared by Conservative Members. On this issue, I will certainly join her in the Lobby.

Mr. Tom Harris: I did not intend to take part so early in the debate, but there is nothing like Conservative crocodile tears to stir me to righteous indignation. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) said that the clause represents a break with the low paid. I have no idea whether he was on the Government Benches before 1997, but it does not sit well with any Conservative Member to uphold the rights of the low paid, when the Conservative party not only opposed the national minimum wage but opposed the 10p starting rate that this Government introduced in 1997. I believe that it still opposes the working families tax credit, which is aimed specifically at some of the poorest in our society. It opposed the minimum income guarantee for pensioners, and it will doubtless oppose the pension credit.

Mr. Jack: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman might help me to understand the logic of his argument. Why does he prefer to help the low paid through the 10p starting rate, rather than using such resources to increase personal allowances? Under the latter method, such people would not have to pay tax at all.

Mr. Harris: I am happy to discuss that later.

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Harris: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I shall continue for a while.

In a perfect world, we could raise thresholds yearly by inflation plus 10 per cent., but the fact that underpins this Budget is that the national health service was consistently underfunded for 18 years by the Conservative Government. We have taken a principled decision to raise tax in order to put into the NHS the extra money that is needed. Had the previous Conservative Government decided to freeze the thresholds, the consequences would have been far more serious. In an economy with inflation running at 10 or 15 per cent., such action would have constituted a far greater setback to the lowest paid, and to everybody else. Not only did the previous Conservative Government oppose the national minimum wage; they abolished wages councils as well.

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell spoke touchingly and with tears in his eyes about nurses being devastated by the freezing of allowances. He also said that, under the clause, any hope of a career for school leavers will disappear over the horizon. However, it is precisely nurses who will benefit from the Budget's general package. Thanks to this Government's handling of the economy, school leavers have been given hope of finding a job. They can find a job even in the health service.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman may not be aware of the practical consequences of tax increases for public servants in my area. It is proving increasingly difficult to recruit new teachers and health service workers, and one disincentive is the cost of living in the south-east. The more cost burdens that are added—be they increased council tax, higher national insurance contributions or adverse changes to personal allowances—the less incentive such people have to remain in public services. That is the real consequence of higher taxes.

Mr. Harris: I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says about living in the south-east, but I should point out that it is far cheaper to live there today than it was 10 years ago, simply because interest rates are a third of what they were under the previous Conservative Government. The morale of health service workers is better today than it was at any point under the Conservatives, and it is likely to improve greatly in the next 10 years, as investment in the NHS comes through.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): The hon. Gentleman is making a brave attempt at defending the indefensible, but will he address the central point that was made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak

[Adam Price]

(Lynne Jones)? Freezing the allowance is an extremely regressive form of taxation that will disproportionately hit the poorest paid in our society.

Mr. Harris: I disagree. I have already mentioned several Government initiatives that will ensure that the lowest paid in our society have the best protection, even under the new regime that the clause will introduce.

In accusing the Government of attacking the lowest paid, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell mentioned one of his constituents. I should tell him that, before the national minimum wage was introduced, some people were being paid £1.40 an hour. To such people, it makes no difference whether thresholds have been frozen since time immemorial. They were being paid so little that work could not possibly pay. Thanks to the measures introduced by this Government, the lowest paid will continue to reap the benefits of a redistributive Budget, which are far more significant than anything that the Conservative party could have offered when in government.

Mr. Hoban: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the view of Andrew Dilnot, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, that the most effective way to relieve poverty is to lift people out of the tax bracket by increasing personal allowances, rather than mucking about by introducing measures such as a 10p rate?

7.45 pm

Mr. Harris: The short answer is no, but the longer answer is that the IFS has also said that, even according to the lowest estimate, through positive economic and financial policy this Government have taken more children out of poverty than have any other Government.

Mr. Flight: Why does the hon. Gentleman describe the Budget as redistributive, given that the Prime Minister said on "Breakfast With Frost" that it is not?

Mr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman may be surprised to learn that I am not a spokesman for the Prime Minister. I am not an economist, but I can call a spade a spade, and I can tell that this Budget, like all its predecessors since 1997, is redistributive. That is why I support it, and why I will vote for the clause.

Mr. Hendrick: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in opposing the Government's proposed increases, and by talking about a Soviet-style system, the Opposition give the game away? They do not believe in state support for the health service, and the real reform agenda that they do not mention is a privatisation programme that dare not speak its name.

Mr. Harris: The Conservatives cannot challenge my hon. Friend's comments, because they have refused to explain their plans for the NHS. That makes me extremely suspicious —

The Temporary Chairman: Order I ask the hon. Gentleman to come back to the clause.

Mr. Harris: Thank you, Mr. Benton.

The clause is necessary. It will not harm the lowest paid in our society, and certainly not as much as it could have under previous policies. I am delighted to commend it to the Committee, and I shall cut my losses there.

Mr. Hoban: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris). It enables me to address some of his comments about how the money will be spent—an issue to which I shall return in a moment.

It is right to note that the number of higher rate taxpayers has increased by 50 per cent. since this Government took office, and like my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) I have spoken to constituents who are concerned about that. One constituent who wrote to me recently was horrified to discover that her husband had just breached the 40 per cent. threshold. She felt that his was not the sort of job that one would expect to incur tax at a 40 per cent. rate. Her point was that incomes that are low in the context of the area that I represent are getting caught in the 40 per cent. tax bracket. Of course, the freezing of personal allowances next year will exacerbate the problem. People who get reasonably small pay increases may well cross from the basic rate tax bracket to the higher one, and from the 10p starting rate to the higher rate.

The drift of people towards higher tax rates is a consequence of the freezing of the personal allowance—a point that all hon. Members should take on board. It impacts on incentives to work. It impacts on whether people can leave low-paid jobs to improve themselves and meet their aspirations for themselves and their families.

We need to be careful when we explain to those constituents who will slip into the higher rate tax bans exactly why personal allowances will be frozen in 2003–04. The hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart said that the money will go to save the NHS. I remember that in last week's debate on the national insurance paving motion he said that the money would be allocated to saving the NHS. If he had read the Red Book, he might have discovered that in fact the surplus on the Budget will increase over the 2003–04 financial year, as a consequence of the actions taken by the Government in the Budget. That is shown in table 2.4 and I am glad to see that the hon. Gentleman has his copy in front of him.

Table 2.4 states that the surplus on the previous Budget was £4 billion. In the current Budget, that surplus will increase to £7 billion—an increase of £3 billion. The cost to taxpayers of the freezing of personal allowances in 2003–04 will be £0.7 billion, so we will penalise the low paid and all those who will slip into a higher rate tax bracket simply to expand the Government's surplus. The money will be spent not on saving the NHS but on increasing the surplus that will be available for the Chancellor to release in later years. There is no apparent reason why personal allowances should be frozen for that financial year and it is difficult, therefore, for the hon. Gentleman to claim that it is being done to save the NHS. That argument is not reasonable.

The Chancellor will hit the very people—the low paid—he has set out to help in so many of his Budgets, simply to increase the surplus. If personal allowances are frozen, lower paid people who receive pay increases may start to pay the starting rate of tax or the basic rate of tax. It is a retrograde step. No party has a monopoly on

compassion and Labour Members should consider the impact of an unnecessary tax increase of £0.7 billion on the very people they seek to help.

Roger Casale: The hon. Gentleman said that he was trying to explain the measure to one of his constituents, but he should explain to the Committee how he can speak on behalf of low paid people who will, he says, be adversely affected, and at the same time speak for a party that did nothing in government to help poor and vulnerable people. In fact, the Conservatives pushed millions of people and families into poverty. In opposition, his party has opposed every measure that the Government have taken to redress that wrong.

Mr. Hoban: I am staggered, because to my recollection the Conservatives did not oppose measures such as the Tax Credits Bill. In government, we took steps—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) outlined earlier—to alleviate poverty. We are now considering the record of this Government and the impact that this measure will have on the lower paid.

The freezing of tax allowances will also have an impact on the people whom the Budget did not help. Many childless couples and single people will have lost out through the 1 per cent. increase in NI contributions, and many of them are on relatively low incomes. The uprating of the personal allowances would have mitigated some of the impact of that tax increase. Those people will not benefit from the tax credits that the Government have introduced and they will be hit twice—by the increase in NI contributions and by the freezing of personal allowances. The Government are making a double dip into the pockets of childless couples and single people. Given that this tax increase is not necessary to fund public spending increases in 2003–04 and in subsequent years, the Government should take this opportunity to protect the interests of those who will suffer from this measure. The Government should recognise that there is more than one way to help those who are most in need.

Mr. Laws: I considered not taking part in the debate, but so enlivening has it been that I cannot resist the opportunity. We have heard several contrasting contributions from Conservative Members. We started with the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who expressed his concern about the effect of the change on people on very low pay, and then we ended with the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban), who expressed his concerns about higher rate taxpayers.

Mr. Hoban: I wish to correct the impression that the hon. Gentleman is giving to the Committee and to casual readers of the daily—

Roger Casale: The *Daily Mail*.

Mr. Hoban: No, but I nearly said the *Daily Record*, which is a completely different newspaper. I meant to say the daily *Hansard* report. I did not speak only about higher rate taxpayers. In fact, I devoted much of my remarks to the impact on lower rate taxpayers.

Mr. Laws: Those who read the hon. Gentleman's comments in *Hansard* tomorrow will see the slightly different emphasis that he placed on the matter compared with the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell. We do not need to look to the future to judge the Conservatives' priorities, because we have their record in government over a long time when they placed the reduction of the basic rate of income tax and, to some extent—they will be pleased to hear me say this—the upper rate of income tax as a priority over raising the personal income tax threshold or introducing a lower rate of tax such as the 10p rate. That is on the record in their Budgets and in the memoirs of Lord Lawson, who specifically deals with that issue and states his preference for reducing the basic rate of tax—a less progressive measure—as opposed to increasing the personal tax allowance.

Mr. Flight: Is it a good thing that another 1 million people, or 50 per cent. more, have been brought into the higher tax band? That band will now include people such as teachers and doctors.

Mr. Laws: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point, because he will know that raising the personal tax allowance, as opposed to cutting the basic rate of tax or introducing a 10p tax rate, has been the policy of my party. I sought to contrast the present views of the Conservatives on freezing the tax threshold with the views that they held in office. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will tell us—if the Conservatives have a tax strategy at the moment—whether they would still focus on reducing the basic rate of tax or on the more progressive measure of increasing the personal tax allowance.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is devoting most of his remarks to the history of the Conservative party in government. I remind him that the Conservatives maintained indexation and, indeed, on several occasions increased the thresholds by more than the rate of inflation. Today we are talking about a Labour Government who have abandoned indexation and I suggest that he devotes his remarks to that topic.

8 pm

Mr. Laws: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I did not want to mention the occasions when the Conservative Government froze the level of the personal income tax allowance—something that he has criticised this evening. I do not want to be drawn even further into the quandary that is Conservative policy on taxation and the health service, so—lest hon. Members feel that I am not being equitable in my criticisms—I shall move on to discuss the Government's position with regard to the personal income tax allowance.

The Government should take no pride at all from freezing the personal income tax allowance. As has been stated, that is a less progressive reform of the tax system than the 10p rate that the Government introduced. The hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris) said earlier that many people are on such low incomes that they do not pay a significant amount of income tax and that therefore they have been influenced more by the minimum wage and tax credits. That is true, but the Government's reforms of the personal tax system—in the past few years they have reduced the basic rate and introduced a 10p rate—contrast with the proposal to freeze the personal allowance, which is clearly regressive rather than progressive.

[Mr. Laws]

Why has the change been introduced in this Budget? It has not been introduced primarily to bolster the Government's surpluses, as the Government are projecting significant borrowing on their Budget accounts, on the old Conservative basis. I believe that the Government chose to freeze personal income tax allowances because they had made a commitment in two general election campaigns not to change the basic rate of tax. As a consequence, they had to find other ways to increase the tax burden.

As I have said, the freeze on personal income tax allowance is regressive, and the rise in employers' national insurance contributions will hit jobs. The changes are also unfair, as the Government have also increased employee national insurance contributions. That is a tax on jobs from which many wealthy people are exempt as, although they could afford to pay more tax, they may not be in work.

For all those reasons, my party opposes freezing the personal tax allowance.

Mr. Mark Field: Mr. Gale, you have missed an enthralling debate on this matter over the past three quarters of an hour. However, I shall not detain the Committee for long.

Most of the important points on this matter have been made by those of my hon. Friends who have contributed to the debate. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones) also made a helpful contribution. The hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris) is not present at the moment, but his contribution was also helpful, albeit rather more inadvertently.

Many people are worried that the proposal is too complicated. As has been noted by hon. Members of all parties, some people earning relatively small sums of money will find that they have to pay extra tax. I accept the point made by the hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) that the tax credits scheme comes into play in this regard. People earning modest sums—say between £12,000 and £14,000 a year—will end up paying a large proportion—£2,000 or more—in tax, but they will get more than that amount in tax credits.

It is nonsensical to have so complicated a system. We need to be more honest in our approach to taxation, and the Chancellor's plans for tax credits are based on the fact that they do not count as public expenditure because of how they are implemented. That also muddies the waters of public spending.

I agree too with the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws), who said that the complication introduced into the system over the past two or three Budgets results from the Government's pledge not to increase the headline rates of income tax at the basic and higher rates. However, although the strict letter of that pledge has been kept, one consequence of not increasing the allowances even to take account of inflation—they are not going to be indexed in any way—is that, in effect, tax rates will be increased.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) pointed out, one effect of the Government's tax policy over the past five years is that the number of people paying the highest rate of 40 per cent. has risen from about 2 million to about 3 million. To that extent, the spirit of the 1997 pledge not to increase taxes has been broken, if not the letter.

Mr. Hoban: My hon. Friend represents a London constituency. As salaries rise to keep pace with living costs, will not more and more people in London fall into the 40 per cent. band?

Mr. Field: My hon. Friend is right. I do not want to indulge in special pleading, but that is a problem facing all hon. Members with London constituencies. The electorate of the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Roger Casale) is probably even more middle class than mine in Cities of London and Westminster. Hon. Members with seats in London and the south-east increasingly find that people in those constituencies on incomes that are comparatively modest find themselves in the upper tax rate band.

That is a real problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) spoke earlier about how it affects people working in the public services. Nowadays, it is very difficult to attract people into the public services—or even into relatively low-paid jobs in private hospitals or private schools, or in shops—without paying some sort of London weighting. That could be the public sector London weighting, or a private sector weighting. All too often, people facing the very high costs of housing and of living in London and the south-east find themselves heading inadvertently for the upper tax rate.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart is not present, as I thought that his comments about the NHS—about which he talked at great length—were a little rich. To a large extent, health matters as they affect his constituents are out of his hands, given the role of the Scottish Parliament. The pro rata tax expenditure on health in Scotland and Wales is much greater than it is in England, and it is ironic that there should be so little satisfaction about that. This is supposed to be a Budget for the NHS, but the Government must give close consideration to the question of how effectively the money may be spent.

Mr. Hoban: I should hate my hon. Friend to sit down without saying more about tax credits and low pay. Every low-paid person will be affected by the tax increases that will flow from the freezing of personal allowances. However, does my hon. Friend agree that an unusual aspect of the proposal is that not everyone will benefit from the system of tax credits? The take-up rate for tax credits is something like two thirds of all those who are eligible. Many people will therefore lose out as a result of the provisions in the Bill. Does my hon. Friend agree that they will not catch up through the tax credit system, as it is quite complicated?

Mr. Field: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, and I shall be interested in what the Minister has to say in response. My hon. Friend is a former chartered accountant, and therefore a greater expert than I on these

matters. I am afraid that I am one of those hon. Members who used to belong to the legal fraternity, but my hon. Friend can crunch the figures.

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Gentleman does not have to apologise.

Mr. Field: The Financial Secretary is another former member of the legal profession. I served only as a solicitor, but I understand that the right hon. Gentleman was a barrister.

Mr. Hoban: He was a distinguished barrister.

Mr. Field: He was a distinguished barrister, so perhaps I should refer to the Financial Secretary as the right hon. and learned Member for Brent, South—but perhaps not.

Roger Casale: I am grateful that the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) has not tried to build his remarks on the crocodile tears of a Conservative defence of the low paid. The hon. Gentleman is basing his argument on the complexity of the tax system, and he has raised some interesting points. He is opposed to freezing the thresholds, but what would he propose instead? If he were to develop his argument further, I am sure that we would find him proposing something even more complex than what is contained in the Bill.

Mr. Field: That is a fair comment, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for complimenting me on touching on the question of complexity. I feel strongly that there should be indexation. The system has become increasingly complicated but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) pointed out, roughly one third of those who qualify for tax credits do not claim them. There is a real risk that a significant number of people who pay tax by PAYE—they often do not realise just how much they are paying, as the money is taken straight out of their pay packets—will not claim the tax credits for which they qualify. I hope that the Minister will say something about that.

One thing that the Government can do is increase advertising to ensure that people are aware of the benefits to which they are entitled. Many elderly people, in particular, are unaware of the credits as they may not have been part of the work force for some time. None the less, this seems to be an idiotic system. If we had a blank sheet of paper before us, we surely would not design an income tax system in which millions of people on low incomes pay tax and can then claim even more than that in various credits.

Dawn Primarolo: I have been a little startled at some of the assertions made by Conservative Members, but it has nevertheless been extremely refreshing to hear how deeply concerned some of them are about the plight of those on low incomes, families trapped in poverty and the crucial issue of ensuring that people are aware of their entitlements and rights. However, I was particularly startled by the speech of the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) when I recall that social security legislation under the Conservative party, when in government, meant that there was no obligation on the Department of Social Security to notify people of their rights. Instead, they had to guess them. Therefore, it will be of enormous benefit if all Members of all the political parties in the House can agree that eradicating child poverty from our society is a principle to which every Member is committed, even if we disagree on the methods of doing so.

Whenever I have challenged Conservative Members, outside the Chamber, to make such a commitment, they have declined to do so.

Mr. Mark Field: Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I am more than happy to give way if the hon. Gentleman will put on record his pledge to see the scourge of child poverty eradicated from our society, even though his party doubled the number of children living in poverty.

Mr. Field: Everyone on both sides of the Committee is in favour of eradicating child poverty, but one difficulty with child poverty is definitional. In the past—certainly prior to 1 May 1997—I recall that Labour Members were keen to ensure that statistics were bandied around when child poverty was seen as a relative value. Obviously, with many families becoming more affluent, relative values are almost meaningless. If there is an absolute rather than a relative value, I will be only too happy to join the Minister in her crusade to end child poverty.

Dawn Primarolo: I will not go down that road, Mr. Gale, because I am sure that you would rule me out of order, except to say that what the hon. Gentleman says is a load of rubbish. He does not want to acknowledge the rising level of incomes in our society and the fairer distribution and share of the growing wealth that has taken place since the Government were first elected.

I have no problem in discussing elsewhere with the hon. Gentleman definitions of poverty. When parents cannot afford to buy their children a new pair of shoes because they do not have enough money, that is a pretty good indication. However, I welcome the hon. Gentleman's unequivocal pledge that he is prepared to join a campaign to eradicate child poverty, and I hope that his colleagues will join him.

Mr. Jack: Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I hope that the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) is about to make the same commitment.

Mr. Jack: I wanted to pick the hon. Lady up on her point about the distributional effects of the Government's tax policies. As an exercise in the clarity and transparency of the Government's policies and to enable us to understand some of the things to which she has referred, will she commit to answering again the question first tabled in 1981 by the then hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), now Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, on tax—direct and indirect—so that we might gauge the effect of the measures through the deciles of income that used to be at the centre of that question, or will she explain once and for all why she will not answer it?

8.15 pm

Dawn Primarolo: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, because this has been debated in the House many times, the distribution of indirect tax is imprecise and difficult to measure. Are we to assume that every household smokes or consumes a certain amount of beer, whether from a small brewery or not?

Mr. Laws: Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I will be happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I should like to finish one point before giving way on the next.

In advancing the 10p tax rate, reducing the basic rate of tax and designing our tax measures, whether they be tax credits or changes to the tax system, to ensure that maximum benefit goes to those on the lowest incomes, the Government have substantially increased those incomes. When I have given way to the hon. Gentleman, I will give some examples of how significantly incomes have been increased.

Mr. Laws: On the non-continuance of the previous series of figures on the tax burden, although I heard the Paymaster General's criticisms of the previous methodology of deriving the tax burden, does she recall using precisely the same figures, to great effect, in opposition?

Dawn Primarolo: I admit that I remember being in opposition, but it has no glowing attraction. I much prefer being in government and taking decisions. I will give the hon. Gentleman some figures to consider.

A single person aged 25 or over, working 35 hours a week on the national minimum wage—which was opposed by both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties—will be £21.55 a week better off as a result of the working families tax credit. A single-earner family on half male mean earnings, with two children, will be £3,490 better off since 1997.

Lynne Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: If my hon. Friend will wait a moment, I will give way to her.

These are hardly the actions of a Government who do not care about those on low incomes. As I have said, we must contrast our record with that of the Conservative party when in government.

I know that I should return to the clause before you reprimand me, Mr. Gale. I will give way to my hon. Friend and then return directly to the clause.

Lynne Jones: The question is whether those who cannot afford to buy shoes for their children, to use the Minister's example, should be paying tax at all.

Dawn Primarolo: If my hon. Friend will bear with me, I will come to indexation, the Rooker-Wise amendment and the true cost to families in each tax bracket.

Clause 28 freezes the personal allowances for those under 65. Along with the freeze on the national insurance threshold, that will raise £700 million for the Exchequer next year and £850 million the year after, helping to fund the increase in investment in the national health service. It spreads the burden of contributions wider than simply being placed on earners. As I have said, clause 29 will extend the age-related personal allowances for those aged 65 or over beyond indexation.

Conservative Members oppose the clause. They made great play of ignoring the Rooker-Wise principles. I took the precaution of reading the debate that took place in 1978. It is a very important debate, and I hold both hon. Members who moved the amendment, especially the late Audrey Wise, in great respect as regards their intentions in doing so. In the debate, Audrey Wise made it clear that a Government who were freezing the allowances would have to come to this House to explain why automatic indexation was not taking place. That is exactly what we are doing in relation to this year. We are not talking about indexation having gone for ever, but about what happens as result of this Budget.

As the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) pointed out, Conservative Members showed no hesitation and expressed no worries about the poor when they froze personal allowances in 1993–94, nor when they did it again in 1994–95. They were not freezing allowances, as are this Government, to use the money to spend on investment in public services—quite the reverse. Hon. Members may recall that I reminded the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) that his Government's Budget in 1994 cut £10 billion from public expenditure. The Conservatives were paying the cost of economic failure. The breathtaking argument advanced by the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) was that we should not be raising any more tax because the economy was looking quite good—we should just borrow more if we wanted to invest. That would be a return to exactly the policies that got the last Conservative Government into such a dreadful mess.

Conservative Members said that they were concerned that the increase meant that higher rate taxpayers would pay more.

Mr. Jack: The Paymaster General rightly drew our attention to the fact that a decision had to be taken about the suspension of the Rooker-Wise amendment, and said that the Committee would require an explanation. So far, she has announced that a sum of money is being raised and told us what it will be used for, but she has said neither why that particular mechanism—the freezing of the allowance—was the chosen vehicle for raising the money, nor what others were rejected.

Dawn Primarolo: If the right hon. Gentleman will be patient, I am coming to that. I am trying to deal with questions in sequence rather than making my comments, then answering all the questions at the end out of sequence.

The Chancellor made it clear that he believed, based on the Beveridge principles, that all members of the community should make a contribution to increases in spending in the public sector. I shall give the figures so that hon. Members know exactly what we are talking about before their imaginations run riot. The changes resulting from freezing the allowances will be equivalent to 28p for the starting rate taxpayer, 49p a week for the basic rate taxpayer and 80p a week for the higher rate taxpayer. Surely, Conservative Members do not expect us

to believe that 80p a week will force millions of people into the upper rate tax bracket. Of course, that is not so, as they know full well. Freezing personal allowances—I absolutely acknowledge that that is the impact—spreads the burden of the contribution widely, as the Chancellor wanted to do in line with the Beveridge principles. Those on the lowest incomes will be greatly assisted by the interaction between the family tax credit and the working tax credit, to the point where there will be no extra charge to them.

Great play was made of the higher rate of income. The higher rate threshold is £34,515 in 2002–03. That hardly qualifies as a low income. The Government have considered where to raise the money for investment in first-class public services. We are increasing non-health spending by 2.5 per cent. in real terms in 2004–05 and 2005–06. We want to place the national health service on a sustainable long-term financial footing, as do all members of our community. We are increasing the UK's health spending by 7.4 per cent. a year in real terms over the next five years, and by more than £40 billion between 2002–03 and 2007–08. My constituents and people I meet on the doorstep tell me that they are prepared to invest that money in their health service. They do not say, "Our incomes are lower, so we don't want to make a contribution."

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones) asked about people on low incomes. I remind her that 50 per cent. of families with children are better off in terms of actual income and will be better off as a result of the improved quality of the health service when the investment is made. Single people aged 25 or over working 35 hours a week on a minimum wage are better off and will have access to improved public services. Because of the tax and benefit reforms that we have made since 1997, the poorest fifth of families will on average be £2,400 a week better off—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry. They would love me to say that, but I think that the Chancellor would have something to say about it. They will be £2,400 a year better off as a result of our changes, better public services and higher investment. If we said to those people, "You are not to contribute even a small amount to your health service, even though you have vastly improved your financial position as a result of this Government's investment in your future", they would find that bizarre, as they would find it bizarre to hear hon. Members suggesting that they are not prepared to pay.

Mr. Edward Davey: Of the number of people on low incomes who are being brought into the income tax net as a result of the freezing of personal income tax allowances, what proportion will gain from the Government's tax credit policies and what proportion will not benefit at all?

Dawn Primarolo: I shall be very careful in giving the answer, because I do not want to mislead the Committee on that matter, and I will check carefully whether I have answered the hon. Gentleman correctly.

The working tax credit, the child tax credit and the pension credit, linked to the minimum income guarantee for pensioners, the £200 a year allowance for heating and the changes that we have made to indexation for over-65s—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman knows that people on low income do not represent just one group. Presumably, he is expecting me to deal with the income of each and every group where there may be people on low incomes. The combination of all the measures I mentioned ensures that the very lowest incomes continue to increase the most. The hon. Gentleman can confirm that by studying the distributional impact charts in the Red Book and by talking to his hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil, who is a member of the Select Committee on the Treasury, one of whose recommendations dealt with the matter.

8.30 pm

The right hon. Member for Fylde made many interventions; the final one was to point out that we should do more about avoidance. That is rich coming from a party that tells us that we are introducing too much complexity and red tape to the tax system, while telling us that people who should pay tax are not doing so, even though when the Conservatives were in government they did nothing about that problem. If the right hon. Gentleman examines the Finance Bill, he will see that closing avoidance loopholes will raise £740 million next year and more than £1 billion in the following year, ensuring that those who try to avoid tax are encouraged to pay it.

Mr. Jack: The hon. Lady should consider her words carefully. She said that the previous Conservative Government did nothing about avoidance. She might remember that the last Finance Bill before the general election in 1997 included a range of measures that built on previous initiatives on the issue. We can debate their effectiveness in another place at another time, but the Conservative Government took action on many aspects of avoidance and the hon. Lady knows it.

Dawn Primarolo: The right hon. Gentleman referred specifically to VAT. I do not mind debating the record of his Government or scrutinising it, but I do not recall that they ever made an assessment of the problems of VAT fraud. I certainly remember that they got their forecasts wrong; there was one year when £6 billion of VAT receipts disappeared and could not be accounted for—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman specifically raised VAT avoidance and I stand by what I have said. I do not recollect that his Government undertook the assessment that we have made, nor did they publish either figures or strategies as we have done under the able stewardship of my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary.

For all the reasons that I have given—investment in public services, ensuring a fair contribution, an understanding of the decision to freeze allowances this year for the under-65s—I commend the clause to the Committee.

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 257, Noes 187.

Division No. 228] **[8.32 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick	Bailey, Adrian
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*	Baird, Vera
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*	Banks, Tony
	Barnes, Harry
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*	Barron, Kevin
Atherton, Ms Candy	Bayley, Hugh
Austin, John	Beard, Nigel
	Bennett, Andrew

Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Casale, Roger
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Illsley, Eric
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ruth
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Lyons, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malliaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moran, Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Rt Hon Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Dr Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Watson, Tom
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Fraser Kemp and
Mr. Ian Pearson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel

Donaldson, Jeffrey M
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, Rt Hon Iain
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gibb, Nick
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Lews, David
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell–Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, Dr John
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Younger–Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Cheryl Gillan and
Mr. Desmond Swayne.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 28 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 29

PERSONAL ALLOWANCES FOR 2003–04 FOR THOSE AGED 65 OR OVER

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Flight: The clause, as hon. Members are aware, raises the question of age-related personal allowances. I want to draw attention to two issues, aspects of which I am not sure that the Government have fully taken on board. As a result, many pensioners with an income below the national average will have no benefit whatever from the increased allowances. In particular, almost 1 million with modest pensions for which they have saved for years, and whose earnings are about 75 per cent. of national average earnings, will be short-changed.

The first issue is that the restrictions clawing back the age-related allowances are not being indexed or increased. The Government have failed to point that out, as one might have expected. As the Committee will be aware, if a retired person's taxable income exceeds £17,900 per annum, he or she loses £1 of age-related personal allowance for every £2 of income above that sum. Those with an income of £21,980 per annum have no age-related allowance. Those who still qualify for the married allowance are in a similar position, as that allowance will not increase.

8.45 pm

Why are the Government not increasing the level at which the age-related personal allowance is clawed back? Surely it is wrong for pensioners with incomes below the national average wage to have their personal allowances restricted, especially when the Government have made so much of wanting to do their best for pensioners.

The second issue on which I want to concentrate is that of certain forms of insurance saving. Again, the Government make their point about wanting to increase pension saving and people's savings for old age, but when people cash in United Kingdom-based with-profits income bonds, the sum realised is treated as income for tax purposes even though those involved may not have any immediate tax liability because they are only standard rate taxpayers. The effect is that people with modest incomes will lose their age-related allowances for the year in which they realise those savings for their old age.

As I have said, pensioners with incomes of £21,980 have absolutely no additional allowance, yet their incomes are £1,000 below the national average. As Age Concern has said, many older people with modest incomes will not benefit from the higher age allowances, yet the expenditure of people in retirement is often increasing faster than the rate of inflation. The 10 per cent. council tax increase—it is often considerably more—has hit pensioners quite hard. Obviously, pensioners may have to pay nursing home costs for themselves or for their partners or spouses, and those costs are rising substantially faster than the rate of inflation.

I object to the Government's making a great noise as usual in saying what wonderful things they are doing for pensioners, given that, as with last year, many people in the middle and pensioners with incomes below the national average will not benefit at all. The arrangements

[Mr. Flight]

have been structured in a sufficiently devious fashion so that they will receive no increase in their personal allowances in 2003–04.

Will the Government consider whether it is reasonable, in principle, for the threshold at which the age-related personal allowances are withdrawn to be indexed, together with other personal allowances? If we really want people, especially the vast bulk of people in the middle, to save more for their old age—we all know the Government's target for the ratio of public to private pension provision to swing from 60:40 to 40:60—tax rates in retirement are material.

I repeat the essential point, but I also ask the Paymaster General whether the Government have focused on the fact that many in retirement who are not enjoying large pensions will not benefit from the much-boasted, double-inflation increases in age-related allowances. Was that the Government's intention, or is it an oversight? Why did the Government not consider increasing the ceilings at which the age-related personal allowances are withdrawn?

Mr. Edward Davey: In part, I want to support what the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) just said. Many of his points were valid, particularly his point about the need—he did not say it in these words, but it was the implication—to top-slice relief for people who cash in insurance bonds, as they often exceed the age-related allowances and are hit unfairly. I very much agree with him in that respect.

I want to focus on age-related allowances as they affect married couples. There is room for a very modest measure to be introduced in Committee or in next year's Budget—this is an early Budget representation for next year—to sort out the allowances for married elderly people to make them less complicated. Currently, there is a difference in the married couples allowance for people aged 65 as opposed to those aged 75. It is a small difference, but it seems odd that there should be two different allowances for those two different groups of pensioners. It creates an unnecessary complication, and, by spending tiny amounts of money, the Government could level up the age 65-to-75 allowance to the higher rate for those aged 75 and over. That would achieve simplification and benefit some pensioners in a small way. I put that down as a marker, as the Government could consider such a proposal in the Standing Committee or in next year's Budget.

The clause itself is welcome. The fact that the age-related allowance is being increased over and above indexation is welcome, just as the failure to index the personal allowance for those under 65 was not welcome. I should have thought that the clause would receive support on both sides of the Committee, but there are several other smaller measures, as the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs and I have tried to suggest, that the Government could consider to push in the same direction as the clause.

Dawn Primarolo: The clause increases the pensioner allowances for those who are 65 and over. It complements our policy of tackling pensioner poverty and rewarding those pensioners on modest incomes who have saved a little for their retirement. From April, the poorest households, who are on the minimum income guarantee, are at least £20 a week better off—over £1,000 a year in real terms—compared with 1997. We will increase, throughout this Parliament, the minimum income guarantee in line with earnings, which means that the poorest pensioners will share in rising prosperity thanks to the Government's successful handling of the economy.

In addition, from October 2003 the pension credit will replace the minimum income guarantee and provide pensioners with a guaranteed minimum income of at least £100 a week for single pensioners and £154 for couples. It will reward those whose second pensions, savings or earnings give them income of up to about £135 a week for single pensioners or £200 for couples. We have also increased the basic state pension beyond the rate of inflation. For a single pensioner, the rise will be £3 a week this April and that is on top of £5 increase last April. In 2003, the full basic state pension will increase by at least £100 for single pensioners, and in the future it will always increase by at least 2.5 per cent.

As I have already said, we are setting the winter fuel allowance payment at £200 for the rest of this Parliament. There is also additional help for households with someone who is aged over 75. They will continue to receive free television licences.

On taxation, in the last Parliament we increased pensioner allowances beyond inflation, very much recognising the point that was made in earlier debates about pensioners being on fixed incomes and facing other pressures. We then created and extended the 10p tax band. However, we wanted to do more for those pensioners who pay tax. In 2003–04, we will increase the pensioner allowance to £6,610 for someone aged 65 to 74 and by another £240 over indexation for those who are over 75. That will come to £6,740 on current forecasts.

The higher allowances will benefit 1.4 million pensioners and will take about 170,000 of them out of tax altogether. The basic rate pensioner taxpayer will gain up to £85 per year and we will subsequently increase the allowances at least in line with earnings for the rest of this Part. As one would expect, that is very much in line with our manifesto commitments.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) raised an issue that he has raised powerfully in the House on several occasions. He referred to the importance of continuing to look critically at the way in which the tax system affects pensioners and of considering every opportunity, as we have done, to remove pensioners from the tax system whenever that is possible. When the tax system impinges on their income, we should continue that quest. I am therefore happy to accept the hon. Gentleman's representations for next year's Budget in the spirit in which they were offered. In particular, he identified the issue of the married couples allowance, which was protected for those over 65 when the Government removed it in a previous Budget as we prepared the way for the tax credits.

Adam Price: I would like clarification. If I understand it correctly, both pensioner age groups—the 65-to-74 cohort and those aged 75-plus—have been over-indexed, but they have been dealt with slightly differently by the Bill. A precise figure is stated for the 65-to-74 group, but indexation-plus applies to the other group. Will the Paymaster General explain the reason for that?

9 pm

Dawn Primarolo: For the over-75s, there is indexation plus an extra £240. That is in recognition of the particular pressures and expenditures that older pensioners face, in the same way that we provided free television licences for people aged 65 and over. We have debated that problem many times. Although the Committee is only considering the taxation system, the Government's reforms to support pensioners attempt to tackle the wider problems that they experience. In particular, we hope to increase the income of those on the lowest incomes as rapidly as possible and ensure that the money that we spend has a greater impact on the income of pensioners on lower pensions.

For the over-75s, indexation occurs in September. We promised to ensure that no pensioner aged 65 or over would pay tax on their income if it is less than £127 a week. We are setting the monetary amount to ensure that we deliver on that promise. The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question relates to the connection between statements that were made in the House, the September date for indexation and the announcements in the pre-Budget report. We are fulfilling the pledges made in the House.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) mentioned the tapering away from the upper limit of the benefit of the allowances. No elderly person pays more tax than a younger person would with exactly the same income. In fact, the reverse is true. Retired people who are aged 65 and over tend to pay less tax on the same income as someone who is in work, which relates to the protection of fixed income.

The hon. Gentleman knows that the purpose of the age-related allowance is to give extra help to those aged 65 and over who rely on relatively modest incomes. That is why the allowances are given in full only to those whose income does not exceed a certain limit. The limit for 2002–03 is £17,900. Abolishing that limit would cost the Government £420 million and would benefit only the very wealthiest 10 per cent. of pensioners. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but this Government and preceding Governments have thought it right to retain the income limit and to concentrate the extra benefits of the allowances on elderly people with modest incomes.

The income limit is indexed for 2003–04. The Government have tried to protect the position, but I will not conceal the fact that that type of expenditure on the wealthiest 10 per cent. of pensioners is not justified in our opinion.

Mr. Flight: I did not suggest that the tapering away should be abolished. My concern relates to the way in which it operates. Many pensioners who are on below average incomes will not benefit from the increase in the older person's personal allowance. I am glad to hear that the limit at which the tapering away applies will be indexed because I confess that I was not entirely clear that that was the case. I hope that the Minister is correct. At the very least, it seems that indexation is fundamental. I was focusing on those with incomes below the average because the costs of living of the elderly tend to have a higher inflation rate than those of the mean citizen.

Dawn Primarolo: All pensioners on incomes of up to £22,000 will benefit from this measure, and that amount is higher than the median earnings of a single person, which are £21,400, so the position is protected and the situation is not as acute as the hon. Gentleman might imagine for those on modest incomes. The changes that he suggests would benefit only the wealthiest 10 per cent., and the cost is not justified, given their substantial incomes compared with those of people who earn less and still contribute.

That point addresses one made earlier by the Liberal Democrats. They said that we are letting the wealthiest pensioners off the hook. If the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton looks at how indexation operates, he will see that that is not quite the case.

Mr. Davey *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman once more, and then I want to conclude my remarks.

Mr. Davey: Moving on from the point that the Paymaster General has been debating with the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), will she provide clarification? The clause sets the personal allowance for those aged 65 and 74 at £6,610. I have been looking through the notes on clauses to find what the allowance would have been set at if the clause had not been included in the Bill—in other words, under pure indexation—and I could not find the amount. Will the Paymaster General tell the Committee what that figure is? It is clearly a lower amount, because on page 14 of the Red Book the cost of over-indexation of age-related allowances for those aged between 65 and 74 is set at £55 million for 2003–04, but I cannot find the exact figure.

I have a second question. We are being told in the clause the personal allowance for those aged 75 and over will be determined by the indexed amount plus £240, but in table 1.2 in the Red Book I cannot see any figure for the cost of that policy for the over-75s. Does the Paymaster General have a figure for that?

Dawn Primarolo: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will excuse me if I do not give him those figures right now. I do not have them at my fingertips. He knows that I am not feeling quite on form this evening, so if he will forgive me I will make sure that I respond later to those points. If he preferred to ask for those figures in a parliamentary question, I could answer him that way, or I could write to him. I shall certainly look into the matter. The Government have made commitments to protect income at a certain level, and we are using different methods to achieve that. There is no intention to use smoke and mirrors.

The final point made by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs concerned life assurance policies and any gain from them. We take the view that a gain on such a policy is income like any other income, and the age-related limit applies. The gain comes into the income that will be taken into account when calculating tax over the limit. That is how we are proceeding. Committee members must strike a reasonable balance. We must ensure that pensioners on modest fixed incomes are protected in the best way possible without creating exceptional rules that seem to imply that once someone is over 65 all the tax system's rules on gains on income do not apply. There is no reason to move away from that argument.

[Dawn Primarolo]

The proposals in the clause have been widely welcomed by Members on both sides of the House and by pensioners. I shall look carefully at points made by hon. Members to ensure that our aim is delivered and consider whether anything further needs to be scrutinised. I commend the clause to the Committee.

Mr. Flight: I do not wish to detain the Committee for long, but the Paymaster General did not quite understand my argument. I was not proposing that there should be an abolition; I was merely asking her to look at the level at which age allowance restrictions are removed. I may be wrong, but my understanding is that the £17,900 limit has not gone up, which is a fundamental issue. I understand that average earnings are about £23,100; all age-related allowance is lost at £21,980, which is £1,000 or so below average earnings. I was focusing not on better-off pensioners, but on the rump of people in the middle and suggesting, if I am right about the figures, that they are getting a slightly raw deal.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 29 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 87

EXTENSION OF POWER TO GIVE EFFECT TO DOUBLE TAXATION ARRANGEMENTS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Flight: Clause 87 is a technical measure, designed to provide a useful power for Britain to enter into tax treaties with non-recognised territories. Taiwan has been cited as the jurisdiction where it will be most useful. The enabling provision on tax treaties is section 788 of the Taxes Act 1988, which is one of the measures being addressed or tinkered with. Has the opportunity been taken to make quite sure that it gives proper authority to all aspects of existing treaties as well as the proposed change?

In the past, the Inland Revenue has acknowledged that section 788 has shortcomings. In practice, there may not be a serious problem, but in principle it is less than desirable to enter into treaties without adequate statutory authority in the United Kingdom. I seek confirmation that, in looking at changes to section 788, the Government are satisfied that they have addressed the Revenue's concerns about its shortcomings.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): I hope that the Minister will forgive me. She has always been very courteous to me, but she knows from the exchanges that we had in the Treasury Committee, before I was chucked off it, that I have the gravest suspicion about everything that she does.

I have a simple question about the reason for changing the words

"made with the government of any territory"

to

"made in relation to any territory".

The next clause, which of course we cannot discuss now, contains regulations that provide for different cases with respect to different territories. The clause states:

"The territories to which this section applies as respects an accounting period . . . are those specified as such in regulations".

9.15 pm

I am horrified because I gain the impression that the Government are asking for the power to apply different rules to different territories. There is no definition of how the territories will be selected, and there is no definition of what rules will apply. The Minister is aware that I am extremely concerned, for example, about what the Government are doing in relation to the Channel Islands. The policy that they seem to be adopting towards one of the Channel Islands seems to differ from the policy that they are adopting towards the others.

What worries me in particular is the fact that the Government are asking for blanket powers to bring in regulations that will apply to any place that they want, without ensuring that the same rules are applied to all territories. That strikes me as very worrying and not in the traditions of the House—

The Temporary Chairman (Mr. Roger Gale): Order. With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I think that he will find that he is speaking to clause 88, not to the clause currently under discussion.

Sir Teddy Taylor: I would not think of taking up the time of the Committee. I was giving an example to illustrate my simple question about the reason for substituting the words

"made in relation to any territory"

in clause 87 for the words

"made with the government of any territory".

I shall, of course, say a few words on clause 88 if I have the delightful opportunity of catching your eye, Mr. Gale, but I should like to know why the words are to be substituted and what the aim is.

Dawn Primarolo: The clause amends the legislation that enables double taxation agreements to be implemented. In particular, it removes the existing requirement that the agreement is "made with the government" of the other territory. The other territory is the country—the jurisdiction.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) asked whether we were confident that the proposed wording was correct. I am confidently advised that the wording is correct, but the hon. Gentleman is right: if it were not correct, we would not have the authority to enter into a double taxation treaty, for which the clause provides. I assume that the wording is right, because I have been advised that it is right.

The purpose of the change is to enable legal effect to be given to a double taxation agreement in relation to the territory of Taiwan. The agreement must be made between two representative offices—the British trade and cultural office in Taipei, and the Taipei representative office in London. It was formally signed in London by the heads of those offices on 8 April 2002. The agreement will be laid for consideration by the House at the earliest convenient opportunity after the passing of the Bill.

The reason that we need to change the wording is specifically to enable us to have an agreement with Taiwan. Other countries have taken similar powers in order to do that. Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands have all implemented double taxation agreements with Taiwan, which were made between their representative offices and the Taiwan representative office in each country. The change is necessary because Taiwan is part of the People's Republic of China. It is one of our most important trading partners in Asia, and a double taxation agreement will provide considerable benefits to British companies trading in Taiwan, and will also serve to encourage Taiwanese investment in the United Kingdom. It is necessary to make changes in order to retain the internationally recognised definition of "the Government", and to reach an agreement with the representatives of Taiwan.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Is the Paymaster General suggesting that Taiwan has no Government? My understanding is that it has a democratically elected Government, while the People's Republic of China does not. Why on earth is the Paymaster General removing the word "government"? Is she making a concession to the People's Republic of China and, if so, what is the purpose of that concession? What is wrong with the existing words, given that Taiwan has a splendid Government, who are democratically elected and respected throughout the civilised world?

Dawn Primarolo: I have already answered that question. To my knowledge, Taiwan is not recognised by any Government. Other Governments have double taxation treaties for precisely the reasons I have given. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that the rest of the world is wrong in terms of its diplomatic relations with that part of the world, he is entirely entitled to hold that view; but the international agreements require the reference to a Government to be changed to a reference to a representative office, so that the balance of agreements already in existence can be maintained and an agreement with Taiwan can be secured.

That is all that the clause does. It is what many other countries have done. It is a welcome arrangement, which adds to the double taxation agreements that this country already has—more than 100—thus facilitating international trade and, in particular, the operation of our companies in countries where we have such agreements.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 87 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 88

CONTROLLED FOREIGN COMPANIES: TERRITORIAL EXCLUSIONS FROM S.748 EXEMPTIONS

Mr. Flight: I beg to move amendment No. 26, in page 63, line 14, at end insert—

'(6) A period of 6 months' notice shall be given prior to the laying of a statutory instrument, as provided for in subsection (5) above.'.

This is essentially a probing amendment. It is intended to establish whether the Government are willing to consider relaxing the measures in clause 88. Conservative Members are extremely uncomfortable with the clause and its background. For reasons connected with the national interest, we are particularly unhappy about the fact that it makes Britain a marginally less attractive place for a multinational company to have its headquarters. It introduces a degree of uncertainty to the international structure of such companies.

Clause 88 gives the Treasury an arbitrary power to designate territories where CFC exemptions for UK-based groups will be removed. Although I duly note that an affirmative resolution of the House is required, self-evidently the present Government have a majority that will make that little more than a formality.

Let me say something about the background to the clause. I do not know why, but there was some misreporting of it in the press. It was said that the clause related to a disagreement—shall I say?—between the Paymaster General and Jersey on the savings directive, which threatened the deal allowing it to be an alternative to a common European Union withholding tax. Whether there is a disagreement is debateable, but the matter relates to the Primarolo report on EU unfair tax competition and not to the savings directive.

The Committee may remember that the Primarolo report identified in EU member states, various British dependencies and elsewhere, what it considered instances of unfair tax competition that resulted, among other things, in particular locations getting business because of specific tax incentives. At the outset, EU members considered applying their code and principles to other key parts of the world—the United States and Switzerland in particular—on the basis of the sensible argument that not bringing them in would merely drive capital away from the EU and places like the British dependencies. As I understand it, that developed slightly later into an attempt by EU member states to get a commitment that the same measures would be introduced in British dependent territories, even though they are not members of the EU. In relation to key third territories, the concept was to try to promote the adoption of equivalent measures. I think that there was a slight change from the original intentions in that regard.

As I understood it—I remember reading the report—the main offender was the Netherlands, which I think had 66 cases of allegedly unfair tax practices, while the British dependent territories of the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man had relatively few such cases. I recollect that the report stated that the UK would do its best to persuade its dependent territories to come into line with what was being introduced in the EU, but also made it clear the UK had limited constitutional powers and could do its best only within that framework.

I understand that a week or so before the Budget announcement—I think on 10 April—a conversation occurred between the Paymaster General and the chairman of the Jersey policy resources committee, who is the senior politician in Jersey. In essence, the Paymaster General told that gentleman that if Jersey did not sign up within a week to the EU code of conduct on unfair tax competition, the UK would introduce options for putting economic pressures on Jersey to do so.

Dawn Primarolo: Will the hon. Gentleman explain whether he is merely repeating what has been alleged in the press or whether he has been told by the senator concerned that that was the content of our conversation?

[Dawn Primarolo]

He needs to be clear on the matter, because if he wants to pursue that route, there will be a sharp dispute between us about what was said and when. If he is repeating what was reported in the press, perhaps he could say so.

Mr. Flight: I thank the Paymaster General for those comments. In fact, I recollect press reports that had nothing to do with the matter, but were all about the savings directive. The document that I have is the EU tax package statement by the gentleman in question to the Senate in Jersey, and I shall refer to some points in that statement.

9.30 pm

Dawn Primarolo: May I ask the hon. Gentleman not to read from the document selectively? The senator whose statement to the Jersey Parliament the hon. Gentleman is talking about referred to the fact that discussions went on between Jersey and the United Kingdom for some two years.

Mr. Flight: I am aware of that, and I will be referring to those discussions, which went on for some time. I am sure that the Paymaster General may be able to elucidate a little further what those discussions were about. In commonsense language, as I understand the situation, there were discussions with the various dependent territories, particularly with regard to exempt companies; the Jersey authorities were less co-operative than the Guernsey and Isle of Man authorities and sought to negotiate terms, because the administration of companies forms a larger proportion of the Jersey gross domestic product than it does elsewhere.

Dawn Primarolo: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to explain whether his speech is intended to defend the UK interest, or Jersey's interests.

Mr. Flight *rose—*

Sir Teddy Taylor: Before my hon. Friend responds to that intervention, will he point out that Jersey has no representative in the House of Commons to speak for it?

Mr. Flight: I will come to the UK interest, but it is important to raise the matter, partly for the reason that my hon. Friend has mentioned and partly because in some senses the British dependencies are part of British interests. If, as a result of clause 88, we end up damaging our own self-interest, that will not be particularly sensible. *[Interruption.]* May I continue? It is healthy that this matter should be out in the open, particularly where, for some reason, what appeared in the press, particularly the *Financial Times*, was far from what the matter was all about.

The Paymaster General's discussions with Jersey were also about what the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has been concerned with in the territories. It is interesting to note that roughly a year ago the United States Government changed policy and broadly made the point to the OECD that it was not entirely proper to over-interfere in the internal tax affairs of sovereign states. I would be interested to know whether the United States change of policy was acknowledged by the Government here, and what the opinions about that were.

To deal with the Jersey matter, my practical point is that it is in the UK's interest, no matter how difficult it may be, to resolve British policy objectives directly with Jersey. It is unfortunate that the resulting power that the Paymaster General has introduced in clause 88 does not relate specifically to the Government's disagreement with Jersey. It has a much wider application.

I realise that the Paymaster General may seek to talk about precedent, but as I said at the outset, under clause 88, a UK-based multinational will face the arbitrary possibility that the exemption rules applying to controlled foreign companies, on which basis it may have structured itself, could suddenly change if the Government choose to use the powers in clause 88. As a result, its CFC exemptions would be suspended.

The amendment would provide a cooling-off period, and introduce the concept of giving six months' notice of an intention to bring forward such legislation. One hopes that that would force agreement between the UK and the relevant dependent territory, and it would also enable UK-based multinational companies to examine their global structure and to change it, having been given notice of such legislation by the UK Government.

I finish by returning to the Jersey issue, and Jersey's response—as I understand it—to the Paymaster General, following the famous telephone conversation in which Jersey was required to commit. The key clause states:

"We have said clearly to the Treasury that, subject to safeguarding our vital economic interests and to a clear level playing field, we shall take the Code of Conduct principles into account in our review of fiscal strategy and also examine whether we can address the Directive by adopting measures that are the same as, or equivalent to, those set out in it. We have emphasised that in any event we recognise the wish of EU Member States to limit as far as possible any circumvention of the Directive, if or when it comes into force, and that accordingly we shall not allow Jersey to be a place outside the EU where EU residents could avoid paying their due taxes. As my letter to the Minister makes clear, we want to reach an agreement with the UK on the Tax Package and we are ready and willing to enter into constructive discussions to that effect. The progress of our fiscal strategy review makes that now timely."

It would be in the UK's and London's interests if the UK and Jersey could reach an agreement here. It is unfortunate that the Government have resorted to the instrument constituted by clause 88, which has a wider application than merely the specific discussions with Jersey.

Mr. Edward Davey: I rise so that we can return the debate to amendment No. 26. I have some sympathy with it, but its implications have not been explored in recent moments.

The explanatory notes and Budget press notices do not offer sufficient explanation of, or justification for, clause 88, so the Government need to offer some. The Committee needs to be aware that it would empower the Treasury to make regulations that would affect companies' commercial

decisions overnight. One assumes that such regulations would not be retrospective, and it would help if the Paymaster General could confirm that.

Mr. Flight *rose—*

Mr. Davey: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, provided that he is not going to talk about Jersey.

Mr. Flight: I did make the point that the measures would in effect be retrospective. If a group has a structure or its CFCs in a certain jurisdiction, but it is suddenly decreed that CFC exemptions are not valid there, that is effectively retrospective.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is redefining the term "retrospective" with that argument. It is a concern, but not in the way that he suggests. My concern is that the clause gives the Government the opportunity to produce an instrument to change the rules on CFCs at any stage during the financial year. Governments in the past have been able to do so every year in the Budget and the Finance Bill. Every year, the Government get their sticky fingers on the tax statutes and change the law. All companies and individuals know that the tax regime may change in the next financial year. That degree of instability is built into the system and we cannot get around that unless we stop having annual Finance Bills. That might be a good idea, but I would be ruled out of order for pursuing it. However, the clause would build in extra instability over and above the annual Finance Bill. That is the concern, and the Government have yet to make the case that the power is necessary between annual Finance Bills.

Sir Teddy Taylor: I hope that the Minister will reconsider this important issue. This clause does not mention the Channel Islands, just as the previous clause did not mention Taiwan. I had the pleasure of having breakfast in Portcullis House last week with senators from Jersey who explained their concern about the provision. I should point out that I paid the bill, so there is no question of anything unusual.

The senators had several concerns. The Minister will be aware that it has been widely reported—the senators who spoke to me confirmed it—that those involved had been told to agree to the code of conduct, lest economic sanctions be levied against them. I am sure that the Government will deny that shameful behaviour. However, the clause contains unusual wording that would horrify Members, especially Labour Members who claim to believe in democracy, if they read it. Clause 88 states that regulations may be introduced that

"may make different provision . . . with respect to different territories".

In other words, there might be one rule for Jersey and another for a different country. That should worry us all.

The regulations may also

"contain such incidental, supplemental, consequential or transitional provision as the Treasury may think fit."

So we would be giving the Government a blank cheque to introduce whatever measures they think fit, subject to the approval of regulations. They could bring in different rules for different countries or places.

I hope that the Minister will accept that the Channel Islands have some of the highest standards of financial operation to be found anywhere in the world. We had a recent report on money laundering in which the Channel Islands were not even mentioned as being suspected of involvement. The Channel Islands are also the second major source of capital for London finances. Surely the Government should be concerned to try to preserve that.

As the Minister is well aware, the code of conduct that she initiated in the EU, among all the nonsensical talk about a withholding tax—it cannot happen unless Britain agrees to it—has meant that we are stuck with forcing the Channel Islands to do something that they do not want to do. It will be much against their financial interests. If the Minister doubts that, she should speak, as I have, to senators from Jersey who are very concerned, worried and alarmed. The Minister may argue that the people of Guernsey are not suffering, but she will probably know that they have a very different sort of business from that carried on in Jersey.

9.45 pm

Why is the Minister introducing this measure? Why does she want the power to bring in different regulations to apply to different countries? The Minister may say that the circumstances are different, but surely a law should be applied fairly and squarely. Many of us who care about Britain and the high standards that have been maintained here are worried that the Channel Islands will be undermined by the code of conduct that has been introduced. The Minister may remember that she said at the time that the code was not available, but I was able to get hold of a copy. My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir Michael Spicer) is present, and he will recall that I obtained a copy simply by telephoning Brussels for one.

Will the Minister explain why the Government want the power to bring in regulations that will apply to different places in different ways? The Channel Islands do not belong to the EU, and have always had the right to make their own decisions on taxes. Can the Minister assure the Committee that there is no question that the Channel Islands will be subject to sanctions, and that no pressure will be applied, under the clause, to force them to do something that they do not want to do and that they do not consider in their interests?

Finally, Britain's interest in the EU obliges us all to do many things that we do not want to do. The Minister may remember that we spoke about the Bank of England being forced to sell gold, but the price today is $309 per ounce. The price at which we sold means that Britain has lost hundreds of millions of pounds. Ministers either seem uninterested, or they say that there is nothing to be done.

I know that it would be out of order to go beyond the clause. However, the powers in the clause have never appeared in legislation before. They would allow provisions to be applied differently in different areas. We have treated the Channel Islands in a shameful manner that is against the interests of Britain and the world. The provision is also against the interests of those who believe in maintaining high standards of financial conduct in the financial world.

Dawn Primarolo: I shall begin by explaining the provisions of clause 88. The clause provides for a reserve

[Dawn Primarolo]

power to make regulations specifying overseas jurisdictions in which controlled foreign companies would automatically fall within the charge to tax made by the controlled foreign company rules.

The aim of the measure is to protect the UK's economic interests and tax base against harmful tax practices where they continue to be prevalent. It reflects the Government's determination to promote fair tax competition and to take effective action where jurisdictions do not remove the harmful features of their tax regimes. It will not be used where appropriate action is being taken by jurisdictions to remove harmful tax practices.

I shall explain the parliamentary process involved and the precedents; finally, I shall explain what will happen next.

Regulations specifying a jurisdiction would require the express consent of Parliament. The regulation-making power is subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, so no jurisdiction can be designated unless and until the House votes through regulations to that effect; only then would the tax rules for controlled foreign companies be affected.

The controlled foreign companies rules are designed to stop UK companies reducing their UK tax liabilities by diverting profits to subsidiaries situated in low-tax regimes. The rules work, broadly, by charging UK parent companies of controlled foreign companies on an amount equal to the profits that would otherwise avoid tax.

At present, there are a number of specific exemptions from these rules that exclude from their effects the vast majority of overseas subsidiaries of UK companies. The measure would give the reserve power to make regulations to exclude from these exemptions companies that carry on business in the designated jurisdiction and would, in effect, bring them into UK tax charge.

We have introduced this measure because, although much progress has been made towards eliminating harmful tax practices, we must be able to take effective action against jurisdictions that do not remove them in order to afford more protection for the United Kingdom tax base. Those are the obligations of Ministers and, I should have thought, of all Members.

It is the responsibility of Governments to protect their tax base, and by taking this action we signal that we are serious about our desire to see the United Kingdom's interests protected. The Government strongly support international initiatives aimed at curbing harmful and anti-competitive tax practices. In particular, that means encouraging our dependent territories to co-operate fully with the two key initiatives—the code of conduct and the draft directive on taxation of savings, which are contained in the European tax package—that are so crucial to the City of London.

The United Kingdom has committed itself to promoting the principles in the code. We believe that our dependent territories should match up to the highest international standards and be part of international efforts to ensure fair tax competition. As major offshore financial centres, they depend on the health of European economies.

We will all benefit if there is strong and healthy competition—but only if the competition is fair and not simply predatory. This measure provides the Government with a reserve power to take considered action, with the full authority of Parliament, when such action is necessary to protect the tax base and the United Kingdom's economic interests.

Denzil Davies (Llanelli): I think that we all understand the purpose behind the legislation. Is it not a legitimate concern that, as I understand it, under the reserve powers the tax rates of companies can be increased in the middle of a financial year by secondary legislation?

Dawn Primarolo: If such a regulation were sought from the House, it would become effective at the company's next accounting period, whether it was in January or April. It is not retrospective.

The Government hope that, by negotiation, agreement will be achieved. However, there have been a number of occasions in the past when the United Kingdom has taken defensive measures against other jurisdictions to defend its economic interests and tax base. For example, the United Kingdom terminated two double tax treaties, with the British Virgin Islands in 1971 and the Dutch Antilles in 1988. Both treaties were terminated to defend United Kingdom interests.

In 1985, with the full support of the then Opposition, the Conservative Government secured provisional powers—the same type of reserve powers as these—to act against unitary taxation, specifically directed at California. Section 812 of the Taxes Act 1988 allows the Treasury to make an order prescribing a unitary state, and is still on the statute book.

There are strong political, economic and historic ties between the dependent territories and the United Kingdom. In many cases, that relationship contributes strongly to their undoubted success as offshore financial centres. However, mutual responsibility cuts both ways, and it would be highly unrealistic and irresponsible to expect us to allow them to enjoy the benefits without contributing to the way forward.

On the comments that have been made about Jersey, let me give hon. Members one example. There are about 19,000 exempt companies in Jersey. They pay a charge of £600—that is all—which means that they have to pay no tax at all on their income on profits arising outside Jersey. Moreover, at the moment they are not taxed anywhere else. It does not seem unreasonable that we should, as part of the international debate about tracking terrorist finance, dealing with money laundering, addressing fair tax competition and eradicating niche regimes, expect to advance this argument with our dependent territories, and they are engaging with us on that.

The UK dependent territories have the capacity and expertise to prosper without recourse to internationally damaging tax practices, and their reputations and long-term viability will be enhanced by their being part of these international initiatives. Guernsey's advisory and finance committee president, Laurie Morgan, was reported only two weeks ago as saying—as have those in other dependent territories—that he was confident that the industry would be able to adapt to any changes implemented as a result of adopting international standards. No dependent territory is being asked to do anything that the United Kingdom would not do. No dependent territory is being asked to move first or to change its system without others in the international

framework doing the same. No dependent territory is being asked to do anything apart from engaging on a level playing field, helping us to take forward initiatives whereby all of us will prosper.

The amendment would put back by six months the best interests of the United Kingdom economically and in defending its tax base. The provisions in the reserve power provide, first, for the Government to introduce regulations and, secondly, for that to be debated in the House: only then will the matter be acted on. I say to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) that no retrospection is involved. If the regulations were required—I hope that they will not be, but the UK must be strong in signalling its intention to defend itself—the earliest date on which they could be made is that of the passing of the Bill. If regulations become necessary, they will specify exactly what they are doing, and no power within them can be retrospective. The UK is defending its economic interests and its tax base, sending a clear message to all jurisdictions about how we will conduct ourselves in the international field.

Sir Teddy Taylor: The Minister mentioned money laundering as one of the reasons for the regulations. Is she aware that the recent report on upholding money laundering issues throughout the world specifically excluded the Channel Islands altogether?

Dawn Primarolo: I used money laundering as one example of international practices that were improving. The regulations will tackle harmful tax competition and predatory tax regimes that seek to undermine legitimate fair tax competition; they have nothing to do with money laundering.

I call on every Member to vote for the best economic interests of the United Kingdom, to defend its tax base, to support the clause and to reject the amendment because it would deny us those opportunities—*[Interruption.]*

The Temporary Chairman: Order. I remind the Committee that a debate is under way.

Mr. Flight: As I pointed out, the amendment was, in essence, a probing one. The Government have taken excessive powers, but I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

THE CHAIRMAN, *being of the opinion that the principle of the clause and any matters arising thereon had been adequately discussed in the course of debate on the amendment proposed thereto, forthwith put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 68,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 88 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

To report progress and ask leave to sit again.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Committee report progress; to sit again tomorrow.

10.1 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The parliamentary day is drawing to a close and, yet again—unless you are able to tell us to the contrary—we have had no indication from the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions that he wishes to come to the House, to make an apology, to make a statement or, indeed, to offer his resignation. Can you give us any information, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to whether you have received an approach from the Secretary of State—even at this late hour—to honour the House with his presence, to purge the contempt for the House that he has shown hitherto, and to allow the House to question him and hold him to account, as is our duty?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): I must inform the right hon. Gentleman and other Members that I have not received any communication from the Secretary of State or anyone else. The right hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member and I am sure that he is well aware of a very well-tried method of obtaining information—he may wish to pursue it at the earliest opportunity.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you clarify this point? Is it not usual, when the shadow Leader of the House rises to make a very serious point of order, for the Leader of the House to be present to listen to it? The right hon. Gentleman, who is the custodian of the traditions of the House, could at least communicate to his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how angry the House is about his conduct.

Madam Deputy Speaker: In the absence of any information being given to the Leader of the House about the point of order, I should not expect him to be present.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. A headline on Ceefax tonight stated that the Secretary of State had been in discussions with Mr. Speaker. Can you give the House any information about that?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have to inform the hon. Gentleman that I am in no way responsible for whatever appears on Ceefax.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you take this opportunity to reaffirm the guidance given to me and other new Members of the 1997 intake by Speaker Boothroyd that, as Members, we enjoy the privilege of being able to say what we like in the House without suffering the risk of defamation proceedings? Do you agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that if a Secretary of State has not only misled the House but has defamed an individual in the way that Mr. Sixsmith was defamed, the individual is entitled to expect a withdrawal in the House and for his name to be cleared?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have already ruled on that and given my response to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth).

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Mr. Speaker said earlier in the Session that he was concerned to ensure that announcements would be made to the House and not outside. Therefore, I put it to you that on this occasion

[Mr. John Gummer]

this is a matter about which the Chair ought to be concerned, for an announcement was made outside the House about the proceedings in the House. Would it not therefore be appropriate for the Chair to make inquiries as to when this might be remedied here, in this Chamber?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have absolutely no doubt that Mr. Speaker, if he is not aware already, will read *Hansard* tomorrow. I remind all hon. Members that I have already made a suggestion and ruled on this matter. If there are any points of order other than on that subject, I am prepared to take them.

Mr. Forth: In view of the gravity of this matter, Madam Deputy Speaker, and in view of the fact that the Secretary of State is apparently unwilling voluntarily to come to the House, may I give notice that Her Majesty's Opposition will tonight table a motion of censure on the Secretary of State?

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. If a Member of the House accuses another Member, particularly a Minister, of misleading the House, the procedures that you would exercise are very clear, unless the Member immediately withdraws the accusation; so, from the point of view of Members of the House, especially Back Benchers, the procedures are clear. However, if the House is misled by Ministers there seems to be absolutely no redress. The imbalance in our procedures becomes clearer with every event such as this that passes, so I hope that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will discuss this with Mr. Speaker as a matter of urgency.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have already suggested to the shadow Leader of the House the route that is available to any Back Bencher, but I will see that the hon. Lady's comments are drawn to the attention of Mr. Speaker.

PETITION

Personal Benefits (Long-stay Patients)

10.7 pm

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): I wish to present to the House a petition in the name of 3,769 constituents from the Derby patients council and residents of Derby. It declares,

that the present level of personal benefit allowance for long-stay patients drops to £14.50 per week after 52 weeks in hospital; and that this is grossly inadequate and demeaning for people whose home is a hospital.

The Petitioners Therefore Request that the House of Commons urge the Government to introduce legislation to immediately double the allowance to £29 per week, and to review the aspect of this benefit system with the aim of ensuring that all long stay patients receive a level of allowance which meets their needs.

And the Petitioners Remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Asthma

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Dan Norris.]*

10.9 pm

Mr. James Wray (Glasgow, Baillieston): I should like to draw attention to the seriousness of the incidence of asthma throughout Britain. I have spent a great deal of time trying to get this subject debated in the House. I raised it with the Leader of the House and asked him to give time for a debate, but unfortunately there was other important business to deal with.

I also raised the issue with the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), to try to find out some relevant statistics and how much has been spent on research. In a written reply, she said that she did not have those statistics because they were not collected centrally. However, the British Thoracic Society has done a great deal of research on health service expenditure, and it reckons that respiratory disease costs the health service about £2.5 billion.

I am not saying that I am a great asthma expert, but many men and women, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters and sons and daughters have spent a great deal of time worrying about members of their families who have become emergency patients in many hospitals throughout the country because of their asthma.

This is the National Asthma Campaign's national asthma day in Scotland, and yesterday was national asthma day in England. The campaign is involved in a worthwhile cause, and it is guided by the hands of the chief executive, Liz Brodie, whose son has suffered from asthma for 25 years. I would like to do justice to the campaign's cause. It has reported on many occasions to many other committees and has sent speakers across the country.

The National Asthma Campaign's report "Sleepless Nights, Anxious Days", which was launched today, analyses the incidence of asthma throughout the United Kingdom. We have to focus on younger children first when we talk about asthma, as 1.5 million children in the United Kingdom alone have the illness. One in five children have been diagnosed with asthma at some point and one in eight have asthmatic symptoms. Nationally, more than 7,000 children visit their GPs every week to be treated for asthma for the first time. The United Kingdom has the highest rate of "severe wheeze" in the world for those aged 13 and 14. Those are very serious statistics.

A recent World Health Organisation report found that asthma in young children can be more damaging than tuberculosis and the human immune deficiency virus. That finding is extremely serious. Let us not forget that in the past we screened people for tuberculosis in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom because of the number of lives that were lost to that disease. That is why we want the Government to focus on asthma in the United Kingdom and why I would like them to put it at the top of their list of health priorities, as the situation is likely to get worse, not better.

Triggers for asthma range extremely widely from cigarette smoke and cat fur to vehicle exhaust fumes, and there are many other causes. In such an unpredictable environment, I am sure that everyone would agree that

children must get the best possible care and support. Although deaths from asthma in childhood are rare, the fact remains that asthma encroaches on the lives of many people and, unless it is manageable, it can cause undue stress and discomfort.

I want to give an idea of the impact of asthma nationally. Every 16 minutes a child is admitted to hospital because of asthma. Many of those children go through accident and emergency units, which, as I am sure everyone would agree, can be inhospitable places for children. Often, a frightening environment for children is unwittingly created. I would welcome, as would many people, measures to reduce asthma triggers in the environment, including measures to control smoking in public places and cat pollution.

I tabled an early-day motion on asthma and schools, which more than 100 Members have signed. It raises the important issue of the application of medication and knowledge of the condition in schools. In that early-day motion I reiterate my point that parents who have children with asthma must feel comfortable to leave their children in the hands of teachers and staff at schools. On average, there will be up to four children with asthma in each classroom. In my constituency, approximately 12,000 people have asthma—the majority are children. Too often, teachers do not have the training or knowledge about asthma, and could be wary when administering medication or not know what to do when a child has an attack. One parent told me that

"the school just didn't want to take the responsibility, they just didn't know what my son needed and he was not allowed to carry his inhaler with him".

I take such comments very seriously, as children with asthma must be allowed immediate access to their medication. Locking it away in a cupboard somewhere in the school does not necessarily provide easy access. Children in reception and preparation classes may not understand their condition fully. It can be very frightening for young children to experience attacks, and it is important that their supervisors know what to do.

I tell all those who do not consider asthma a serious condition to imagine what not being able to breathe properly and struggling to take each breath feels like. In that type of situation, young children will panic, and the condition can worsen. Supervisors must provide a calming influence and not panic. Under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, local education authorities, or school governors in the case of independent schools, are responsible for ensuring that schools have a health and safety policy.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I have been an asthma sufferer since birth—I carry an inhaler about—and I have a daughter who has also had asthma since birth. Does he agree that not only do we need to educate teachers and parents but we must do extensive research into why children suffer from asthma from birth?

Mr. Wray: The Government have been doing a great deal—they spent in the region of £130 million on Smoking Kills, a lung disease programme, in 1998. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his acknowledgement of that issue.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): I have been asthmatic all my life. When I was young, I participated in several schemes for new treatments such as broncho-dilators. At that time, in the 1960s, sensitivity tests were available that easily identified the substances to which people were allergic, which are among the causes of asthma. My understanding is that those tests are no longer available because they were subsidised by drug companies, and when generic drugs were introduced the companies no longer subsidised the tests. Now people must do a much more difficult blood test to identify allergic substances. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be useful if such tests were once again available under the national health service, particularly for young people, to identify easily the substances to which people are allergic so that they can take the obvious preventive action?

Mr. Wray: One of the recommendations for which the National Asthma Campaign has been fighting is testing. It wants testing to be carried out because it reckons that it will save money for the health service—that £2.5 billion could be put to a better use.

Another important consideration for the Department for Education and Skills is provided by the Department of Health's 1996 guidelines on supporting pupils with medical needs in schools. The National Asthma Campaign has discovered that almost half of local education authority schools are without an active asthma policy. My early-day motion has called for all local education authorities to have asthma policies. Although we cannot turn teachers into asthma specialists, such policies would at least ensure that they can spot symptoms and provide medication quickly.

The National Asthma Campaign's school asthma pack has been tried and tested and, what is more, it takes only 10 hours to implement. I would welcome legislation making mandatory the 1996 Department for Education and Employment guidance on support for pupils with medical needs. In March 2002, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pledged to contact all schools and local education authorities to remind them of the guidance issued in 1996. However, to the best of my knowledge, that is yet to take place.

The report "Sleepless Nights, Anxious Days" does not ask for a massive increase in finance, but offers a pragmatic approach and easy solutions. Asthma is seen as an invisible disease and it is not taken as seriously as some other conditions. One mother told me that, if her child were in a wheelchair, people would be more supportive.

I must raise an important point about diagnosis. A woman will often take a child who is wheezing and gasping for breath to the GP and the GP will simply say something like, "Oh, he has got asthma", give them an inhaler and pack them off without much explanation. Such practice must stop. GPs must divulge more information about the condition to the parents and to the children to ensure that they know what exactly is involved. I have spoken to a number of my constituents and I am now convinced that, to enable the 1.5 million children with asthma to lead a normal life, their carers and health professionals need to have more ready knowledge and access to information.

Parents of children with asthma do not ask for any more from public services than any other family with a sick child. Surely, it is reasonable to ask for a minimum

[Mr. Wray]

standard of care, so that those parents can at least be confident of receiving the support that their child needs—whether in general practice, hospital or at school. As agreed minimum standards of health care for people with asthma in the United Kingdom do not exist, the reality for the 1.5 million children with asthma is that the condition is not a priority for the national health service. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister could tell me why the Government are unwilling to establish a national minimum standard or make funding available to improve the health care of people with asthma.

Perhaps my hon. Friend could respond to the calls for the introduction of a simple lung function or allergy test for asthma that could be carried out from an early age. That would allow for the right prescribed medication and put a halt to anxious parents continually bringing their children to GPs and thus creating more pressure on the health service.

In conclusion I hope that the national service framework will include asthma; that minimum standards of asthma care will be established in the health service; that resources will be provided to primary care trusts to give priority to asthma; that legislation will be introduced to ensure that all schools implement an asthma policy; and that the Government will carry out more research into asthma in children to find out its causes and to find a way to prevent it.

10.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray) on securing this Adjournment debate. I also thank other Members for their contributions. This is an extremely important subject for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people up and down the country.

I welcome the debate, not least because it gives the Government an opportunity to state clearly our policy on asthma and to point out the wide-ranging work that is going on in research and to try to advise patients of the ways in which they can manage their condition. That work is increasingly successful.

I recognise how distressing and debilitating the condition can be for individuals, their carers and their families. Asthma involves generalised airways obstruction that is reversible either spontaneously or by treatment. Its cause is not known and people can become asthmatic at any time. There are two major variants of asthma. Extrinsic allergic asthma can arise from hypersensitivity to allergens. Those can be everyday particles including grass pollen, house dust mite dung and pet fur. That condition often results in wheezing. It affects many people, especially those of a young age. The other type of asthma is known as intrinsic or non-allergic asthma. It often occurs in people in their 20s and 30s.

Asthma is the commonest chronic disease in the United Kingdom and affects people across a range of age groups. There are no comprehensive data on the number of people with asthma, but it is estimated that it affects up to 3.4 million people in the UK, including 1.5 million children between the ages of two and 15. It is estimated that 4 per cent. of adults and approximately 5 per cent. of children suffer sufficiently severely to require medical intervention.

About one in seven children have asthma diagnosed at some time and about one in 20 have asthma that requires regular medical supervision. It is clear from those figures that schools need to be aware of asthma—what triggers an attack, how to prevent it and how it can be treated. My hon. Friend made the important point that if young children are not well prepared they can panic, which exacerbates the attack. It is vital to ensure that schools have the tools, the knowledge and the power to help children in those circumstances. That is why the Department for Education and Skills and the Department of Health jointly issued "A Good Practice Guide", which is about supporting pupils with medical needs.

Mr. Wray: I asked my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the 1974 Act. She said that she wrote to all local authorities to encourage them to be prepared. Surely that Act legally binds them to be responsible for ensuring that the children in their schools get the medical treatment that they need.

Ms Blears: Under health and safety legislation, schools are responsible for providing a safe environment for staff, pupils and anyone who uses the school environment, but they are not legally responsible for administering treatment. It is not possible under that legislation to put a legal duty on members of staff to provide medical treatment. Rather than putting staff in the position of administering medical treatment—we must remember that they are members of the education staff—we have tried to give them enough confidence, skills, equipment and knowledge to help them to help the children.

The matter is sensitive and it is important to get the balance of duties right. If we attempt to impose medical duties on non-medical staff who do not have the medical qualifications to carry out treatment, we could find ourselves in legal difficulties. I understand that my hon. Friend wants the guidance to be as strong as possible, but we need to take the staff with us on that. We do not want them to think that we are imposing a duty that they cannot fulfil. They need to be active partners in helping children to care for themselves and in ensuring that the facilities are available to them.

We produced the good practice guide to encourage local education authorities and schools to draw up medical support policies, not just for asthma but for other conditions from which children might suffer. The guide is therefore not asthma-specific. Hon. Members will know about the rare and severe times when children have an allergic reaction to a product which requires the immediate administration of adrenalin products. We want to have a wide-ranging support mechanism to help school staff to help children.

The guide includes a specific section on asthma. It states:

"Children with Asthma must have instant access to their reliever inhalers when they need them."

My hon. Friend made that important point. The guide gives clear advice on the administration of inhalers. It states that pupils who are able to use their inhalers themselves should usually be allowed to carry them on their person. If the child is too young or immature to take personal responsibility for their inhaler, staff should ensure that it is stored in a safe but readily accessible place and is clearly marked with the pupil's name so that they know where they can get it as soon as the first signs of an attack come on.

The guide says:

"Inhalers should also be available during physical education and sports activities or school trips."

It also recommends, as good practice, that children should be encouraged to take responsibility for using their inhaler from the earliest possible age because the safest way to manage their condition is if they are in control.

The guide stresses the importance of children with asthma being able to participate fully in all aspects of school life, including sport. Too often in the past children with asthma were discouraged from getting involved in physical activity, but it is important that they do as much as they can within the constraints of their condition. Many children can benefit from physical activity, but managing their condition carefully is important. Schools need to be aware that pupils may need to take their inhaler before joining in sporting activities, and they must be careful not to force children with asthma to take part in sport if they feel unwell. Again, we must strike the right balance between encouraging children to have as normal and active a life as they can and being conscious of the restrictions that their condition may impose.

As well as advising staff what to do if a pupil suffers an asthma attack, the guide promotes the drawing up of individual health care plans for pupils with medical needs, which should include details of the pupil's condition, medication and named members of staff who are able to support them should anything go amiss. The guide recommends that there should be clear procedures, including the reporting of information about any medical conditions that children have.

I understand that the National Asthma Campaign, which has been tremendously active in this area, produced a resource pack entitled "Danger Zone", which highlighted all these issues. That has been disseminated to all local schools in our healthy schools network, and programme co-ordinators are making good use of those materials. Healthy schools are working in close conjunction with school nurses to ensure that children and their families get the right support.

Although asthma has become more common in recent years, treatments have improved and the number of deaths has fallen. Since 1988, in England and Wales the number of deaths has fallen by about 25 per cent., but even so, in 2000, 1,272 people died from the condition, so we can see that it is very serious. Most deaths occur in middle-aged people, and there were only 14 deaths among young people aged 19 and under. Clearly, however, each of those deaths is a tragedy for the family, so asthma is extremely important to the Government.

Management of asthma mainly takes place in primary care settings. Under the chronic disease management programme, GPs are paid and encouraged, in their contracts, to provide organised programmes of care and, at primary care level, proper clinics for patients with asthma. A recently introduced programme will have a significant impact. Hon. Members may already know of the expert patients programme, which is being developed for people with a range of long-term and chronic conditions, including asthma. This is an extensive programme whereby patients themselves are trained in managing their condition and given detailed clinical information about it. After all, it is the patients, who live day to day with chronic conditions, who are the real experts on their care. Often they know far more than consultants and doctors will ever know.

Mr. Salmond: As the Minister knows, when people suffer from allergenic asthma, their allergies can change very quickly indeed. Is there a medical reason why sensitivity tests are no longer available on the NHS, or is it merely a matter of cost? I find it distressing that my young constituents do not have access to a simple test that I had access to in the 1960s, which was invaluable in stopping asthmatic attacks by allowing me to avoid the substances to which I was allergic. Why are not those simple tests available now, whereas they were available 30 years ago?

Ms Blears: I entirely understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and I was going to come to that. I was not aware that the tests were available in the 1960s, and I certainly do not know why they are no longer available—whether the reason is cost or a technicality. I would have hoped that we could make clinical advances rather than moving in the opposite direction. I do not know whether these were good, clinically effective tests, so I shall explore the clinical basis for withdrawing them. I am happy to look further into the matter, not only for the hon. Gentleman but for the National Asthma Campaign, and I shall also respond to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Baillieston about the history of this matter.

As I was saying, the expert patients programme will help us to make big strides towards progress. I am delighted that the programme has 26 pilots on a range of conditions up and down the country. The Medway primary care trust has a pilot specifically on asthma. The area has a disproportionately high accident and emergency admission rate for asthma in childhood; far too many children have attacks and are admitted to A and E. Many of those admissions could be avoided through improved self-management by expert patients. The fact that Medway has a pilot on something that particularly affects the community is extremely encouraging. Evaluating the evidence from the pilot to see if the expert patient programme can reduce the crisis in asthma will be extremely interesting and valuable for the NHS.

John Robertson: What kind of research is going on in respect of children who have asthma before they are even born, and what kind of money are we putting into that?

Ms Blears: I am happy to say that extensive research is going on. The Medical Research Council is the main body carrying out research on the Government's behalf, but we also work closely with the National Asthma Campaign to look at why asthma is caused in the first place and to investigate links between air pollution, traffic pollution, the environment and asthma. The National Asthma Campaign is funded to the tune of £5 million a year to carry out research on the Government's behalf; it is innovative of the Government to use experts to conduct research in the field via that voluntary organisation. That is a priority for the Government, even though we have not had any breakthroughs on isolating the causes of asthma. Much of our attention has centred on alleviating people's symptoms, but research into causes is equally important and we want to try and achieve a clinical breakthrough.

[Ms Blears]

Members have asked whether or not asthma would be subject to a national service framework.

Mr. Wray: Over the years, have Health Secretaries or Education Secretaries ever been in contact with Transport Secretaries? I read an important article in *The Independent* which said that most asthma cases are caused by exhaust fumes.

Ms Blears: That is a subject of ongoing dialogue. In 1995, a committee reported on the medical effects of air pollutants. There was little evidence that air pollution causes asthma, although it was accepted that exposure to air pollutants could worsen the symptoms of asthma. Again, the issue is about causes rather than the exacerbation of the disease, but we do not have strong evidence. It has been conjectured that modern fuels are more polluting than those used in the past, but there is no hard evidence of a direct causal link. One would expect there to be more asthma in urban communities where there is more traffic than in rural communities but, interestingly, there is no difference between the two; the link is clearly not as established as one might think from anecdotal evidence.

The national service framework for children will use asthma as an exemplar; it will not investigate specific diseases, but it has chosen to concentrate on asthma as an illustrative example. I reassure Members that right across the board in research—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at twenty-one minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 9 May 2002

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON DEVELOPMENT AGENCY BILL (*BY ORDER*)

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Thursday 16 May.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Budget

1. **Mr. Kevan Jones** (North Durham): What estimate he has made of the number of families in the north-east of England on middle and low incomes who will be affected by measures in his Budget aimed to support them. [53543]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Some 300,000 families with children in the north-east and 800,000 families with children in the north-west—around 90 per cent. of families—will be eligible for the child tax credit from April 2003 which, together with child benefit for those earning £50,000 or less, will deliver a minimum of £26.50 and up to £54.25 a week in support of the first child. That compares with a minimum of £11 and a maximum of £27.70 a week in April 1997.

From next April also, the national insurance rise will fund an expansion of the national health service to the benefit of all. After all the changes, a family on median earnings with two children will be £3.90 a week better off.

Mr. Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that the child benefit reforms will help to eradicate child poverty, and that the announcements of increased health spending will mean that it will amount to 9 per cent. of national income? Is not that good news for hard-working families in the north-east and for families everywhere who rely on a health service that is free at the point of delivery?

Mr. Brown: The question is, "What will benefit families in all regions of the country?" There is no doubt that the combination of the changes in child benefit through the new child tax credit and the increased resources available to the NHS means that the quality of life of all families is better. I am pleased that more than 90 per cent. of families will benefit from the child tax credit and that we will have been able to inject, by 2007–08, an additional £40 billion into the NHS. We will invest that money: other parties would make cuts.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Is the Chancellor aware that, for the north-west, the north-east and other regions of the country, new figures from the Office for National Statistics show that the poorest families pay a higher percentage of their income in tax than the richest families? The poorest 20 per cent of families pay 41.2 per cent. of their income in tax, compared with the 35.5 per cent. paid by the richest 20 per cent. of families. Does the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge that that is due primarily to the burden of council tax and indirect tax? When will he do something about that? When is he going to reform—indeed, abolish—council tax?

Mr. Brown: This is another proposal from the Liberal Democrats that one suspects would cost some additional sums of money. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to abolish the council tax in its entirety, he will have to replace it with something else. As for lower-income families, those in the bottom 20 per cent. are £2,400 a year better off as a result of all the measures that we have taken. The hon. Gentleman should start to recognise that the working families tax credit means, for the first time in our history, that those families are subject to a negative tax rate. They are better off as a result. The measure helps people to get back into work. In addition, the child tax credit means that we are relieving people from poverty. Those are exactly the measures that I wish the Liberal party would support.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the Chancellor agree that even his best efforts to improve the lot of those on lowest incomes cannot be delivered unless there is uptake of benefits? Has he any plans to increase promotion of uptake of the benefits that he has made available?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I enjoyed my visit to Northern Ireland last week, when his concerns were among the issues that were raised. The working families tax credit is, for 400,000 more people than was the case with family credit, a benefit for families with children that goes with working. Increased numbers of people therefore receive that benefit.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, the advertising and publicity of the benefits are important. When the children's tax credit was introduced, the surrounding publicity meant that the uptake was far higher than when family credit was first introduced. Equally, when we introduce the child credit and the pension credit next year, we will be telling people of their rights so that they, too, can claim the benefit. Opposition parties opposed the minimum wage and now have to accept it. They opposed the working families tax credit and then—at the election, at least—accepted it. They opposed the children's tax credit and then had to accept it. In the same way, over time they will have to accept the pension credit, the child tax credit and the new employment credit.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Given his last three answers, is the Chancellor proud of the fact that the Budget was redistributive?

Mr. Brown: Money went to families and to people in employment. Therefore, it was a progressive Budget. It put money in the hands of families, as it should do, and in the hands of people who work. Thank goodness that we have got away from the situation that existed under the Tories, when child poverty rose and there were 4 million children in poverty in this country. Child poverty trebled under the Conservatives. The right hon. and learned Gentleman in particular should be ashamed of his record as Secretary of State for Employment, when unemployment went up by 1 million.

Mr. Howard: I remind the Chancellor once again that that was when we were in the exchange rate mechanism—a policy which he specifically supported. Why is the right hon. Gentleman so coy about using the word "redistributive"? Could it have something to do with the fact that on two separate occasions in answer to questions from Sir David Frost on 21 April, the Prime Minister specifically denied that the Budget was redistributive? Is not it utterly pathetic that there is such a chasm between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor that they cannot agree even on whether the Budget was redistributive?

Mr. Brown: The one thing that our Budgets have not been is what the Conservative Budgets were—totally regressive. *[Interruption.]* Let me tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman, so that he can say what the Conservative party position is—*[Interruption.]*—that first—*[Interruption.]*

Hon. Members: Order!

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let us hear what the Chancellor is saying. I cannot hear him speak.

Mr. Brown: First, a progressive Budget will transfer money to families. Does the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) agree with our policy of eradicating child poverty? Will he support the child tax credit that is doing more to take people out of poverty now than ever was done under the Conservatives?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Chancellor should not be asking questions, he should be answering them.

Mr. Brown: This is a progressive Budget because it transfers money to families. I hope that the whole House will support the measures that give extra money to children and to families, and where more goes to those who need it most. Equally, the Budget transfers money so that people who are in work and on low incomes get extra income, and I hope that the whole House will support those measures too. This is a progressive Budget and, as the Conservatives have had to admit, it has the support of the people of this country.

National Health Service Funding

2. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk): What discussions he has had with Mr. Wanless since the 2002 Budget on the contents of the final version of the Wanless report. [53544]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): In response to recommendations in Mr. Wanless's report, the Budget announced a five-year settlement for NHS spending—more than £40 billion extra by 2007–08. Because resources must be matched by reform, in line with Mr. Wanless's recommendations, the White Paper "Delivering the NHS Plan", published by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, announced further major reforms. I have not met Mr. Wanless since he completed his report.

Mr. Bellingham: I thank the Chancellor for that extremely courteous reply. However, is he aware that in my constituency, the Queen Elizabeth hospital is facing serious shortages of radiologists, radiographers and nurses? Given that inflation in the NHS is running at 4.5 per cent., that 45 per cent of its budget goes on wages, that many employees who will be worse off as a result of the Budget will want inflation-busting pay increases, and that the NHS, as an employer, will have to pay out much more in national insurance contributions, what guarantee can the right hon. Gentleman give my local hospital that the much-needed resources will go to patient care? Surely it would have been better if Mr. Wanless had been asked to look at all aspects of health funding, as then we could have had a proper, constructive debate on the future.

Mr. Brown: If the hon. Gentleman wants more money to go to the hospital in his area he should support the Budget, which puts an extra £7 billion a year into the national health service next year and £40 billion extra by 2007–08. Perhaps he should be telling the shadow Chancellor that the Conservative party should change its position on the Budget.

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will recall the Wanless report concluding:

"Success or failure will ultimately depend on how effectively the health service uses its resources."

In the light of that conclusion, what mechanisms will my right hon. Friend put in place to ensure that patients get a real return on this record investment in the service?

Mr. Brown: As my hon. Friend knows, side by side with the Budget were the proposed reforms of the national health service that were agreed by the Secretary of State for Health and announced by him the next day. One set of proposals covers statutory audit, statutory inspection, the statutory right of patients to make complaints and for them to be dealt with independently, an annual report that has to be published each year for Parliament by an independent regulator of the health service, as well as local reports and prospectuses that must be published by each health authority. Information, the power to scrutinise and to carry out proper audit of the use of money, is enshrined in the way in which the health service works for

the first time in its history. Equally, we have set national standards but are giving hospitals locally, through rewards for better performance, incentives to do better.

I believe that the combination of those factors as well as dealing with the performance of failing hospitals means that we will secure value for money. I hope that we can restore in this country the consensus on the national health service that existed for 50 years but has unfortunately been broken by the Opposition.

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The Liberal Democrats would have preferred an increase in income tax rather than national insurance. However, we welcome the money that is being put into the NHS and the fact that the Government have at last admitted the obvious—that saving the NHS needed investment, which needed tax rises.

Did the Chancellor honestly have no idea that tax rises were necessary when he fought a general election campaign just a year ago? If he did know, why did he not have the courage to put that to the electorate so that they could choose the tax rise rather than have the Chancellor choose it after the election? Is that not an act of cowardice?

Mr. Brown: Not at all. We set up the Wanless inquiry in 2000; it worked through 2001 and made its interim report in December 2001. When we received its final report, we made a decision on what resources were needed. The more sensible way to go about things is to consider what resources are needed, to make a decision on what we need for the next five years, and then to make a decision on how to raise the money, but I know that that is not how the shadow Chancellor makes policy for the Liberal party.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): Will my right hon. Friend keep in mind the views of business on Wanless? The Select Committee on the Treasury received a submission from the CBI stating that £10 billion was lost in workplace absences in 1999. Does my right hon. Friend agree, therefore, that the huge cash injection will be good for both employers and employees, getting more people back to work and giving us a healthy nation?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the Chairman of the Treasury Committee for putting those views. We know that business loses about £10 billion a year as a result of people being unable to go to work due to ill health. We also know that in every major health care system in the world employers as well as employees make a contribution. The contribution of 1 per cent. from employers and employees is, in our view, the fairest way of going about funding the health service for the long term.

I am pleased that almost all political parties in the House, including the Liberals, support a health service free at the point of need. The unfortunate thing is that the only party which no longer supports a health service free at the point of need is the Conservative party.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): The Budget's fiddled assumptions can no longer conceal the £7 billion black hole in the Chancellor's NHS spending figure for five years' time. Will he confirm to the House whether taxes will have to rise, borrowing will have to rise, or both will have to rise, if he is to fill that black hole?

Mr. Brown: Once again, the hon. Gentleman, who is also a member of the Treasury Committee, does not conduct his research properly, despite the fact that he was a political adviser—*[Interruption.]*—probably because of the fact that he used to be a political adviser to the Conservative Government who failed to be re-elected. As was pointed out to him at the Select Committee, the costings for the NHS are given up to 2007–08. It is stated that, prior to the spending plans being set in the 2004 spending review, the fiscal projections assume departmental expenditure limit growth after 2005–06 of 2.5 per cent. in real terms, supplemented by an addition to allow for the five-year health settlement. That should answer the hon. Gentleman's question—as he should have known before he put it.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that when the Liberals open their mouths, we expect them to talk as their belly warms? On this occasion, they have already announced that they want to get rid of council tax at a cost of several billion pounds. They have been very revealing. Will my right hon. Friend comment on their policy? Would he adopt it? They have just announced that it would be a good idea to raise money for the national health service by increasing income tax. There are 11 million pensioners and about half of them probably pay income tax, so the Liberals are calling for a policy to tax pensioners.

Mr. Brown: It is absolutely correct that the national insurance change means that pensioners do not have to pay the tax rise. People who have served the community all their lives and who need the national health service will not have to make the additional contribution that they would have to make if there were an income tax rise. The shadow Chancellor who lives in Truro, as opposed to the shadow Chancellor who lives in Folkestone, must face up to the fact that he spends all his time going around the country talking about local decision making, but he wants to abolish the local taxation available to local councils through council tax. It is time that the Liberals thought out their policy before announcing it.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I am disappointed that the Chancellor has not met Mr. Wanless since the Budget. Was not Mr. Wanless appointed on the basis that his report would be the beginning of a debate on reform of the health service rather than the end of that debate? Is not it clear that Mr. Wanless is saying that unless there is reform in the health service, much of the extra investment will be wasted? Does the Chancellor recall that the Secretary of State for Health stated that public service agreements

"set out the concrete improvements to be delivered in return for the extra investment we are making"?—[*Official Report*, 24 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 458W.]

Those 1999 agreements did not deliver concrete improvements, unless the Chancellor thinks that the extraordinary record of more administrators than hospital beds is an improvement. When will we see improvements in return for the investment?

Mr. Brown: The improvements are taking place and will continue to take place, and the reforms that we have made as a result of the Budget will ensure that the £7 billion extra a year and the £40 billion extra by 2007–08 secures the value for money that is necessary, but sooner or later hon. Members will have to face up to their responsibilities in this matter. If Conservative Members no longer believe in a health service free at the point of need, they must tell us which charges they would introduce, who would have to pay private health insurance and what they would charge to visit GPs and hospitals. They must face up to the fact that the health service has to be paid for in some way and, if that is not done through taxation, it has to be done through charges or private insurance, which is now their policy.

Offshore Tax Havens

3. **Mr. Colin Challen** (Morley and Rothwell): What steps are being taken to prevent the loss of tax revenues through the use of offshore tax havens. [53545]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): We are determined to tackle tax evasion and tax avoidance, including the use of tax havens, on as wide an international basis as possible. As we made clear at the European Council in June 2000, we believe that greater international co-operation—in particular, the exchange of tax information—is the key to tackling cross-border tax evasion and avoidance.

Mr. Challen: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. I also applaud the Government for the measures they are proposing in the Finance Bill to deal with tax evaders abroad. There are principally two kinds of people who use offshore tax havens: terrorists, such as al-Qaeda, who seek to destroy government by violent means; and multinational corporations, such as News Corporation, which seek to undermine government by not paying for it. Is my right hon. Friend satisfied with the international co-operation that he has received on this matter? We need to do a lot more about both those groups.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. Progress is being made in international co-operation against tax evasion. The OECD issued its conclusions in June 2000 and asked all countries to agree to produce information where tax evasion was an issue. Since then, most countries, including all our dependent territories and our overseas territories, have agreed to produce that information. Seven countries remain unco-operative, and they were named in April this year. In addition, we want to ensure not just information on request, but the exchange of information as the basis of future tax policy. That is why we are making progress with the savings directive, among other things, in the European Union. We will continue, as we did in the Budget, to take further measures as necessary to tackle tax evasion.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Will the Chancellor give an assurance that Her Majesty's Government will maintain the fiscal autonomy of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands—if need be, against the European Union? May I remind him that the Isle of Man balances its budget by law and has a rate of unemployment of less than 1 per cent.? Were it not to have fiscal autonomy, it would be a drain on the British taxpayer, rather than the contrary.

Mr. Brown: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman refers to the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands under a question that is about offshore tax havens, because the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands have brought themselves into line with the OECD recommendations. As for the savings directive, however, which requests the automatic exchange of information, I hope that all the dependent territories and all the overseas territories that are affected will agree to play their part in exchanging information on an automatic basis so that we can make progress on the directive. In case they do not, I have taken measures in the Budget announcements last month whereby we will take action if they remain unable to help us.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): How far has international co-operation extended since 11 September on offshore tax havens? Does that co-operation bring nearer the date when it will be possible to operate an international tax on currency speculation?

Mr. Brown: Those are two separate issues. On tax havens, because of the events of 11 September, many countries are very keen to move forward with the exchange of information as the basis on which we can reach agreements about how we deal with tax evasion, as well as money laundering and tracking terrorists' finances. The United Kingdom has agreed that it would be the first country to be subject to international surveillance of the measures that we have taken in that area. I hope that other countries will agree that international surveillance of what they do is very much part of an international system of co-operation to deal with tax evasion. We are taking action on those matters.

On the issue of tax on speculation, my hon. Friend knows well that the proposals put forward by Professor Tobin were in an era when there was not the liberalisation of currency markets that exists now. Most people would find that while it is worth looking again at whether Professor Tobin's proposals could have a beneficial effect, it is very difficult to implement them. The key question on international aid is whether we can raise the money that is necessary with or without a Tobin tax, so that we can deal with the problems of the third world, particularly education and health. The Government's proposals for a new deal in this matter, involving £50 billion extra in overseas aid, are the best way forward. At the end of the day, national Governments must make the decisions about what they are going to do.

National Insurance Contributions

4. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): What discussions he has had with the Department for

Health about how the increase in class 1 national insurance contributions announced on 17 April will affect costs in the medical profession. [53546]

6. **Dr. John Pugh** (Southport): What estimate he has made of the impact of the proposed change in employers' national insurance contributions on services' company profitability for financial year 2003–04. [53548]

13. **Patrick Mercer** (Newark): What discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues about how the increase in class 1 national insurance contributions announced on 17 April will affect workers in the public sector. [53555]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): It is estimated that the changes to employer national insurance contributions announced in the Budget will add around 0.7 per cent. to pay costs on average next year. The cost to the public services will be just over £1 billion, which compares with a planned rise in spending on public services of nearly £20 billion. The changes will, of course, help to fund improvements in public services and a real-terms increase in spending on health over the next five years of over 40 per cent.

Tim Loughton: Will the Chief Secretary confirm that, according to the House of Commons Library, within those figures £217 million of the increase in national insurance contributions relates to the national health service? On the public sector generally, does he expect that higher employers' national insurance bills in the public sector will be financed by Departments or passed on to public sector workers in the form of lower pay settlements? Can he explain to me specifically how hospices up and down the country will cope with the big increases in national insurance contributions, given that they are run by the voluntary sector and largely on voluntary contributions? They will not, therefore, be the beneficiaries of his supposed NHS largesse.

Mr. Smith: If the Conservative party is suggesting that the public sector should somehow be exempt from national insurance contributions, that is an extraordinary proposition. When the Conservatives increased employees' contributions 10 times and employers' contributions five times, I do not remember them ever addressing the question of the impact on the public sector. The money will be found from within the additional resources that we are making available—departmental expenditure limits are increasing by £19.5 billion.

The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about hospices, which make an invaluable contribution across the country and in many of our constituencies. As part of the spending review, there will be a cross-cutting review of the role of the voluntary sector in the delivery, and in assisting the delivery, of public services. I shall ensure that that examines the position of hospices.

Dr. Pugh: The service sector of industry employs a huge number of people. As the service sector is not made more profitable by an increase in employers' national insurance contributions, is it fair to say that this sector is one of the major net losers? If not, which business sectors are the major financial losers, or is this the first Budget in history when absolutely everyone is a winner?

Mr. Smith: As we have made clear on many occasions since the Budget, we believe that the national insurance increase is a fair way to fund the much-needed improvements in the national health service, which even the Conservatives claim they recognise are necessary. On the impact on the service sector, I remind the hon. Gentleman that for the average small business, the rise in national insurance contributions is substantially offset by cuts in corporation tax.

Patrick Mercer: I wonder how the Chief Secretary would reply to public sector workers in my constituency to whom I have spoken recently. First, I spoke to two policemen in Newark who doubt that, with the increase in national insurance contributions, they will be able to continue serving in the police force. Secondly, I spoke to nurses in Tuxford—not surgeons or doctors but the lowest-paid of the national health service workers—one of whom said to me that the Chancellor's catchphrase should not have been "Enterprise and fairness" but "Physician heal thyself".

Mr. Smith: The nurses, doctors, police officers, firefighters and other public service workers to whom I have spoken recognise the crucial importance of the extra investment in the national health service. They recognise that that has to be paid for, and national insurance is a fair way of doing that.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): I represent one of the largest groups of NHS workers outside London. They all say, "Yes, we will pay more national insurance but, for goodness sake, get on and tackle the health inequalities that mean that people in the north-east of England live seven to 10 years less than people in the south-east of England." The direct and indirect costs of those health inequalities far outweigh the direct costs of 1 per cent. on national insurance. Is my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary getting that message too?

Mr. Smith: I certainly am. It is already a well-established commitment of the Government that health inequalities are a key priority. Indeed, analysing those factors featured large in the Wanless report. It is therefore crucial that resources go into prevention, community health and primary care, as they will do as a consequence of the extra £40 billion that we are making available over the next five years. In addition, we have the benefits of the working families tax credit, the child tax credit, the new deal and our other policies for sustaining high employment. As we all know, unemployment and poverty have long been a big factor in the health inequalities to which my hon. Friend refers. The Labour party is committed to tackling them while the Conservative party, which is unable to come here with any credible policies on health, would allow them to get worse, just as they allowed inequalities to worsen when they were in government.

Roger Casale (Wimbledon): My right hon. Friend will be aware that my constituency of Wimbledon has one of

the highest proportions of professional and managerial people in the work force. There is a high degree of support for the Budget measures, because people understand and support the fact that money will be spent on rebuilding the NHS. Is it not the case that, even with the increase in national insurance contributions, Britain is still in a much more competitive position than some of our major competitors such as France and Germany? Is it not also the case that we are taking a number of measures to boost productivity and competitiveness? Finally, is it not the case that when we see the changes that the investment in the NHS will bring, we will find even more support from people in the work force for these measures than we find today so soon after the Budget?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. The CBI pointed out that ill-health costs business in this country £10 billion a year. Even after this increase in national insurance contributions, business in this country will contribute on average £10 a week towards health care, compared with £60 a week in France and £30 a week in Germany. The contributions in this country are fair and, as my hon. Friend said, they will be welcomed by people in the business community. Anthony Stone of the British Chambers of Commerce said about the Budget:

"Any of us in business know that we get what we pay for. If we want a world class health service in the UK we need to pay more."

I believe that that message is well understood in business.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Does the Chief Secretary recall the words of Labour's 1997 election manifesto, which said:

"How and what governments tax sends clear signals about the economic activities they believe should be encouraged or discouraged"?

What economic activity do the Government think will be encouraged or discouraged by their tax on jobs?

Mr. Smith: In our manifesto for the election in 2001, we made our position very clear. The manifesto said:

"Tax policy will be governed by the health of the public finances, the requirement for public investment, and the needs of families, business and the environment."

We also pledged that we would put schools and hospitals first and that we would put investment in our public services ahead of the cuts in taxation for which the right hon. and learned Gentleman and his colleagues were arguing. They cannot have any credibility in the House when they say that the national health service needs more resources but oppose our measures to raise them. We have introduced reforms to match those resources, but they say that they have no alternative. The right hon. and learned Gentleman and his colleagues are not advancing a politically or intellectually credible proposition.

Exchange Rate

5. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): What estimate his Department has made of the level of UK exports if the pound-euro exchange rate fell 10 per cent.; and if he will make a statement. [53547]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): The specific effects of exchange rate changes depend on the particular causes of each change. The Government appreciate the difficulties that the slowdown in the world economy and weakness of the euro have posed. However, as set out in the Budget forecast, stronger external demand and the anticipated pick-up in world trade should provide a significant boost to United Kingdom export growth, which is projected to increase markedly from the second half of this year and to rise by between 7.75 and 8.25 per cent. next year.

Dr. Cable: Does the Minister acknowledge that the Treasury's model shows that a 10 per cent. change in the exchange rate is the equivalent of 50,000 or 60,000 jobs in tourism alone? Does she agree with the assessment of the president of the German Bundesbank, who was in London last week, that the pound is over-valued and will have to be devalued before Britain can join the European monetary union? Do the Government's five tests allow for an appropriate exchange rate, and if so, how?

Ruth Kelly: I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman's question. He knows full well that the Government are committed to Britain's national economic interest and will take a decision on the euro only if it is in our national economic interest to do so. We have clearly set out our approach to the five economic tests, and it will be rigorous and thorough. We are certainly not about to embark on a running commentary on the progress that is being made.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend recognise that in a constituency such as Burnley, where 36 per cent. of jobs are in manufacturing industry, there are concerns about the value of the pound against the euro? Manufacturing industry has to fix the price of its goods—and sell them—in euros and believes that it is important to join the euro as soon as possible. That would reduce instability and provide security and jobs, although obviously we need to join at the right rate and meet the economic tests.

Ruth Kelly: I am glad that my hon. Friend recognises the importance of the five economic tests and that any decision on the euro will be taken in the best interests of Britain's national economy. Of course we are concerned about businesses and, in particular, manufacturing in my hon. Friend's constituency, which is similar to my own in many respects. That is why we are the party that is taking action to support manufacturing; why we are cutting corporation tax; and why we have made permanent 40 per cent. first year capital allowances for plant and machinery for small and medium-sized enterprises. It is also why we have reformed capital gains tax to ensure that this country is the best in the world for entrepreneurship and enterprise. The Budget went further by implementing research and development investment tax credits, and it will provide a platform for growth on which businesses can thrive.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): May I point out to the hon. Lady that the five economic tests do not include an examination of the exchange rate, which is what the question is about? What is the reaction of her Treasury colleagues and her former colleagues in the Bank of England to the fact that economists at home and

abroad almost unanimously argue that before Britain can practically think of joining the single European currency, the pound sterling will have to be devalued by between 20 and 30 per cent?

Ruth Kelly: I have already explained that the assessment of the five economic tests will be thorough and rigorous and will include all relevant economic considerations, including the durability and sustainability of economic convergence. The best way to achieve a stable and competitive exchange rate, to which we are, of course, committed, is to have a framework for monetary policy that removes the political control of setting interest rates and gives it to the Monetary Policy Committee at the Bank of England. It also needs a fiscal framework that keeps debt under control, something that the Conservatives manifestly failed to do during their years in power.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): Does my hon. Friend accept that not just the pound but the dollar is overvalued? I am sure that she is aware of speculation in the past week that both the pound and dollar are not only over-valued but likely to depreciate significantly in the coming months and perhaps for the next year or two. Does she agree that that would put enormous pressure on an already deflated eurozone economy, probably force nations in the eurozone to break through the boundaries of the growth and stability pact, and force a fundamental rethink of economic policy in the eurozone?

Ruth Kelly: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing out something that we recognise: some difficulties experienced by manufacturers are caused by the weakness of the euro. In fact, sterling has depreciated against the dollar since 1997. We are committed to a stable economic framework in this country and I have set out the policies that we have put in place to ensure that we have one. As a result, the number of people in employment has increased by 1.5 million since 1997, we have the lowest inflation rate since the 1960s, and the lowest interest rates since 1964. I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that we have a platform for sustained economic growth.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): In addition to the president of the Bundesbank, two members of the Monetary Policy Committee, Christopher Allsopp and Sushil Wadhwani, have recently said that the pound is overvalued and that devaluation is necessary. They say that that could work and need not be as disruptive as the Treasury fears. If the Government are unprepared or unwilling to act, perhaps they will consider doing with the exchange rate what they did with interest rates by giving the policy to the Bank of England so that we can get the exchange rate that we need.

Ruth Kelly: What we do not want to do is return to the days of artificially manipulated exchange rate depreciations. We saw what happened when that policy was attempted in the past, and saw the results of policies that led to boom and bust in the 1980s. We are determined to create a platform of macro-economic stability in this country and have introduced policies to make that programme work. We are committed to maintaining a framework that does just that.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): Does my hon. Friend accept that a fall in the value of the pound against the euro would give an enormous boost to manufacturers in the north-east, which is striving to achieve the Government's target of full employment in every region? Does she agree that a fall in the value of the pound is essential if we are ever to join the single currency?

Ruth Kelly: I think that my right hon. Friend will agree that the best thing that we can do for manufacturers is to have economic stability in this country. Once we have a platform of economic stability we can build on it by promoting competition, productivity and enterprise. That is why the Budget set out measures to support manufacturing and introduced a generous volume-based research and development tax credit for large companies, building on work that has already been done to support small companies. That is also why the Budget included exemptions for capital gains on substantial shareholdings in trading companies; why we have increased funding for regional development agencies so that they can act as drivers for growth and productivity throughout the regions; and why we are determined to tackle gaps in the market for finance by setting up regional venture capital funds across the country. Those are the conditions that manufacturers need to thrive and grow but, most important of all, we must avoid a return to the days of boom and bust that manufacturers had to endure for a long time under the Conservatives.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): In view of what the Minister has just said about manufacturing, why has the rate of productivity been falling ever since Labour took office?

Ruth Kelly: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would accept that in a period of rising employment—I have already pointed out to the House that the employment figure has risen by 1.5 million since 1997—there may be a cyclical variation in productivity growth. In the longer term, measures that we have put in place will increase productivity growth. I point out to him that the only year in which productivity fell in this country was when his party was in power.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): Does the Minister accept that an artificial devaluation of the pound would make imports more expensive and thus be inflationary? Does she accept that the real problem is the fact that the euro has collapsed in value, and that that is hardly a sign of success? Does she agree that if we wish to avoid returning to boom and bust, we cannot have any artificially manipulated devaluation?

Ruth Kelly: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Economic stability must underpin all the action that we take on the economy. If we get the platform of stability right, we can take the measures essential to help enterprise and build a climate of competition and productivity growth in Britain. That is what we are doing.

Manufacturing

7. **Mrs. Annette L. Brooke** (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): What assessment he has made of trends in manufacturing output in the south-west since January 2001. [53549]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Paul Boateng): The Government's latest assessment of developments in the manufacturing sector, based on all relevant factors, was published on 17 April in Budget 2002. Manufacturing in the south-west, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, was clearly influenced by the synchronised global slowdown in the aftermath of 11 September. Manufacturing output fell in March, but is expected to accelerate during the second half of 2002 and well into 2003 as stronger global demand feeds through.

Mrs. Brooke: In light of the CBI's great pessimism for the south-west, how significantly will the Budget measures this year contribute to at least reversing the current trend in manufacturing, jobs and optimism? How will the measures redress the balance between the housing boom and the failing manufacturing sector?

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Lady will appreciate that the cuts in corporation tax, the R and D tax credit, the simplified package of VAT for businesses, and the action that we have taken across the piece to create, through the regional development agencies, a climate of enterprise in the south-west and elsewhere will all contribute to the improvement in manufacturing in the south-west. She is wrong to suggest that the CBI is pessimistic about the south-west. Only today, Mr. Doug Godden of the CBI stated:

"There are signs that the worst is over. Manufacturing is expecting to increase production in the months ahead."

I do not call that pessimism.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): The Government take great credit for the fact that unemployment has fallen month by month over the past 12 months, but in my constituency it has risen month by month in the past 12 months. More than 5,000 manufacturing jobs have gone in Opto Electronics. How does putting a tax on national insurance help in an area that suffers from high unemployment and wants more jobs, when a tax on income may well have helped my area?

Mr. Boateng: Both business and the country as a whole are agreed that it is important that we invest in our public services. There is a direct feed-across between public health and business. Business gains when health is delivered in ways that reduce absenteeism, business gains when the health of the nation is improved, and business is prepared to make its contribution to what we are seeking to achieve in the national health service—a major contribution from that service to the health and well-being of the entire nation.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is only three years since the Chancellor of the Exchequer came to my constituency with a great fanfare of new Labour trumpets to open the expanded Dyson bagless vacuum cleaner factory in Malmesbury, a town of 4,000 people. Mr. Dyson announced recently that he would lay off 1,000 people, not as a result of what is described by the Minister as a synchronised global slowdown, whatever that may be, but because he cannot continue to manufacture vacuum cleaners in the United Kingdom. What is the Minister's explanation to the people of Malmesbury as to why his right hon. Friend's mate Mr. Dyson has laid off 1,000 people in my constituency?

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Gentleman must get real and appreciate what is happening across the globe in manufacturing and the global economy. That is what is synchronised—it is happening in all continents post-11 September. He also needs to understand, in relation to his specific example, that Dyson's is upping its R and D investment in our economy. That is what we are seeking to achieve: high value and high skills. That is good for the economy and good for Britain, and it will be good for the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Local Authorities (Emergency Planning)

9. **Syd Rapson** (Portsmouth, North): How the Budget will affect the funds available to local authorities for emergency planning. [53551]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Paul Boateng): The Budget has had no effect on the amount specifically made available for emergency planning.

Syd Rapson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer and welcome the previous increases on the low base that we inherited from the last Government. However, in evidence to the Select Committee on Defence, local authority representatives claimed that there was a 15 per cent. cut this year for English local authorities, and Portsmouth is receiving a reduction of 5 per cent., from £78,000 to £74,000. Will my right hon. Friend reconsider the means of funding for dealing with civil emergencies—perhaps the issue could be dealt with through the standard spending assessment—to enable the public to have more confidence following 11 September?

Mr. Boateng: I know from my time as a Minister of State, Home Office that my hon. Friend takes a great and proper interest in civil defence and emergency planning in his constituency. That is very much to be welcomed. He will be glad to know that the total amount given to local authorities in civil defence grants increased by 36 per cent. in 2001–02, rising from £14 million in 2001 to £19 million in 2001–02. That is a substantial increase. Where there are specific issues in relation to the administration of the civil defence grant, that is a matter for my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Cabinet Office, but I shall certainly draw to their attention the concerns that my hon. Friend expressed.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): A recent survey of county emergency planning officers found that 93 per cent. of the 30 officers questioned felt that emergency planning in local government was severely under-resourced. Given the wake-up call that we received on

11 September, surely the Government can do more to find resources for the people who are so crucial in planning for our safety.

Mr. Boateng: I share the hon. Gentleman's belief that we need to ensure that those who plan for our safety and who play such an important role in securing the welfare and safety of us all have proper recognition. That is why my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Cabinet Office and my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary have given the matter the attention that it deserves, and why counter-terrorism is now specifically treated as a mainstream priority and is being handled through the spending review 2002. The points that the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North (Syd Rapson) have properly made will no doubt be taken into account in that review.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): May I also express my concern about the size of the emergency planning budget, especially in view of its failure to keep pace with increases in other spending? In Staffordshire, the fire service co-ordinates the emergency service for all the district councils, Staffordshire county council and Stoke-on-Trent city council, and we now have only seven full-time emergency planning officers. This year, the amount available was settled only in April, meaning that people are now employed on temporary contracts. May I urge my right hon. Friend to tell the Cabinet Office that we need certainty for local authority spending during the next five years so that we can rely on our fire service and its officers to provide the emergency service that we all know is needed after 11 September?

Mr. Boateng: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, not least for the interest that she takes in this subject. She will know that no decisions on the other elements of local government funding have yet been made. They will be announced in the spending review in the summer. I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the additional
£43 million that has been found for 2002–03 from the capital modernisation fund for the fire service, part of which will meet the very concerns that she has expressed.

Tourism (South-West)

10. **Mr. Paul Tyler** (North Cornwall): What analysis his Department has undertaken on the impact of *(a)* the slowdown in the world economy and *(b)* the exchange rate with the euro on the tourist industry in the south-west of England. [53552]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): The Government fully appreciate the difficulties that last year's world economic slowdown, the tragic events of 11 September and the persistent weakness of the euro have posed for businesses dependent on tourism in the south-west and in the rest of the UK. However, the Budget forecast is for a considerable strengthening of the world economy during 2002 and into 2003 and, alongside a number of initiatives that the Government have introduced to promote British tourism, that should help the industry to recover.

Mr. Tyler: May I ask the Minister to concentrate on the impact of the exchange rate on the tourism industry, especially in the south-west? Does she recognise that irrespective of whether this country enters the euro, the euro has now entered this country, and is having a dramatic impact, not least on the holiday industry? Has she examined the study published in October 2001 by Caledonian Economics for the British Tourist Authority, and does she accept its conclusion that if we had a realistic exchange rate, the holiday industry could generate 51,000 more jobs and increase its earnings by £1.76 billion?

Ruth Kelly: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that 80 per cent. of visitors to tourist attractions in the United Kingdom are domestic tourists, so the most important thing that we as a Government can do is to create the conditions in which domestic tourism will thrive. Of course we recognise the impact of the slowdown in the world economy, the weakness of the euro and the tragic events of 11 September. In fact, since 1997 the value of the pound has depreciated against the dollar, and American tourists, who are so vital to certain aspects of the tourist industry, should have been encouraged by the exchange rate effects that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): Although the Minister's comments on euro policy were typically enlightening, does she agree that they were not as enlightening as those made earlier this week by a senior Minister at the Department of Trade and Industry, who is sitting not far away from her, and who said that within two years we would have joined the eurozone?

Ruth Kelly: I have already explained to the House the Government's policy on the euro. That policy will be determined by Britain's national economic interests. We must carry out a rigorous and thorough assessment of the five economic tests. Then, if those tests are satisfied, we will have the triple lock of Cabinet, Parliament and the country through a referendum. That is the Government's policy, which remains unchanged.

Public Service Investment (Scotland)

11. **Mr. Mark Lazarowicz** (Edinburgh, North and Leith): If he will make a statement on how his plans for investment in public services will affect Scotland. [53553]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): The Government announced in the Budget substantial increases in provision for Scotland as a consequence of the increases in health spending in England. The increases in 2003–04 through to 2007–08 are £224 million, £858 million, £1.6 billion, £2.3 billion and £3.2 billion.

Mr. Lazarowicz: The £8 billion increase in public expenditure that that amounts to is welcomed by my constituents and will, I am sure, be welcomed throughout Scotland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Scotland can benefit from those increases only if the UK economy as a whole is soundly managed? Can he tell me what he considers would be the effects on future public expenditure trends in Scotland if it were to go along the

road of fiscal autonomy, which is the latest wheeze being dreamed up by certain people among the nationalists and others?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right about the benefits to Scotland of good management of the United Kingdom economy as a whole. The stability that we have put in place, the 1.5 million extra jobs and the expansion in public investment that we can fund demonstrate how Scotland benefits both from being part of the United Kingdom and from devolution and the ability to control matters in the areas that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Executive. My hon. Friend is right that those who argue for independence would bring about an economic calamity for the people of Scotland.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that health spending in Scotland over the past five years has risen by 28 per cent. in real terms, but that in precisely the same period the average waiting time in Scotland for an out-patient appointment has risen by 25 per cent., why cannot the right hon. Gentleman accept that simply spending more public money without fundamental reform of service delivery will not achieve the improvements that we all want?

Mr. Smith: Not for the first time, the hon. Gentleman is wrong. Waiting times in Scotland are one month less than in England. He reveals that the Conservatives will look for any excuse to stand at the Dispatch Box and run down the national health service, deny the funding that we are providing and remind their constituents that their agenda is the privatisation of the NHS. People will ask, "How much will we have to pay for private insurance, operations or a visit to the doctor under the Tories?" They will never trust the Tories with the NHS again.

Regional Government White Paper

12.30 pm

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State (Mr. John Prescott): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the English regions.

Today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and I are presenting our White Paper, "Your Region, Your Choice" for more democracy and less bureaucracy. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

Throughout the United Kingdom and Europe, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of regions as a focus for economic growth and social identity. The Government have challenged the notion that the only decisions worth making are those taken in Whitehall and Westminster.

We recognise that people in Birmingham or Bradford, Liverpool or Lowestoft, Falmouth or Faversham, Newcastle or Norwich deserve to have their voices heard, too. We believe that Britain as a whole cannot achieve its full potential unless all our regions share in success and, indeed, drive it.

When we offered devolution, we placed our trust in the people of Scotland and Wales. Today, I am announcing measures to bring decision making closer to the people of England by strengthening regional powers and giving them the choice of regional government.

We trust the people to make that choice and, if they wish, to choose to elect a regional assembly and give a new voice to their region. The White Paper gives effect to our manifesto commitment to provide for directly elected regional assemblies for those regions that want them.

My interest in regional policy goes back more than 30 years. In the early 1980s, Michael Foot asked me to draw up a new policy framework to secure agreement for devolution for Scotland, Wales and the English regions. Some hon. Members will remember that that caused some local difficulty as well as problems in the House. The result was the alternative regional strategy, published in 1982, which set out a framework for devolving power to Scotland and Wales, and decentralising power to the English regions.

In 1994, I appointed Bruce Millan, the former Secretary of State for Scotland and European Commissioner to chair the Labour party's regional policy commission. His report, "Renewing the Regions" said that,

"without strong regional policy rooted in the regions themselves, and without firm commitment to decentralisation we are unable to develop our national economy to its full potential".

Many of the ideas in the White Paper find their origins in the earlier reports. I would like to express my appreciation to those who worked on them. Some are Members of the House today.

The Government have always recognised the regions' potential. In 1997, we inherited one of the most centralised systems of government in the western world. We have changed that. In our first term, we devolved power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Opposition opposed that. In England in our first term, we restored to London democratic citywide government, which the Opposition had abolished.

We have reformed local government; strengthened and broadened the Government offices for the regions; and set up nine regional development agencies, which, in their first two years, created or safeguarded more than 80,000 jobs. We also helped establish a network of regional chambers and assemblies, which have improved accountability and given the regions a new voice.

Today's White Paper takes that a step further. It sets out a range of options for people in the English regions. But, whatever they decide, the White Paper will strengthen regional policy across England. In all regions, we are giving extra resources and greater flexibility to the regional development agencies, and regional chambers will have greater responsibilities and a greater role in regional planning. In all regions, we will also give extra responsibilities to the Government offices to strengthen regional decision making and to ensure that government is joined-up in the regions. But for those regions that wish to proceed to directly elected regional assemblies, the White Paper sets out the process. Members are well aware of the different needs and aspirations of our English regions. There is a strong and growing demand in some regions to have a distinct democratic voice and a greater say over their own future. The people of the English regions should rightly have the same choice as we gave to the people of Scotland, Wales and London.

The White Paper is about striking the right balance, trusting the people, responding to the needs of a modern, diverse and more progressive society, and creating the conditions for greater prosperity and reducing disparity in and between our regions. The key, therefore, is flexibility. This will require a pragmatic approach and the consent of the people of the regions. Where there is a referendum in favour of them, we will establish elected regional assemblies, and I believe that where one or two regions lead, others will follow.

The White Paper sets out the powers, functions and financial arrangements for these new elected regional assemblies. They will have real power and funding to improve the quality of life of people in their region, particularly by improving regional economic performance. Indeed, raising growth by just 0.5 per cent. for the worst-performing regions would increase our national wealth by £20 billion in 10 years. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's pre-Budget report made clear, if all our regions raised their productivity to the national average, the average person in the United Kingdom would be £1,000 a year better off.

Regional assemblies will be responsible for developing joined-up regional strategies on issues such as sustainable development, economic development and regeneration, skills and employment, planning, transport, housing, health improvement, and culture. Assemblies will have a range of powers to help them to deliver those strategies. For example, they will allocate funding for economic development, housing, tourism, arts and sport. They will also be responsible for the regional development agencies, appointing the board and approving the regional economic strategy.

Regional assemblies will be funded primarily by central Government grant, and they will have complete freedom to spend that grant as they judge best. We will agree targets with them and provide a single pot for regional government. In addition, they will have the power to raise further funds through a precept on council tax and through borrowing. Naturally, budgets will vary depending on the

[Mr. John Prescott]

population of each region. On current expenditure, the budget for the north-east would be about £350 million a year, and for the north-west about £730 million. On top of that, the assemblies will have a direct influence over large amounts of central Government public expenditure—some £500 million in the north-east and £1.3 billion in the north-west. That is over and above the £3 billion spent by local authorities in the north-east region at present.

Elected assemblies will need to be big enough properly to represent the interests of the different communities in the region, but not so big that they become unmanageable. We therefore propose that assemblies should have 25 to 35 members.

It is important that an assembly of that size should have broad political representation. In Scotland, Wales and London, we have used the additional member system of proportional representation to elect Members of the Parliament and the assemblies. On balance, we have decided to use the same system for English regional assemblies. The boundaries of each region will be the existing ones used by the Government offices for the regions and the regional development agencies.

In addition to elected regional assemblies, we would like to see greater involvement of groups such as the business community, trade unions, voluntary organisations and environmental groups. We want to encourage the regional assemblies to draw on the experience and skills of individuals in the region who may not be able to stand for election themselves. We want to build on the experience of the Scottish Civic Forum, the partnership arrangements in Wales, the London Civic Forum and the arrangements introduced in a number of English regional chambers. Different regions may want to use different models. We are asking for views on that. For example, there could be appointed assembly members who could play an active part in the role of the assemblies, but would not have the right to vote.

Regional assemblies represent a new tier of political accountability. They will work closely with their local authority partners. However, in areas that currently have county and district councils, an assembly would have a third tier of government. We believe that it would be simpler and more efficient if in those cases we moved to a fully unitary system of local government. So where it is decided to hold a referendum for an elected assembly—and only in those regions—there will first be an independent review of local government structures, conducted by the boundary commission for England. That review will examine the two-tier areas of the region, and make proposals for wholly unitary local government. Existing unitary authorities in the region will not be affected.

We believe that when a referendum is held voters should know the proposed structure of local government, and should be clear about who would do what in their area. I emphasise that the review takes place only in regions where a referendum will be held, and that any restructuring of local government will take place only if there is a "yes" vote in the referendum.

The White Paper sets out the process and timetable for establishing elected regional assemblies. Before we decide which region or regions should hold the first referendum, we will consult all the English regions on our proposals. The Secretary of State will decide whether a region should hold a referendum primarily by assessing the level of public interest in the region. In reaching his conclusion, he will seek the views of the regional chamber, local authorities and other key stakeholders.

We intend to introduce legislation to provide for referendums and local government reviews as soon as parliamentary time allows. We intend to allow a referendum to be held before the end of this Parliament. After a region has voted for an elected assembly, we intend to introduce further legislation enabling assemblies to be established. That would make it possible for the first regional assembly to be up and running early in the next Parliament—under a Labour Government, of course.

All English regions will benefit from our strong regional policy, and we will continue to develop the regional structures and agencies that we established in our first term. Furthermore, our White Paper offers the opportunity of a new constitutional settlement for the English regions, a choice that has been denied them for far too long.

The opponents of our proposals must answer this question: if devolution is good enough for the Scottish and the Welsh, why should they deny that choice to the people of England? Our proposals will give the regions of England new choices, new powers, and a new voice. By devolving power, we can elevate our democracy; by empowering our regions, we can engage people more effectively; by harnessing the energy of the regions, we can drive forward the nation's economic growth; by embracing diversity, we can strengthen the United Kingdom; and by liberating the potential of our regions, we will be helping Britain to prosper.

I commend the proposals to the House.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I must say to the Deputy Prime Minister that it is the way he tells them; it really is.

I am grateful to the Deputy Prime Minister for his courtesy in giving me prior sight of the statement. His recognition of the courtesies of the House could well be a lesson to some of his colleagues. However, I also commiserate with the right hon. Gentleman. He said in his statement that he had long been an advocate of regional government, and we acknowledge his consistency in that regard. He has, we know, worked hard to battle for the White Paper. I am only sorry that, on the day of its introduction, he has been somewhat upstaged by the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Sabotage.

Mrs. May: Sabotage indeed.

We are opposed to regional government because we believe that regional assemblies will take power away from local government, lead to the abolition of county councils, and take decision making further away from local communities. The Deputy Prime Minister claims that today's measures will bring decision making closer to the people of England, but far from devolving power, they will centralise it, taking it further away from local people. The Government are simply going in the wrong direction, pulling power up to remote bodies; we want to

push power down to local people and to local communities. We want community government, not regional government.

The Deputy Prime Minister also says that it is a matter of choice, but it is some choice for those who do not vote for a regional assembly. We learn from his statement that the regional chambers, government offices and regional development agencies of even those regions that do not vote for an assembly will be given greater responsibilities and powers, greater opportunity to take decisions affecting people's lives, and greater opportunity to take decisions away from elected local government representatives.

The Deputy Prime Minister claims to have changed one of the most centralised systems of local government in the western world. Tell that to the local councils that now have 15 per cent. of their funding ring-fenced by this Government, and who can spend it only on what this Government say they can spend it on.

The Deputy Prime Minister also tells us that, as a result of the introduction of regional assemblies, a complete review of local government will need to be undertaken in the areas concerned. That sends one clear message: it will lead to the abolition of county councils. Counties count. They are historic areas, with which people identify clearly. I wonder how many people in the north-east realise that regional government will mark the end of Durham and Northumberland county councils. How many people in the south-west realise that it will mark the end of Devon, Cornwall, Dorset and Gloucestershire county councils?

Regional government will mean that decision making is taken away from local people and given to the regions, but we must recognise that there are differing needs. In the south-east, for example, the needs of the Kent coastal towns are quite different from those of the Thames valley. Will people in Falmouth really want decisions affecting their lives to be taken in Bristol? Will people in Sunderland want Newcastle to rule their lives?

We also learn from today's statement—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. The hon. Lady must be heard.

Mrs. May: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We also learn from today's statement that the new regional assemblies will, after all, have tax-raising powers such as the power to raise a precept on council tax. The Deputy Prime Minister presents that as a great advantage, but I doubt whether the people of London, on whom the Mayor and the Greater London Assembly have imposed a 30 per cent. precept, would regard granting such powers to regional assemblies as a good thing. We are talking about budgets of about £350 million a year, but county councils such as Essex and Kent have budgets of some £1 billion a year. Exactly what will regional assemblies be able to do?

The Deputy Prime Minister said at the beginning of his statement that this is about more democracy and less bureaucracy, but we now learn that regional assemblies will be responsible for developing joined-up regional strategies on issues such as sustainable development, economic development, transport, housing, health improvement and culture. Does that constitute less bureaucracy? What will happen to the existing quangos when regional assemblies are in place? How many quangos will be abolished?

In its 1997 manifesto, the Labour party pledged that regional assemblies would require

"confirmation by independent auditors that no additional public expenditure overall would be involved".

However, the reorganisation of local government is likely to cost up to £2 billion. Does the Deputy Prime Minister stand by Labour's manifesto pledge, and will he confirm that if additional public expenditure is involved, regional assemblies will not go ahead? Will the tax-raising powers for the regional assemblies be limited, as they are in Scotland, or will they be unlimited?

These regional assemblies will not provide greater opportunities for devolving power down to local people: they will raise power up from local government, destroy county councils and mean that local communities have less say in their lives and in decisions affecting them than they have today. These proposals for regional assemblies will mean less democracy, more talk and more tax. It is a centralising measure and we will oppose it.

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I suppose that I could return the compliment and say that it is the way the hon. Lady tells them, but that would be flying in the face of history. I presume that the Tories are still responsible for what they did in government. Let me remind the House that they opposed Scottish devolution: they now accept it. They opposed Welsh devolution: they now accept it. They opposed the Greater London Authority: they now accept it. They opposed the Scottish regional development agency: they now accept it. They opposed the Welsh regional development agency: they now accept it. They also opposed the RDAs for the English regions, although God knows why they felt that England should not have economic agencies to deal with similar problems of jobs and investment. I shall have to treat the hon. Lady's comments with some contempt, because of the Tories' history. They oppose proposals and they shout a lot, but in the end they come to accept the new ideas. That is what will happen in this case.

The hon. Lady said that the proposals would mean more bureaucracy and less democracy, but decisions in the regions are made at present by Government offices. Who set up the Government offices? It was the previous Administration, but not all Departments were included. They are now, and that is an improvement. However, it is not sufficient for the regions to have civil servants making decisions—that is bureaucracy—when directly elected members could make the strategic decisions. If we are replacing civil servants, who are by definition the bureaucracy, with directly elected members, that will mean more democracy and less bureaucracy. Both civil servants and elected members have a part to play, but I cannot accept the hon. Lady's arguments on that point.

The hon. Lady mentioned precepts. When her party was in government, it abolished the Greater London council, but it did not consult the people of London on that. When the Conservatives came to finance its replacement, what did they use? They used a common form of precept, as the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) can tell the hon. Lady. Under all Governments, precepts have been seen as a proper mechanism for financing local

[Mrs. May]

authorities. They are used even today in the metropolitan authorities. The precept has been a proper form of financing—alongside grants, which I also mentioned—for local authorities.

We heard some hypocrisy from the hon. Lady, whose concern for quangos is touching. Most of the quangos grew up under the previous Administration, because they did not trust the elected members of the regions to make decisions. We totally reject that approach and we will provide the people with an alternative of regional elections, as proposed in the White Paper.

The hon. Lady said that the regional assemblies will take powers away from local authorities. I understand that she has not had the chance to read the White Paper, but when she does she will see how the local authorities will retain the powers that they have. The proposals involve decentralising from the Government down to the regions.

The hon. Lady mentioned counties. There are county structure plans, as the hon. Lady has mentioned in the past, but that sort of regional body is not enough. Some areas are larger than individual county councils and there can be several county councils in an area. They will now have a regional body. There is no need for a county structure plan if there is a regional planning body. That is precisely what we are proposing.

The hon. Lady spoke about county councils. We are giving people the choice to retain or reject a county council. They will be able to decide whether they want to keep the existing local government structure or move to an elected assembly. We trust the people, and we give them the choice. That is called a referendum. We are not imposing the structure.

That is why the White Paper is about choice. If people in the south-east want to retain the current structure, that is fine: let us give them the chance to decide whether they want to advance through the referendum process towards regional government. However, it is their choice. It is not for people in Newcastle to choose for people in the south-east. Each region will make its own choice about its local authority. That is called consultation and democracy. The White Paper is dedicated to that purpose.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Will the Deputy Prime Minister accept that the Liberal Democrats have been campaigning on this issue for years? We welcome the fact that the right hon. Gentleman has brought forward proposals today. We will examine them closely to see whether they will achieve what needs to be achieved—bringing the regional government that already exists in this country under proper democratic control, and bringing down to regional level decisions that are now taken in London and which should be taken much closer to the people whom they affect.

Does the right hon. Gentleman understand that we have some anxieties about the slowness of the process, which involves two stages of legislation? When they vote, will people know precisely what powers will be available to their regional assembly, or will that depend on a subsequent piece of legislation?

Is the Deputy Prime Minister aware that we do not approve at all of his involvement of local government reorganisation in this process? The White Paper is not supposed to be about local government. If the right hon. Gentleman has a job to do reorganising local government, would not it be far better, rather than trying to organise it from London, to let the regional assembly do it once it has been elected?

Does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that the council tax is not a particularly fair tax? It is not a very good instrument, as it will also confuse the role of local government with that of regional government, which is something quite different. Also, there is no mechanism to deal with those regions where—unlike the north-east, Yorkshire, and the north-west—there is no clear consensus about the regional boundaries. Such a mechanism ought to be established.

I hope that the Deputy Prime Minister realises that, in regions such as the north-east, there will be a continuing demand for the levels of funding that Scotland has achieved through the Barnett formula. People in the regions affected will regard that as very much part of the process. The argument about establishing a version of the Barnett formula for the north-east or north-west will not go away simply because the regional assembly argument is moving forward.

Will the Deputy Prime Minister recognise that the Liberal Democrats want to make the process work, so that it delivers to people in the regions something for which they will vote? When the legislation comes forward, we will seek to improve the package. We will also aim to help to present it more effectively than the Government have managed so far. In that way, people in regions where there is already a recognised demand for democratic control of regional government will be able to vote for it, and thus achieve it.

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much for his words of support. The most recent Liberal Democrat document on regional policy was produced a few weeks ago, and there is a clear difference between our approaches to the matter. However, we agree on the essential objective—that people should be able to make a decision about regional government.

I look forward to the debate about the balance between the powers of regional government and local authorities. The right hon. Gentleman will be able to see how they are spelled out in the White Paper. Any confusion about the use of precepts or council tax stems largely from the Liberal Democrats' belief that the regional body should have tax-raising powers. That is a fair position, and no doubt we will hear the debate. The same proposal arose in the debates about devolution, and different solutions were found for the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether people will know about the powers available to the regions and the counties. I assure him that they will be spelled out, and it will be made clear to people where the resources will come from and what functions the bodies will carry out. We think that that is important, but we believe that a two-tier structure—a unitary and regional structure—is appropriate for regional government. However, there are strong arguments about the counties, and that means that the case will have to be made. People will listen to the arguments and will decide whether they want a two-tier structure. Our judgment is that a two-tier structure is the best.

Local authority members would not necessarily all be

happy if a new directly appointed regional assembly decided the local structure in their area. That is one of the reasons why the Tories imposed the unitary system in Scotland without asking the Scots about it—because it was highly controversial. The Banham inquiry did not complete the arguments for a unitary system because it ran into a lot of flak in different parts of the United Kingdom. We have now come to a political judgment that it would be better to have two tiers—a regional and a unitary system of government. We look forward to the debate and the contributions to be made by Opposition Members.

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Will my right hon. Friend resist being deflected by Conservative Members' crocodile tears about the counties, given that they got rid of the six metropolitan counties? Does he accept that there will be a major welcome for his statement on the Labour Benches, particularly in respect of transferring power from the centre to the regions? However, the balance must be that democratically elected regional assemblies are quickly put into place.

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I very much agree with my hon. Friend on these matters. It is a question of balance, but at the end of the day it is about democratic accountability. The simple point is one that I have made before: decisions about the regions are currently made by local government officers and civil servants; we propose to change that so that people can choose to go for a directly elected assembly. That will provide the opportunity for directly elected members to make the decisions, rather than civil servants.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that the principles of accountability and transparency are important for good government at local and, indeed, given what is to follow today, national level? If he does agree, will he explain how the proposals that he has outlined will enhance those principles, given that his explanation of the proposals indicates that they will result in a mish-mash of incomprehensible and remote local government arrangements across England?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I do not accept that. Of course, the right hon. Lady has not been able to read the White Paper. There is a fundamental difference between us, which is quite understandable, and I do not mean this as a criticism. We want to give the people the opportunity to decide what their local authority structure should be. To say that it must be a unitary structure within a directly elected region raises questions about the accountability of the present structure. However, the present democratic structures in the regions can remain as they are.

People in the regions have to demand change and go through a process and a justification; then there will be a referendum in which the people will decide. We have made it clear today that if we want directly elected assemblies, we must have the unitary local authority system. I should have thought that that would have a great deal of support from the Conservatives—after all, they imposed such a system on Scotland without consultation.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): Some of us recognise what others will come to recognise in due course: that my right hon. Friend has done a great service to our nation and to democracy in the announcement that he has made today and the work that he has done on this issue over many years. His announcement will be widely welcomed in the north-east of England, although we would like to discuss certain aspects with him further. It gives the people of the region a choice that would apparently be denied to them by the Conservative party.

My right hon. Friend spoke of flexibility. Will the legislation that will introduce assemblies be flexible enough to allow for assemblies' powers and responsibilities to be widened, in consultation with the assemblies, without the need for further primary legislation?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: First, I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. It is generally recognised in the House that those in the north-east have been at the forefront of demanding an elected regional assembly. One can reasonably assume that they will be first at the gate.

My hon. Friend says that he will want to discuss some of the details with us. It is no secret that we will be meeting people in the north-east tonight and I shall hear their views. I am sure that it will not be total endorsement and that they will have criticisms to make. There are varying views in the north-east. Some want to see a complete parliament in the north-east, more or less, rather than an assembly. They want to keep all the powers. That is a school of thought in a number of regions, not least Cornwall. However, we must find a balance.

My hon. Friend asks whether we can go further even before we have drafted legislation or entered into consultation, and I have to say no to that at the moment. However, given what is happening in Scotland and Wales, where people are beginning to feel that they can express their views, I am not surprised that people ask for more rather than less.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): As one who is proud of the historical identity of the county of my birth—Lincolnshire—and of the county of Staffordshire, an important part of which I have the privilege to represent, may I ask the right hon. Gentleman to ponder for a moment? He is bent on rewriting, redrawing and destroying the map of this country as people have come to know and love it, and on putting in jeopardy the very identity of England. He is driving people forward by putting in place regional structures that will almost oblige many to think that they must vote in that direction. He is an iconoclast and he ought to be ashamed of himself.

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I must confess that I am not ashamed. I see by the smile playing on the lips of the hon. Gentleman that his rhetoric was more for the benefit of those outside this place than it was a serious contribution. There is a clear difference between us: Conservatives in opposition and in government have always imposed their solutions. We are prepared to give choice—that is what the White Paper is about—to people in his area or to people in the north-east or other areas who are interested in the election of a regional assembly. If they take that route, they must accept that the first tier will be unitary. That is the point

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

that the hon. Gentleman made and I understand it, but we made a decision and there is choice and balance in the White Paper.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I congratulate my right hon. Friend; this is a good day for Yorkshire and Humberside and a good day for him—the culmination of the long campaign that he has waged. He might like to know that, this morning, in a vox pop on Radio Humberside, he was named as a potential First Minister for the new Yorkshire and Humberside region. May I express the hope that, even if he is not prepared to enlarge the powers at present, he will consider the proposals as a basis on which to build? What Scotland has, Yorkshire and Humberside need. The regional assembly must have more powers if people are to be prepared to vote for it and support it. What part will the Government play in the referendum process for regional government? Will they support the principle as they did for Scotland?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and kind remarks. As to whether I would consider being the First Minister, I am already First Secretary of State in this House, and I am happy with that. I do not want to feed the idea that I might be facing retirement, because those guys up in the Press Gallery will be writing about it for weeks. They rarely write the truth, but given half a chance they will make that kind of comment.

On the point about powers and balance, there are many powers in the package and we have tried to achieve a proper balance. It is different from what we did in Scotland, Wales or London. We have considered the experiences in those areas so as to establish a proper balance. We are not establishing parliaments in the regions—that is a fundamentally different proposition—we are establishing directly elected assemblies. We think that the balance of resources and powers is right.

My hon. Friend asked about our support. Clearly, the matter is Government policy, but we want the decision to be that of the people.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The Deputy Prime Minister has not deployed what might be the most persuasive argument in favour of regional assemblies: they would be a system of governance of England compatible with devolution to Scotland and Wales. Instead, he has chosen to base his argument on economics. Does he accept that regional disparities in England have increased, despite the creation of regional development agencies? Why does he think that a new political structure will make that any better? Does he intend to ensure that the distribution of public finance to the regions is made on a fairer basis—for example, so that it relates to the per capita income of those regions compared with Scotland? If the benchmark is Scotland and Wales, how on earth does the right hon. Gentleman think that representative democracy, or real accountability, is served by a handful of neither nowt nor summat representatives, representing several hundred thousand electors in tiny assemblies that have no proper link with their electorate?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I accept the argument that this is part of a constitutional settlement that I believe people in England recognise as having been central to my arguments for an awfully long time. As I mentioned before, those arguments were made in the documents that we were writing in the 1980s. What people in Scotland and Wales were asking for was absolutely right, and I supported them in that campaign at the time. I also made it clear that the same demand should be made for the English regions. Indeed, I seek their support for giving people in the English regions the same kind of direct accountability, so there is that political consideration.

The economic matters are quite important of course, and many people will consider the proposals in that light. But if people consider what happened when Scotland and Wales were given their development agencies by Labour Governments, they will see that there has been a tremendous improvement in the economy of those areas. The improvement is never enough for people in those areas, but if the comparison in made, there is no doubt that the regional development agencies helped to improve their proportion of gross domestic product. That is why the difference was reduced between Scotland and Wales and the English regions.

It is right and proper that the English regions should have those bodies. People in the north-east feel very strongly about that. They want the same tools and resources to get on with the job and to improve the quality of life for our people. They define that in economic terms, but it is about more than that; it is about the environment, housing and all manner of things that make up quality of life, and the White Paper points that out. So it is right to ask me whether there is a proper balance between a constitutional settlement and the economic requirements to get greater prosperity in our regions. Yes, there is a proper balance, but both those issues come together.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): May I thank my right hon. Friend for his long-term commitment to the English regions? I congratulate him on being so determined to secure action. I was privileged to be a member of the Millan commission, and it gives me great pleasure to see so many of its recommendations now being put into practice. The regional development agencies already make a difference, but it is certainly high time that the already existing regional tier of government is made democratically accountable and more focused.

I should like to ask my right hon. Friend whether he is satisfied that the powers now being offered, which undoubtedly open major opportunities, are sufficient to make a real difference, particularly in economic development and transport. Will he reassure us that the Government are ready to listen to the voice of elected regional assemblies? Is he ready to listen to the voice of the north-west, which will welcome this proposal, in the same way as he welcomes comments from the north-east?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind remarks and for the part that she played in the Millan commission, many of whose recommendations are included in the White Paper. She was also the leader of Lancashire county council, which did a very good job in developing new innovations and ideas on economic development in a county council structure. That was good—one to be

welcomed—although I now prefer that to come under the regional development agencies and, indeed, elected regional assemblies. If people in the north-west welcome the proposals and wish to pursue the route of an elected regional assembly, that opportunity is provided for them in the White Paper.

The Government will have to take into account the fact that the assemblies will have their own pot of money and will make their own decisions, which are now made by central Government. The assemblies may say that they want more resources or more things, and the Government constantly get into debates with councils at present. I have no doubt that elected regional assemblies will make the same arguments. The one thing that I would say for directly elected regional assemblies is that they will have more influence over central Government to ensure a better and fairer distribution of resources.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): May I remind the Deputy Prime Minister that the civil servants currently working in the Government offices for the regions are not unaccountable bureaucrats, as he described them? They are civil servants, answerable to Ministers; and Ministers, in turn, are answerable to Members of Parliament.

I attended the consultations on defining the south-west region, and I have to tell the Deputy Prime Minister from first-hand experience that the conclusion was that Swindon, the Scilly Isles, Bournemouth, Poole and the coalfields of Gloucestershire had nothing in common that would not apply to any other region of the country. I want to put this to the Deputy Prime Minister: if, in the course of the consultation, the south-west puts a proposal to him to break into two regions—or even three regions, as Cornwall wants to go its own way—would he consider that and give it his blessing if that was what the people wanted?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: It is a question of choice, which is precisely what we have put in the White Paper. I hear what the hon. Lady says about Government offices, and I want to correct the impression that I might have given on that. I am the Minister to whom the Government offices are responsible, and I think that they do an excellent job—so much so that we have broadened their representation, and more Departments are actively involved in them. Furthermore, they were an idea of the previous Administration, which I thought was excellent. My only disagreement is this: if they make recommendations to Ministers, who debate with Members of Parliament here, why cannot they have a say about the priorities of their areas? That can be achieved effectively only by an elected regional assembly—*[Interruption.]* I hear hon. Members' objections, but, although it might be possible to get a question or a little bit of space in a debate at Westminster, that is no longer satisfactory to people in the English regions. Even if they are satisfied, we leave it with them to make that choice. Those who are not satisfied, however, will have a directly elected assembly, which will be more democratic and less bureaucratic.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Is the Deputy Prime Minister aware that the bleating of the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May)—who is no longer in her place, so I presume she has gone to lick her wounds—about the continuation of county councils is nothing more than hypocrisy and cant. Why, in 1994, did Conservatives in Berkshire—the area now represented by the hon. Lady—propose the total abolition of Berkshire county council?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should be putting questions to the Deputy Prime Minister not about the Conservative party but about the policies of the Government. I think that the Deputy Prime Minister has got the drift of the hon. Gentleman's case, and perhaps he can try to reply.

Hon. Members: He was not listening.

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I heard my hon. Friend quite clearly. He was talking about more hypocrisy under the previous Administration. Indeed, he reminds us that they abolished Berkshire county council. Despite all the talk that I am hearing about keeping county councils, the Conservatives reduced the organisation in Scotland to unitary authorities and abolished the Greater London Council. All of that was without any consultation with the people in the areas concerned. The White Paper puts down a proposal and allows people to make a choice. That is the fundamental difference between the Government and the Opposition.

Andrew George (St. Ives): The White Paper talks about trusting people, flexibility and embracing diversity. In the light of that, does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that, if the Government merely attempt to replace an over-centralised state with a centralised solution, the whole project will become unpicked? Given the chance, voters will simply stay home in their droves. Although chapter 6 of the White Paper refers to the possibility of flexibility about those regions, does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that the whole project will fail if the Government become obsessed with their own regional boundaries?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I do not believe that a centralised solution is being imposed on people. The Government have made a judgment, which is embodied in the White Paper. I hope that the House will have an occasion to debate the details and the flexibilities in the White Paper in the not-too-distant future. We have decided on the best form to offer as a choice. I agree that we are not keeping the local authority structure as it is—we are saying to people, "If you want elected regional representation, you must accept a unitary structure." We therefore have a boundary commission to give us recommendations on that. That is a political choice, but it is up to the people to decide whether they keep what they have or take the structure that we are offering.

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the good case that can be made for democratic regional government will be all the more persuasive if the long-term and deliberate decline in the powers of local government that was brought about by the Conservative party were firmly reversed? Does he agree that the opportunity to do that and to increase the powers of local government will arise through the creation of the unitary authorities to which he has just referred?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I believe that the unitary authority system is the best form of local government, and I think that the previous Administration felt the same. After all, they imposed a great deal of it throughout the country, and that was right. Such authorities have considerable powers and important decisions to make about the services that they provide in their area. However, I return to the point that we shall have a two-tier system if an area chooses to have an elected regional assembly. That option is right, and it would not undermine in any way the influence, controls and resources that the unitary authorities have. We are decentralising from the top down to the regions, and not from the local authorities.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Does the Deputy Prime Minister recognise that devolution in Scotland and Wales created for the Government a problem in the north-east and the north-west, which now feel disadvantaged? However, that is absolutely no reason to impose regional government on areas of this country that have no desire for it whatever. They will view the current plans with anger and disbelief. Is he aware that there is a strong feeling of county in Hampshire, which is based on the historic capital of England, Winchester? The county has shown itself to be sensitive to the different social and economic needs within Hampshire. Can the right hon. Gentleman try to give us an assurance that, if any area rejects the proposals, it will not be economically disadvantaged?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: That is precisely what I have been trying to say. It is all about choice. If the people in an area do not want a directly elected regional assembly, they will presumably not ask for it. If some in an area think that there should be such an assembly, the Secretary of State will come to a judgment as to whether there is sufficient demand in that area. The White Paper spells out just what he has to take into account and, in those circumstances, there either will or will not be a referendum. At the end of the day, the judgment will be whether the people in a region want an assembly.

I have heard much from Conservative Members that such assemblies are not wanted in the regions and we can all quote stories about whether they are or are not wanted. However, a BBC poll says that two thirds of the population are in favour of regional government. [HON. MEMBERS: "Not in the south-east."] I shall come to the south-east—hang on. The big differences in support were clearly reflected geographically. In northern areas, support for regional government was more than 63 per cent.—73 per cent. on average—and, by the way, the west midlands is included in that. In the south-east, an average of between 50 and 60 per cent. were for regional government. Therefore, the figures suggest that a substantial number of people are prepared to consider proposals for regional government.

Joyce Quin (Gateshead, East and Washington, West): In contrast to the carping from some Conservative Members, may I say that I think that my right hon. Friend's announcement is of huge significance for the English regions? For my region of the north-east, it represents a great opportunity for us to pioneer the process, and I hope that we will do that. I am still an owner of the alternative regional strategy that my right hon. Friend mentioned and I can recommend it as reading to the Conservatives, as they need common sense on the issue.

May I press my right hon. Friend on the consultation period that he has announced? Will he use it as an opportunity to say to the regions of England, including the north-east, that the proposed organisations will have real budgets and real powers? Will he also reaffirm his message about inclusivity, because everyone in the regions—business, organisations, voluntary groups and all our communities—can benefit from these proposals?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I thank my right hon. Friend for her remarks. I remind the House of the role that she played in bringing about the White Paper and greater powers for the regions. She rightly tells us that the north-east is a pioneer; clearly, it has been. I shall hear more about that in the north-east later today when I am accompanied by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

I am grateful for the comments that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin) made about the alternative regional strategy. I will make it available, and I can claim that, in contrast to the Opposition, the views I held 20 years ago are consistent with what I say today. The Opposition's views are hardly consistent from year to year or from election to election, but that is the nature of the current Opposition.

We are providing real budgetary powers, real finances, real powers to get on with the job and greater democratic accountability. That is shown in the White Paper. No doubt when we have the opportunity to study it, the House will debate its details and determine whether my points are justified.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): What the Secretary of State has not told us is what very bad news elected regional assemblies would be for rural areas. Is it not inevitable that a regional assembly in the west midlands would be dominated by the interests, agenda and representatives of the Birmingham conurbation, and would suck in cash and powers from the rural areas? Whatever value county councils have, at least they provide some voice for rural areas in local government, which the right hon. Gentleman is proposing to abolish. Will this not inevitably be another advance in the interests of our great cities at the expense of our countryside and market towns?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: It appears that this debate will continue as it started—by reflecting the hypocrisy of the Opposition. I will take no lectures from Tories on what happens in rural areas. The facts are clear to see from their 18 years in government. Since then, we have begun to make improvements. For the first time, we have produced a rural White Paper to consider precisely how we might improve the quality of services. At least we guarantee rural areas the advance in services that has occurred in urban areas.

All the issues, such as the economic provision of jobs, are important. The regional development agencies have been given a specific remit to get on with rural

development, which rural areas have welcomed. Many of the things that we have done are starting to show improvements. Frankly, if areas decide to choose the path of an elected regional assembly, every rural and urban population in those areas will have a responsibility because that is how every region in the United Kingdom is made up.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): Is my right hon. Friend aware that for those of us who, like himself, campaigned for more than 25 years for regional government, the publication of the White Paper is a cause of huge celebration? It represents a great leap forward in establishing a vigorous authentic voice for the north-east. Is my right hon. Friend also aware that we know that the White Paper would not have been published without his tenacity over the past 20 years?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: Of course I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's candid remarks. He has campaigned on this issue for a long time and, indeed, we have worked together on such campaigns. It is a special day for us because we belong to a Government who are introducing a White Paper on regional government. It is a great leap forward, as my right hon. Friend says. It will allow each region to develop a special voice, especially in the north-east. We have the opportunity to go out and sell the case and to show that there can be a more democratic way of working, which is what the White Paper does.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): The right hon. Gentleman and his right hon. Friends have been generous to my constituency in the words they have used in the House in recognising its unique status in England. Can he confirm that no powers would be taken from the Isle of Wight county council to the mainland under his proposals and that it would be represented in the regional assembly by a unique individual?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I assure the hon. Gentleman that if the people do not choose to take the route of an elected regional assembly, the present local government structure will remain as it is. However, if the region that includes the Isle of Wight wishes to go for a directly elected assembly, the local authority structure will be considered by the boundary commission and included in the proposals for a referendum. It is a choice for the people in the Isle of Wight and the south-east region.

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): I welcome today's announcement, particularly in view of the fact that I represent a constituency in the middle of an objective 1 area which has the lowest gross domestic product per capita in the United Kingdom. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that the future establishment of regional assemblies can only assist and enhance the future economic regeneration of neglected places such as Barnsley and Doncaster?

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I have no doubt that that will help areas such as Barnsley, but we should also take into account Government measures before the White Paper, not least the £350 million coalfield community fund, which we introduced to help mining areas that had been destroyed, particularly by the vicious policy pursued by the previous Administration.

Martin Sixsmith

1.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Stephen Byers): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement about Martin Sixsmith in response to—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I understood that some hon. Members wanted to hear a statement from the Secretary of State; he will be heard.

Mr. Byers: With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement about Martin Sixsmith in response to questions and concerns of hon. Members.

On 26 February, I made a statement to the House concerning Martin Sixsmith. In that statement, I briefly described events that took place on 15 February. I said explicitly that the details of the events of that day were set out in the public statement made by my permanent secretary on 25 February. Both statements made it clear that discussions aimed at resolving the terms of Martin Sixsmith's departure were continuing. Those discussions were conducted without ministerial involvement. A resolution has been arrived at under which Martin Sixsmith is compensated in accordance with his employment rights, and an agreed statement was published on Tuesday of this week.

Also on Tuesday, a copy of the agreed statement was placed in the Library and reported to the Select Committee on Public Administration, which had asked my Department to clarify the position of Martin Sixsmith as part of an inquiry that it was conducting. I want to take this opportunity to explain to the House how the settlement that was reached with Martin Sixsmith and the agreed statement published on Tuesday relate to my oral statement in the House on 26 February. In particular, I want to address the concern that paragraph 2 of the agreed statement is in conflict with my statement in the House on 26 February and, as some have said, shows that I misled the House. That is simply not the case, and I want to explain why to the House.

My permanent secretary's statement of 25 February describes in detail two conversations that he had with Martin Sixsmith on Friday 15 February, which led him to inform me that Martin Sixsmith had agreed to resign. His statement also outlined how the announcement was made before it was possible to agree the detailed terms of Martin Sixsmith's resignation, and described his further meeting with Martin Sixsmith on the evening of 15 February, in which Martin Sixsmith argued that he had not resigned.

It is to precisely that sequence of events that the agreed statement refers when it says that the Department, while acting in good faith, announced that Martin Sixsmith had resigned on what turned out to be an incorrect understanding of earlier discussions that day between Martin Sixsmith and the permanent secretary. There is therefore nothing new here, and indeed nothing that was not a matter of record at the time of my statement on 26 February, which explicitly referred back to my permanent secretary's account.

In my statement to the House I made clear the reason for my understanding, based on the information that I had been provided with, that Martin Sixsmith had agreed to resign. It was, of course, also abundantly clear from what Martin Sixsmith had said and from the statement of the permanent secretary that Mr. Sixsmith had said that the release of the announcement without his agreement changed everything. All this was apparent on 26 February when I made my statement to the House and indeed before, and was a matter of public record.

I also described the discussions that were taking place with Martin Sixsmith about an alternative civil service job or agreeing a settlement under his contract. As I said on 26 February,

"there have been a number of meetings and discussions involving Mr. Sixsmith in an attempt to resolve the detailed terms of his departure."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 563.]

I made it clear that at the time of my statement they had not been concluded—that is, the terms of his departure had not yet been agreed. An agreement has now been reached, which gave rise to Tuesday's agreed statement.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: I will take points of order after the ministerial statement.

Mr. Gale *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I expect better from the hon. Gentleman, who is a member of the Chairmen's Panel.

Mr. Byers: I have not misled the House, as some have alleged. All my statements to the House have been based on the information available to me. That is precisely why the agreed statement with Mr. Sixsmith explicitly says that any misunderstanding over his resignation was in good faith.

While these discussions about the employment status of an individual civil servant have been taking place, Ministers in my Department have not been diverted from the real tasks that face us and the people of our country. Those tasks are to rebuild communities—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister must be heard. There is no point in anyone shouting across the Chamber.

Mr. Byers: That task is to rebuild communities and give new hope to neighbourhoods. That is why, since my oral statement on 26 February, we have introduced new laws to get rid of abandoned cars; introduced measures to stop the scandal of children in bed-and-breakfast accommodation; set up nine projects to tackle low-demand and abandoned housing—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I say to hon. Members that the Minister is in order. If it were otherwise, I would tell him. Now, let the Minister make his statement.

Mr. Byers: Since 26 February my ministerial team and I have introduced new laws to get rid of abandoned cars; we have tackled bed-and-breakfast accommodation for children—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. MacKay, you are very, very excited. I am chairing the proceedings, and I say that the Minister is in order. I am well aware of the title of the

Minister's statement, but the Minister can make the statement. The content of the statement is his business, and he can put it to the House.

Mr. Byers: What we are witnessing is the fact that the Conservatives do not like issues to be addressed. These are the real issues that matter to the people of our country: tackling abandoned cars; stopping the scandal of children in bed-and-breakfast accommodation; tackling the Tory standard spending assessment for local government; projects to tackle low-demand housing; and since 26 February, a bid to take over Railtrack by a company that will put the travelling public first and remove a failed Tory privatisation. Those are the real issues that matter to real people in the real world. So for this Department and this Secretary of State there will be no distractions; we will be getting on with the job.

Hon. Members: Resign!

Mrs. Theresa May: (Maidenhead) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Resign!

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) must also be heard.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I should like to thank the Secretary of State for his courtesy in giving me prior sight of his statement.

Yet again, the Secretary of State has come to this House to explain our incorrect understanding of history—but he is at it again. He has just said that he is here today

"to address the concern that . . . the agreed statement is in conflict with my statement in the House on 26 February",

and that

"That is simply not the case."

On 26 February, the Secretary of State said:

"Martin Sixsmith offered his resignation, which was accepted, on 15 February."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 574.]

The agreed statement issued by his Department this week states:

"The Department accept that Martin Sixsmith . . . did not resign on February 15th"

The Secretary of State said on 26 February:

"Mr. Sixsmith's resignation has been accepted".—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 571.]

However, the agreed statement says:

"The Department accept that Mr. Sixsmith has remained in their employment since his contract began on 19th November 2001."

The Secretary of State said on 26 February:

"I am clear that, given the way in which he conducted himself in the Department, Martin Sixsmith was not a suitable person to remain in government".—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 567.]

However, the agreed statement issued by his Department on Tuesday said that

"were it not for these unfortunate events, for which no blame is being apportioned, he would continue to be a successful Director of Communications in DTLR".

The House is always immensely forgiving of those who explain how they have made a mistake, but today we have heard no remorse, no regret and no glimmer of an apology. Last year, the Secretary of State told his electorate that he was "open and honest". Is it not clearly the case that he has not been remotely open and honest when he claimed today that what he said on 26 February is the same as what his Department said on Tuesday? If he had a single shred of decency left, would he not go—and go now?

Mr. Byers *rose—*

Hon. Members: Resign!

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Byers: What I will say to hon. Members is that they should look at my statement of 26 February, the statement made by my permanent secretary on 25 February, which refers explicitly to the events of 15 February, and the agreed statement made on Tuesday. When hon. Members, on reflection, look at what was said on 26 February and at my permanent secretary's statement on 25 February about the events of 15 February, they will in all honesty recognise, putting aside party political points, that this House has not been misled by this Secretary of State.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Given that the Secretary of State has developed a reputation for presiding over the burying of bad news, is it not a great shame that on the day of the publication of the vital White Paper on regional government, he now stands guilty of seeking to bury good news?

The important aspect of this statement is the question of when the Secretary of State is going to start taking responsibility for the chaos within his Department—not only the chaos that surrounds the alleged resignation of Martin Sixsmith, but the chaos on our buses, roads and railways. When will the Secretary of State start taking responsibility, and how many lives is he to have?

This is the Secretary of State who wishes to talk about the record of his Department under his leadership, but this is the Secretary of State who created confusion in the chain of events leading up to taking Railtrack into administration, and got away with it. This is the Secretary of State who created confusion over the value-for-money studies on the public-private partnership for the London tube, and got away with it. This is the Secretary of State who told us that no additional money was needed for National Air Traffic Services, then announced that it was going to get it, and got away with it. He told us that there would be no additional money for Railtrack shareholders, then reneged on that, and got away with it.

Particularly in relation to today's statement by his right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, this is the Secretary of State who on 29 January this year told this House that

"there is no agenda for the abolition of Cheshire county council, or any county council."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2002; Vol. 379, c. 142.]

The right hon. Gentleman is going to get away with that as well.

No wonder we have reached the situation where a letter writer in one of today's newspapers says that even if the Secretary of State announced his resignation, we would

[Mr. Don Foster]

not know whether to believe him. The Secretary of State talks about abandoned cars. He is the one who should be abandoned.

Mr. Byers: I agree with one aspect of the hon. Gentleman's comments—the publication today of the White Paper on the English regions is good news. I am personally delighted to have been able to author it jointly with the Deputy Prime Minister.

There is no hidden agenda to abolish Cheshire county council. The whole point of the White Paper is that we are giving people in the regions the choice, and I should have hoped that the hon. Gentleman would realise that.

The reality is that despite all the blather and froth coming from Conservative Members, this Department is delivering on the things that matter. We are making progress on buses, roads and the railways, and over time we will see real improvements in the areas that matter to the people of our country.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East): Does my right hon. Friend accept that most people recognise the difference between matters involving who said what to whom and when, and a genuine attempt to deceive? Does he also accept that people will view the Conservatives' synthetic indignation for what it is: cynical opportunism?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right. I ask commentators and hon. Members to consider the statement that was made on 26 February, that of my permanent secretary on 25 February and the agreed statement. People will then realise that the House has not been misled.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): Does the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge that in the memory of even the longest-serving Members, those who are privileged to act as Secretaries of State in the service of the House, have, irrespective of the normal partisan give and take, always sought to attain high standards of accuracy, truthfulness, and when appropriate, humility? Does he understand that he has demeaned those standards by his behaviour in the past three months? Does he also understand that he has treated the House with contempt and that he should not therefore be surprised if the House adopts a similar attitude to him?

Mr. Byers: I stress to the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues that they should examine the record. They should look at my statement to the House on 26 February and my permanent secretary's statement on the public record on 25 February about events on 15 February. When they do that, they will know that I have not misled the House.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): My right hon. Friend has rightly come to the House today to correct an inaccuracy. I commend him on that because it is important that those matters be corrected. He mentioned that his permanent secretary had written to me, as Chairman of the Public Administration Committee, this week. He said:

"Needless to say, nothing in this 'Agreed Statement' affects the evidence I gave to your Committee on 7 March or my Secretary of State's statement to Parliament on 26 February, which in turn referred to my public statement of 25 February."

That means that those who want to attack the Secretary of State must also attack the permanent secretary and the Cabinet Secretary. All gave the same account of events on the day that we are considering.

When the Committee discussed the matter with the Cabinet Secretary, he agreed that there was "chaos" in that section of the Department on the day in question. Is not the important issue to ensure that such chaos never happens again?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I am sure that hon. Members look forward to the recommendations of the Public Administration Committee when it concludes its report. There is no doubt that there were problems in the Department; they have been resolved. The agreed statement on Tuesday is part of the resolution of the difficulties, and drew a line in sand. I am pleased that that is the case.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Twelve thousand constituents who travel on the trains every day are primarily concerned that, following the Secretary of State's renationalisation of Railtrack, punctuality has deteriorated. That is more important than his prolific loss of spin doctors. They also note that he has disowned, dismissed or seen depart the chairman of the Strategic Rail Authority, the chairman of Railtrack, the Rail Regulator and another regulator. They were all appointed by him or his Government. If he cannot get on with those people and they do not trust him, how can my constituents trust him to run the railways properly? And if none of those people was required to be paid £200,000 to keep quiet, why is the taxpayer, and not the Labour party, required to pay that sum to Martin Sixsmith?

Mr. Byers: I have great respect for the Rail Regulator, who I believe is doing a very good job. On the issue of changes at the top of the Strategic Rail Authority and Railtrack, I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that I do not think that those organisations were delivering to his 12,000 constituents coming in from St. Albans. There is a choice: we can either make big changes to have the opportunity of improving our railway system, or we can tinker around at the edges. I have chosen to make the big changes that are needed. The right hon. Gentleman may criticise me for doing so, but in the end, his 12,000 constituents who travel every day will be the judge. By the time of the next election, what will really matter to them will be not the debate that we are having here this afternoon but whether their trains are safer, more punctual and more reliable—and they will be.

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): The Opposition are baying for my right hon. Friend's blood. While the payment to Martin Sixsmith was legal, my right hon. Friend will be as appalled as I was to learn that, in the public interest report on Lincolnshire county council which found its Tory leader guilty of £750,000 of illegal payments—

Mr. Speaker: Order. This matter does not seem to have much to do with the statement.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): May I ask my right hon. Friend to cease wasting any more time

on this issue and to get back to the fundamental responsibilities of his Department—not least transport? Is he aware that, in many instances, it took football supporters more than seven hours to get out of Wales and back to London after the cup final on Saturday? That is more important to the people of this country, and it is certainly more important to the businesses of Wales, whose livelihoods depend on those transport links.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes the point that really matters to the people of this country. We face huge challenges, and she has just given a good example of where the railway system is not delivering the quality that we all expect it to. Obviously, we need to take steps to ensure that it is improved. Those are the big issues. I have to say to my hon. Friend that, while there has been all this froth from the Opposition, we have not been diverted from delivering what really matters to the people of our country. When hon. Members look at my statement on 26 February, specifically referring to my permanent secretary's statement on 25 February, they will realise that I did not mislead the House.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): What is the Secretary of State's definition of shameful ministerial conduct?

Mr. Byers: I will simply say to the hon. and learned Gentleman that he should look carefully at what I have said to the House, and at my permanent secretary's statement. He will then realise that there is no conduct for which I should apologise.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): Could the Secretary of State assure Labour Ministers that he will not be distracted by the pedantry of the most mendacious of Oppositions? Can he also assure us that he and his Ministers will get on with the really important business of ensuring that local councils such as my own—a Lib Dem council—are transparent, and that they properly engage with local communities in the essential business of regeneration, which affects them far more than whatever happens to Martin Sixsmith?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I am grateful to him. It is not always the case that, when a Secretary of State sees my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) rising to speak—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Terrified.

Mr. Byers: Yes, sometimes they are terrified, or at least slightly worried, because my hon. Friend speaks independently. He speaks his own mind on behalf of his constituents. What he has done today is to articulate the view of his constituents, and the constituents of all hon. Members, that there are far bigger issues that need to be addressed.

A Secretary of State needs to deliver on the policies and priorities of his Department. I intend to do that. He needs to be truthful to this House. I will do that as well.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): I know that the Secretary of State wants to draw a line under this, but I honestly doubt that he has managed to do so today.

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, whatever the substantial differences between him and Martin Sixsmith, the one thing they have in common is that they have both taken an inordinate amount of time to tender their resignations? If it subsequently emerges that the House has been misled about any of these matters, will the Secretary of State tender his resignation?

Mr. Byers: The ministerial code is absolutely clear: a Minister who knowingly misleads the House should tender his resignation. That is absolutely right. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members who are shouting should look at my statement. I will say this again—*[Interruption.]* Right hon. and hon. Members may not want to hear, but if they look at my statement of 26 February and my permanent secretary's statement of 25 February they will realise that I have not misled the House.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme): When the House debates the substantive issue of the railways, as a new Member I often shake my head in disbelief at the number of statements by Conservatives who are simply trying to reinvent history. Will my right hon. Friend please ask the amnesiac Conservative party to apologise—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should put a question to the Minister; he should not concern himself with the Opposition.

Mr. Byers: The key issue is that we should be debating those big policy issues relating to our transport system, regeneration, planning, housing and local government. The Conservatives are running away from those big issues, for a simple reason: either they have no policy in those areas, or they know that many of them will be required to invest massively over a long period. As their party is committed to cutting investment, they want to run away from the debates and the arguments about those issues of substance.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) referred to Cheshire county council. I for one would like it to be abolished very quickly, and I am delighted about the White Paper that was announced today. While it still exists, however, will my right hon. Friend ignore the froth and nonsense that we are hearing and concentrate on some of the things that are going on in the council? There are appalling employment practices, and cuts in services that are affecting my constituents.

Mr. Byers: I know that my hon. Friend has raised his concerns about employment practices in Cheshire county council with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government, and my right hon. Friend and the Department will examine them closely. There is a big job to be done, and we simply want to get on and do it.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): The right hon. Gentleman will know that earlier in his period of office I suggested in the public print that we should give him the

[Mr. John Gummer]

benefit of the doubt, and not cavil about a number of these smaller incidents. Does he accept that now—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman must be allowed to put his question.

Mr. Gummer: Does the Secretary of State accept that he told the House that Martin Sixsmith had resigned? He has now told the House that Martin Sixsmith had not resigned. Those are two different positions. Why did he not just come to the House and say "I am sorry"? The House would have accepted that. I will apologise to the House for misleading it by suggesting that the right hon. Gentleman was honest, if he will apologise to the House and admit that he was dishonest.

Mr. Byers: I say with all due respect to the right hon. Gentleman, who also thinks independently about such issues and does not jump on to bandwagons, that if he looks at my statement of 26 February, at the permanent secretary's statement of 25 February, and at the outline of the events of 15 February, he will recognise that my statements have not misled this House.

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): I, too, serve on the Public Administration Committee. In his evidence to us, Sir Richard Mottram said—as paragraph 299 of the minutes of evidence makes clear—that he was "very reluctant" to make his personal statement, but that it was "put to" him that he should do so. Did the Secretary of State put that point to him? Did the Secretary of State instruct, ask or encourage Sir Richard to make his public statement, or suggest to him—either directly or indirectly—that he make it?

Mr. Byers: Sir Richard made the statement; he may have been reluctant to do so. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] I say that because I honestly do not know, but according to the hon. Gentleman that is the evidence that Sir Richard gave to the Select Committee. What I do know is that permanent secretaries are not instructed by their Secretaries of State to make public statements. That is the situation. In answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, there was no instruction by me to Sir Richard Mottram. That is not the way in which relationships between Secretaries of State and permanent secretaries operate.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Given what my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) have said today, is he aware that, during the local election campaign in Gorton—in which the Conservative party was not simply trounced, but humiliated—no mention was made of the name of Martin Sixsmith? Nor, indeed, was mention made of the name of the hon. Member for Maidenhead—whatever it may be—or of 15, 25 or 26 February. What were discussed were the issues that my right hon. Friend has raised today, rather than those raised by the Conservatives. That is why, as long as the Conservatives carry on in their current direction, Manchester city council will continue to have an overwhelming Labour majority, and we in Manchester will continue to be represented solely by Labour MPs.

Mr. Byers: I look forward to Manchester being represented by my right hon. Friend and my other hon. Friends for many years to come.

As far as the Government were concerned, last Thursday's local government election results were pleasing to say the least. It is interesting to note that the Conservative Opposition are not mentioning those elections. Throughout the country, Labour held the day in most areas, and gained in many others, which people did not expect.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Do not the many incorrect understandings of key issues during the past year, involving the Secretary of State and his Department, demonstrate carelessness on his part? We have now established that Martin Sixsmith was not lying. Do we believe that the chairman of BMW was lying during the Rover crisis? No. Do we believe that the chief executive of Railtrack was lying? No. The people of this country know what the answer is, and that is why the Secretary of State should resign.

Mr. Byers: When difficult and tough decisions are taken, there are people who disagree with their outcome. The right hon. Gentleman raises two specific issues, and as far as Railtrack is concerned—I have said this in the House before, and I shall say it again—I make no apology for bringing to an end what was a failed Tory privatisation. As far as BMW and Longbridge, in Birmingham, is concerned, I make no apology for saving 6,500 jobs. That was my action, which was not helped by the Conservatives who wanted to sell Birmingham out, to sell Longbridge out and to sell out those 6,500 workers. I make no apology for standing alongside those workers and defending their jobs. If people such as the right hon. Gentleman wish to complain about that, they can do so, but the public expect Ministers to take such decisions on their behalf.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): Do not the simple facts of my right hon. Friend's statement today confirm that the two events of Tuesday this week in no way conflict with his statement on 26 February or the statement the day before by his permanent secretary? It is amazing how the Tories are trying to distract my right hon. Friend from doing his job, but I hope that he gets on with completing the reorganisation of local government finance, which is seen as an important issue in many parts of the country.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right when he points out that hon. Members should consider the documents and the statements together to see the true picture. He is also right to point out the importance of the statement on the regions White Paper. Since 25 February, we have also announced another initiative to identify nine pathfinder projects for areas of low housing demand, including one in my hon. Friend's constituency of Burnley. Those projects will make a real difference for hard-working people who have been trapped in negative equity because the value of their properties has dropped. Those are the real issues that matter to the people of Burnley and to the people of this country and the issues that I as the Secretary of State will continue to pursue.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): The traditions of this House make it clear that all MPs are honourable people. However, honourable people do not blame everybody except themselves. Honourable people do not hide behind other people. Honourable people do not

refuse to say sorry. So why does not the Secretary of State prove me wrong by living up to the best traditions of this House and doing at least one honourable thing—resigning?

Mr. Byers: I say once again to the hon. Gentleman that he should look at the agreed statement of Tuesday this week, my oral statement on 26 February and the statement by my permanent secretary that outlined the events of 15 February. When he has done that, even he will have to recognise that there is no reason why this Secretary of State should resign.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): May I follow the point raised by the hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend), because I too am a member of the Public Administration Committee? It was the Cabinet Secretary who advised Sir Richard Mottram to make a statement, and not my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. What my right hon. Friend has said from the Front Bench is true. I believe it, and the whole House should endorse the version of events that he has described.

Mr. Byers: I welcome that intervention from my hon. Friend, because it clearly shows the way in which Conservative Members are using the issue to make party political points. The fact that a member of the Select Committee partially quoted evidence given to the Committee, without revealing that other evidence had been given by the Cabinet Secretary that he had suggested to my permanent secretary that a statement should be made, reveals much about how the Conservative party is treating this issue.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On 26 February, I asked:

"Will the Secretary of State say whether Mr. Martin Sixsmith was a civil servant in his Department on 22 February?"

The Secretary of State replied:

"As I said earlier, Martin Sixsmith offered his resignation, which was accepted, on 15 February."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 574.]

If that is not misleading the House, what is?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman must look at what was said in the round on 26 February. I was referring—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I expect better behaviour from the hon. Gentleman. He should apologise.

Mr. McLoughlin: I do apologise. I was trying to give the Secretary of State a copy of what he said.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): This is very small beer, is it not? Many people outside this place will be wondering what all the fuss is about. It is not as though the Secretary of State has been found in a Paris hotel in the company of three Saudi arms dealers. It is not as though he has accepted money in brown envelopes from Mohammed Al Fayed or been found guilty of committing serial perjury in the High Court. There has been a minor misunderstanding, it has been cleared up and we should move on.

Mr. Byers: It is helpful at times such as this to be reminded of what happened during the time when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir Brian Mawhinney) was chairman of the Conservative party. He seemed to have very little to say about those issues. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. His constituents in Sunderland are concerned about abandoned housing and antisocial behaviour by tenants. Those are the sort of issues that matter to the public, and that is the agenda on which I intend to deliver as Secretary of State.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk): The Secretary of State repeatedly invites us to compare the statement he made in February with the statement he made today. There is a subtle but important difference. Today he says that he had been told that Mr. Sixsmith had agreed to resign. That is something that a person can do while continuing in employment and negotiating a termination package. However, on 14 occasions on 26 February, the Secretary of State stated that Mr. Sixsmith had resigned. That is an important and crucial difference. Is it not scandalous that the taxpayer is now being asked to pay Mr. Sixsmith's hush money in circumstances in which it is clear that the Secretary of State has misled the House?

Mr. Byers: Martin Sixsmith is being compensated in accordance with his employment rights, as is right and proper. I say once again that the hon. Gentleman should look at the statement I have made today, the statement I made on 26 February and the statement made by my permanent secretary on 25 February about the events of 15 February. He will then recognise that I have not misled the House.

Mr. Mike O'Brien (North Warwickshire): Everyone who has followed this issue has known for a long time that Martin Sixsmith disputed the issue of his resignation. That has been public knowledge for a long time. The issue needed to be clarified today, and now that my right hon. Friend has done so will he accept that many people in the west midlands will be appalled by the lynch-mob mentality that has pervaded the Martin Sixsmith issue. They want to know that the west coast main line and transport in the west midlands are the issues on which the Secretary of State is focusing. I am pleased to hear that he intends to do that and to ignore the attitude of the Conservatives.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right. The agreed statement on Tuesday was the resolution of that dispute, and I welcome that. As my hon. Friend says, we face many problems and challenges in addressing transport in the west midlands.

I was pleased a couple of weeks ago to visit the passenger transport executive in the west midlands and to look at the issues that it is facing. I believe that we will be able to make real improvements in the transport system in the west midlands, as well as in the rest of the country.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): May I remind you, Mr. Speaker, that, during business questions on 26 February, which followed the Secretary of State's statement, I asked whether the record of the House was accurate? I also asked whether the integrity of the House of Commons was not at stake, as the Secretary of State's statement explicitly stated that Mr. Sixsmith had resigned. After the Secretary of State's statement, Mr. Sixsmith went on television to say that he had not resigned. Was

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not the Secretary of State deliberately using parliamentary privilege to impugn the professional competence of a civil servant who could not answer back? Instead of Mr. Sixsmith being asked to resign, should not the Secretary of State do so voluntarily?

Mr. Byers: The statement agreed between my Department and Mr. Sixsmith addresses some of the matters referred to by the hon. Gentleman. I repeat that hon. Members should read in full my statement on 26 February. They will then see that I have not misled the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must move on to the business statement.

Mr. Gale: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman should know that points of order are taken after statements. We are about to hear a statement from the Leader of the House.

Business of the House

2.21 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): The business of the House for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 13 MAY—Second Reading of the National Insurance Contributions Bill.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Excellent.

Mr. Cook: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I am glad that I have the confidence of the House on that point. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will vote for the measure.

TUESDAY 14 MAY—Motion to approve the First Report from the Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee, on Select Committees.

Motions relating to the Ninth Report from the Standards and Privileges Committee, on a new code of conduct and guide to the rules.

WEDNESDAY 15 MAY—Opposition Day [13th Allotted Day]. Until 7 o'clock there will be a debate entitled "Post Office Closures and Royal Mail Delivery Services" followed by a debate on the environment. Exact title to be confirmed. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the Liberal Democrats.

THURSDAY 16 MAY—Progress on remaining stages of the Adoption and Children Bill.

FRIDAY 17 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week after will be:

MONDAY 20 MAY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Adoption and Children Bill.

TUESDAY 21 MAY—Opposition Day [14th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 22 MAY—Consideration of Lords Amendments to the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Bill.

THURSDAY 23 MAY—Remaining stages of the State Pension Credits Bill [Lords].

FRIDAY 24 MAY—Motion on the Whitsun recess Adjournment.

The House will wish to know that on Tuesday 14 May 2002, there will be a debate relating to the pet travel scheme in European Standing Committee A.

[*Tuesday 14 May 2002:*

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Union documents: 11596/00 and 12488/01; Rabies: restrictions on the non-commercial movement of pet animals. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee Reports: HC 23-xxviii (1999–2000); HC 28-iv (2000–01); HC 152-iii; HC 152-xxi; HC 152-xxiv and HC 152-xxvi (2001–02).]

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am most grateful to the Leader of the House for giving us the business details. The right hon. Gentleman is rightly renowned for his respect for the House and for its conventions and proprieties. You will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the right hon. Gentleman recently came to the House, willingly and quickly, to apologise

after he had been grievously misled by a Government Department. He promptly came to apologise, and the House understood and respected what he did.

Has the Leader of the House recently had a word with the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions? If not, will he be kind enough to take the Secretary of State into a quiet corner and give him a lesson about the proper relationship between Ministers and the House of Commons, and about decency and honesty—in politics and in the House?

I ask that because I want the Leader of the House to tell us when he will allow time for a debate on the censure motion, in the name of Her Majesty's official Opposition and relating to the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, that is due to appear on the Order Paper. Today, we heard a performance from the Secretary of State that was completely inadequate and almost contemptuous. It is self-evident that we need an opportunity to have a proper debate so that the matter can be much more thoroughly examined, and resolved. That certainly would be in the interests of the House, and perhaps of the Secretary of State.

I have described the attitude to the House of the Leader of the House, which I respect. When will he provide an early opportunity for the Opposition's censure motion to be debated, dealt with and resolved?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for reminding the House of the statement that I made to the House to correct the record. It may be relevant to consideration of the events about which we have just been hearing, but I should inform the House that the initial statement to the House on the matter about which I was subsequently obliged to correct the record was a line cleared by Mr. Martin Sixsmith. I used precisely the line that had been agreed by him and the Prime Minister's official spokesman. In view of the current unreliability of the line that Mr. Sixsmith approved, I have my own views about his reliability.

I have heard nothing in the past hour to suggest that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions did anything other than to put to the House, honestly and fairly, what was put to him by his Department, specifically by his permanent secretary. The words that he used were identical.

I do not doubt the right hon. Gentleman's commitment to the House. He is a genuine parliamentarian—

Mr. Bercow: A great parliamentarian.

Mr. Cook: That is possibly going a little far, but he is a genuine parliamentarian. I have frequently said to the House that, if we want to establish public respect for the House and to get people to participate in elections to the House, we must demonstrate that we are less concerned with party political point scoring than with the real issues in people's lives. I do not think that the last hour will have gone any way to convincing the public of that. I heard absolutely nothing new. If I may say so, I believe that I could have written the speech by the Opposition spokesman on transport matters in five minutes over breakfast. Indeed, I rather suspect that I should have made a better job of it.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Liberal Democrat Members share the concern of Conservative Members, and do not consider that we have received straight answers to straight questions this afternoon. We will examine our Opposition day option next week and see whether it will provide an opportunity to give another airing to these matters.

In the meantime, will the Leader of the House look again at the statement that he made on Tuesday to the Wicks committee, the Committee on Standards in Public Life? He said:

> "I can announce to you one change on an issue which you raise in paragraph 3.42 of your consultation paper. In the light of experience, the Government has resolved that the following addition should be made to the Ministerial Code.
>
> 'Ministers must also comply at all times with the requirements which Parliament has itself laid on them as Members, including in particular the codes of conduct for their respective Houses.'
>
> I believe this explicit requirement will reinforce the status of the Members' Code of Conduct, and underline the Government's commitment to its observance."

In the light of the exchanges earlier this afternoon, and the very real concern among hon. Members of all parties about the behaviour of Ministers, will the Leader of the House give us an opportunity, in Government time, to discuss the changes to the ministerial code so that we can examine the code in the round?

Mr. Cook: I think that the hon. Gentleman's response to my announcement on Tuesday is a trifle churlish and below his high standards of generosity, as it was he who originally raised the matter at business questions. I had hoped that my response would bring at least half a welcome from the hon. Gentleman, for doing what he had asked of me.

The hon. Gentleman has raised the question of the ministerial code a number of times. I am sure that hon. Members will find opportunities to do so. The hon. Gentleman was right to point to where the opportunity lies in respect of the censure of a member of the Government. In past years, when I was a member of the shadow Cabinet, I spent many happy hours discussing which member of the Conservative Cabinet we would censure that week. The appropriate place for such a debate is in Opposition Supply day time. The hon. Gentleman has the distinction of being the last person to move such a motion in the House, when he moved for the censure of the Minister with responsibility for agriculture in the then Conservative Government. We found opportunities to criticise him on many occasions. However, I commend the hon. Gentleman on his speech on that occasion; it was about substance, policy and issues that affected constituents, not the flim-flam that we have been forced to listen to for the past hour and which, I am bound to say, would be an egregious waste of the House's time if we had to return to it again.

Finally, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned my openness to the Wicks committee, may I take the opportunity of repeating what, for me, was the central point of my observation to the committee? It is worth repeating since, characteristically, very few press reports picked it up the next day. Over the past six years, barely half of 1 per cent. of Members of the House of Commons have been censured for misconduct or misregistration. We were right to censure those Members for failing to meet our high

[Mr. Cook]

standards, but we are entitled to point out to the press and the public that they were rare exceptions, not the generality of the conduct of the House of Commons.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that one way in which the House of Commons can reconnect with the public is to address the questions that concern them very deeply? I refer in particular to the London underground. My right hon. Friend will be aware that the contracts were signed yesterday for a public-private partnership which in my view is seriously flawed.

The real problem is that the Government have said that because we discussed this matter two years ago, we no longer need to discuss it. May I ask my right hon. Friend to reconsider that very urgently? It is no use the House of Commons lecturing others on the need for openness if we will not debate matters of importance on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Cook: My recollection of the past two years is rather different from that of my hon. Friend. I recollect our having exchanges on this matter several times. Indeed, it is only three months since there was a full statement to the House, at the time when the contracts were being let. The signing of the contracts is a natural and inevitable consequence of that statement. However, I am sure that the House will find ways of ventilating the issue and raising it again. For myself, I think that no local government contract in modern history has been more ventilated in the House of Commons.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Can the Leader of House organise an early debate on compensation arrangements for civil servants? The normal maximum that an ordinary mortal can receive from an industrial tribunal for unfair dismissal is £50,000, yet we now find out that £200,000 was paid to Mr. Martin Sixsmith. Surely that needs explanation. We, as the custodians of the public purse, should have a chance to probe the Executive on whether the difference between £50,000 and £200,000 was the price of Mr. Sixsmith's silence.

Mr. Cook: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions dealt with this question perfectly adequately only half an hour ago. The settlement is within the terms of Mr. Sixsmith's terms and conditions. It was carried out by lawyers on both sides, without ministerial intervention.

Finally, so that the hon. Gentleman does not muddy the waters further, Mr. Martin Sixsmith has not, of course, been dismissed, whether fairly or unfairly. He has resigned—fairly, I presume.

Mr. Mike O'Brien (North Warwickshire): Can we have an early debate on motorway compensation so that I can raise the concerns of my constituents who live along the construction route of the M6 toll road and have found that compensation is to be delayed until 2005 or thereabouts? In the meantime, their houses are blighted and there is no compensation available for the disturbance. These issues need to be debated.

Mr. Cook: I cannot promise my hon. Friend a full day's debate on that topic in the near future, but there are a number of ways in which he can raise his constituents' concerns. I will happily undertake to ensure that his observations are passed to the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): May I express my surprise to the Leader of the House that he should have chosen, on this of all days, to impugn the reliability of Mr. Sixsmith when we have heard this morning that Mr. Sixsmith was telling the truth when he said that he had not resigned and that the Secretary of State was not doing so when he said that he had? May we have a debate in Government time on the use and abuse of privilege in the House? In that way, right hon. and hon. Members will have an opportunity to see what recompense there is for people—whether they be sacked spin doctors or permanent secretaries of Departments who get landed with the blame—when they are impugned under the protection of parliamentary privilege by Secretaries of State who ought to shoulder the responsibility themselves and resign because of misconduct, misdemeanours and misinformation from their Department?

Mr. Cook: I have a little difficulty unravelling from the hon. Gentleman's periphrasis exactly who he is talking about. If he is referring to the permanent secretary at the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and looks at the permanent secretary's statement of 25 February, he will see that the permanent secretary uses precisely the same language as was subsequently used by the Secretary of State to the House. As the Secretary of State has said to the House, if we impugn his statement to the House we also, logically, impugn the statement of the permanent secretary. In that case, the hon. Gentleman will then have to accept that he is also attacking the permanent secretary.

Finally, on whether I impugned Mr. Sixsmith, I answered the question that I was asked. I pointed out that the reason why I had to retract my statement on that occasion was that I had acted on the advice of Mr. Sixsmith.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): May we have a further opportunity early next week to discuss the situation in the middle east? Many questions need to be answered: why was a United Kingdom-sponsored resolution to have a commission of inquiry into Jenin thwarted at the United Nations? What went wrong at the UN Security Council? Secondly, and most importantly, what will happen if there is a further Israeli military attack on Gaza? What will the world do if that takes place, and what role will the United Kingdom play to try and bring about a peace in that area?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend raises a serious issue of deep concern to many in the House and many of our constituents. I assure her that the British Foreign Office is fully engaged in trying to find ways of defusing the situation and find a way back to the negotiating table. I congratulate all those who have been involved in finding a solution to the effective house arrest of Chairman Arafat in Ramallah and in the progress that is being made, slow and painful though it is, on relieving the siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It is very important that the outside world does all that it can to make sure that we continue to make progress.

I think that everybody in the Chamber will deplore the act of terrorism that took place the other day and will greatly sympathise with the relatives of those who were killed in that bomb attack. I hope that everyone in Israel will also reflect that the event shows that the actions within the west bank are not eliminating suicide bombers. The only way in which we can fight and successfully defeat terrorism is to offer a just and peaceful way forward for all the Palestinian people, which will only be found at the negotiating table.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Could the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent statement by the Minister responsible for S.I. 843, Animal Health England? I served on the Committee stage of the Animal Health Bill, which currently lies in another place; it has been defeated in another place and is therefore unable to progress. However, this statutory instrument, some 221 pages long, was first made and laid before Parliament during the easter recess, coming into force on 19 April. It seeks to replicate many of the issues on which the Bill was defeated in another place.

I see this as legislation by stealth. The statutory instrument involves giving additional powers to Government to enter property and slaughter owners' animals without their consent. I believe that this is a contempt of the House, and we should have a full explanation of how it came into being.

Mr. Cook: I am glad that the hon. Lady has raised this question because it gives me an opportunity to put right some of the press reports concerning the regulations. The only powers for entry and slaughter contained in the regulations are those which already exist in statute. There is no extension of those powers. The only new matter in the regulations is the power to carry out wider testing to try to establish whether there have been transmissible forms of BSE. That form of testing does not involve the slaughter of live animals but the examination of dead carcases. There is no extension of the power to slaughter in the regulations.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): May I add my voice to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) in calling for an urgent debate on what is happening in the middle east? As we sit here, the Israeli army is massing tanks, troops, helicopter gunships and bulldozers on the borders of Gaza. It is clear that Ariel Sharon is going to inflict bloody revenge on civilians in Gaza, as he did in Jenin. We all condemn the latest suicide bombing—of course we do—but my right hon. Friend must realise that we cannot sit by and watch another Jenin. We should at least hold a debate.

Mr. Cook: I understand my hon. Friend's last point. In fairness to the Government, we are very aware of the concern in the House, as we have shown in the past by giving the House opportunities to hear statements and to explore these matters. Foreign Office Question Time will take place next Tuesday, but I shall continue to keep the situation under review, as, I am sure, will my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

I fully share my hon. Friend's concern that any massive military retaliation for the terrorist action of the other day is not likely to produce a lasting peace or a cessation of terrorist activity. We shall secure that only by returning to the peace table and by ensuring that we find a path forward that is based on security for the people of Israel and justice for the people of the Palestinian territories.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I welcome the announcement that there will be a debate next week on the new code of conduct and guide to the rules for Members of Parliament. However, does the Leader of the House agree that neither the current code of conduct nor the proposed new code would deal with any Member who is associated with an organisation involved in terrorism in this country or who assists such activity in another country? If Sinn Fein-IRA is proven to have been involved in the break-in at Castlereagh police station, in assisting FARC guerrillas in Colombia or in carrying out a recent murder in County Tyrone, what action does the Leader of the House propose or recommend should be taken against the four Members of the House who represent that organisation?

Mr. Cook: It is important to keep a clear distinction between the code of conduct, which governs our behaviour as Members of Parliament in the fulfilment of our parliamentary duties, and other matters where there is the same duty on Members of Parliament as on any citizen to obey the criminal law. There is nothing in the parliamentary code of conduct that seeks to subvert or replace the criminal code. If a Member of Parliament were to have criminal knowledge of a specific criminal or terrorist activity, they should be visited with the full majesty of the law. I support that. Next week, we shall be debating those measures that do not involve criminal activity but on which it is important to establish high standards for our conduct as Members of Parliament, to ensure that we have the clearest possible professional ethics.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate to celebrate women in sport? Yesterday evening, many of us had the opportunity of meeting the England women's rugby union team who are off to their world cup on Saturday. When another world cup is in the news, is it not important that we recognise the tremendous contribution that women make to sport, and that we wish the England women's rugby union team all the best in their world cup in Barcelona?

Mr. Cook: I am sure that my hon. Friend passed a very enjoyable evening and I am happy to join him in his congratulations to the team, and to wish them well. On behalf of all of us, I wish them success.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): May we have a debate entitled "new Labour, new standards in the House of Commons", when we can learn that questions of integrity and honesty are mere "flim-flam", as the Leader of the House just said, and that Ministers can come to the Dispatch Box and claim that misleading the House by saying something that is an untruth is allowed if it is taken in the round?

Mr. Cook: On the many occasions when I advise the House to rise above party political point scoring, I never imagine that the hon. Gentleman will pay any attention.

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the large sums of public money spent by

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both national and local government on maintaining bus services in rural areas and small towns. Nevertheless, the devil is this: private bus operators frequently withdraw a service only for it to be replaced by a subsidised service and, as a consequence, such bus operators run only profitable services and we—the public authorities—run only loss-making services. As a result, costs rise and services often diminish. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on that important subject?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend raises a matter of which I have personal knowledge from my own constituency. The real problem is the difficulty of securing public transport and bus services in places where they may not be commercially profitable or, indeed, at times of the day when many of the vulnerable people in our community want to travel but when, because they are not peak times, services are not available. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the dilemma in which that leaves local authorities, and I shall certainly bear in mind his suggestion that there should be a debate on the subject. I am sure that an opportunity will arise for us to discuss these matters generally, although I cannot predict the date at present.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): As we are not to have a debate on the middle east, will the Leader of the House at least ensure that the Foreign Secretary or the International Development Secretary comes to the House to explain why European Union funds go to finance members of the Palestinian Authority under Yasser Arafat at a time when it would seem that terrorism is being prosecuted by that very organisation? At the very least, should not the European Union stop such funding until violence stops, or is the United Kingdom powerless to prevent British taxpayers' money going to such purposes?

Mr. Cook: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has paid any attention whatever to what has been happening in the Palestinian territories during the past month or, indeed, during the past five years. Income in those territories has gone down by a third over the past five years. During the past month, large parts of the infrastructure have been smashed, with total damage from that destruction amounting to well over £200 million. People in the Palestinian territories are desperate. I do not believe that it would assist the peace process at all if the European Union were to stop providing humanitarian and reconstruction aid for those people. Furthermore, the hon. Gentleman should be careful not to spread false allegations that European funds support terrorism. The European Union has made it plain that it has carefully audited the trail of money and that, to its knowledge, none of it has ever been used for terrorist activities.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to VARDA—the Victims of Air Related DVT Association—and the Aviation Health Institute for raising public awareness of the problem of deep-vein thrombosis in air travel? Is he aware that, this afternoon, in the precincts of the Palace, they are launching a report which shows that 43 per cent. of the people who have died from deep-vein thrombosis were aged between 20 and 40, which almost certainly shows that the problem is directly related to the unique conditions of flying? Given that the Government lead the world in calling for and supporting international research into the problem, does my right hon. Friend share my sheer disbelief that the Australian Government refuse to fund the World Health Organisation research? They are placing that research at risk, yet they stand to benefit most from it. Will my right hon. Friend use his good offices to try to persuade them to change their mind?

Mr. Cook: I am happy to congratulate those organisations on their work on drawing attention to the matter, although I do not think that anyone has done more than my hon. Friend to draw attention to the problem of deep-vein thrombosis. I fully agree about the importance of our carrying out research to ensure that the necessary steps are taken to minimise the risk of deep-vein thrombosis.

I do not want to get into the business of criticising a foreign Government about their attitude to that or many other matters. I am proud of the fact that Britain has taken the issue seriously and is providing leadership. I hope that, in time, other countries will follow that lead.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): On 16 January, I put a question to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the number of claimants for incapacity benefit in York and North Yorkshire. I received the figures in a written answer on 6 March. However, this week, I received a letter from a Minister in the Department stating that the figures were incorrect and that he had published revised figures. Will the Leader of the House confirm that, in such circumstances, it is customary for the Minister in question to apologise and explain why the figures were incorrect, whether they were higher or lower than the original figures, and why the revised version was necessary.

Mr. Cook: I did not hear anything in what the hon. Lady said that seemed in any way improper or in breach of ministerial duty. If the Minister discovered that the figures provided to him were in error, he was right to correct the record. There is a duty on him to do so. I am confident that the previous figures were provided in good faith. Given the many thousands of questions that have to be answered—some of which are highly statistical—it will occasionally be necessary to correct figures. I gently suggest that such situations were not unknown when the hon. Lady's party was in government.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Clearly, the whole House deplores the suicide bombings that took place a couple of days ago in Israel and Pakistan, but the stark contrast is surely between the expected responses. It is inconceivable that France would engage in reprisal killings or the wanton destruction of poor people's homes. May I endorse other hon. Members' requests that we should have an early debate on the middle east and its wider implications? If Sharon continues to exercise a licence to kill and to block the Jenin inquiry, that could surely undermine the United Nations in the way that the failure to act effectively over Japan/Manchuria and Italy/Abyssinia undermined the League of Nations in the last century, leading eventually to war.

Mr. Cook: Of course I hear the very strong feelings among a number of Members who have taken part in the

exchanges on the situation in the middle east, and they are absolutely right to be deeply concerned about what may be the wider implications not only for the region—the current situation in the middle east is a major threat to stability of the wider region—but for the standing and status of the United Nations, which, initially in response to an Israeli view, offered an inquiry into Jenin only to have that inquiry refused by the Israeli Government. I hope that a way forward will be found to ensure that the UN can play a constructive and real role. I assure my hon. Friend that the British Government are doing everything that an outside power can possibly do to try to bring both sides to the negotiating table.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): The Leader of the House will be aware that today is Europe day and that the future of Europe is currently being considered in the convention chaired by the former President of France, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Twice in recent weeks, the Minister for Europe has made the Government's position on the future of Europe clear to members of that convention. Will the Leader of the House tell us when hon. Members will have an opportunity to debate the Government's proposals for the post-enlargement period from 2004? Will he also tell us what arrangements will be made to allow the parliamentary representatives from the House—the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) and the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory)—to report on their contributions to that convention?

Mr. Cook: I have told the House before that we are examining how we may provide an appropriate forum for the House's representatives to the convention—as well as the Minister for Europe, who represents the Government—to report to hon. Members. I hope soon to be able to announce those proposals.

John Cryer (Hornchurch): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst), my right hon. Friend may be aware that London bus workers lobbied Parliament yesterday. London is different from the rest of the country because an element of regulation was maintained after privatisation, but a route-based franchising system is used. That is a direct threat to the standard of services across Greater London because the system operates to bear down on costs, which screws down wages, pension rights, terms and conditions and even, in some cases, the condition of the buses that operate on those routes.

My constituency is more or less on the border between the regulated part of the bus network and the unregulated part which exists in Essex. I have been involved in several campaigns to save various bus services. So when we have a debate on bus services in Britain, could it extend to the regulated part in London, not just to the part outside that area?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend will of course be aware that pay for bus drivers and other staff is a matter for the companies and unions concerned, but the companies negotiating those wage settlements with their staff are, in part, subsidised by Transport for London. The Government's grant for Transport for London has rocketed in recent years. Indeed, it recently went up by 100 per cent. My hon. Friend may wish to ask Transport for London what has become of all the increased investment that we have made and why it has resulted in such a difficult situation for some of the staff who provide the service.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The Leader of the House will have read reports to the effect that political advisers are being asked to amend, or tamper with, Ministers' answers to parliamentary questions. I am sure that he will agree—as will you, Madam Deputy Speaker—that parliamentary questions are one of the crucial ways in which Members from both sides of the House can hold the Executive to account and gain information on behalf of their constituents. If there is no truth in those reports, I am sure that the Leader of the House will want to let the House know, and we will all be entirely happy and very satisfied. If there is any truth in those reports, perhaps he will arrange for a statement to be made to explain the full detail of that further imposition on the rights of parliamentarians by the Executive.

Mr. Cook: The right of Parliament is to receive full and accurate answers, which is set out in the ministerial code, and Ministers are accountable for those answers. I am all in favour of Parliament's being rigorous and vigorous in ensuring that Ministers are held to account for the answers that they give. In those circumstances, it is not unreasonable for Ministers to seek advice from those in their own offices.

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): May I tell my right hon. Friend that, last Thursday, Councillor Jim Speechley, the Tory leader of Lincolnshire county council, was in court facing eight criminal charges and that the very next day, he was found guilty in an independent public interest report of intimidation and being behind illegal payments totalling some £750,000? I am sure that my right hon. Friend will share my immense concern that, last night, the same councillor was re-elected as Tory leader of Lincolnshire county council. Will my right hon. Friend find time to debate standards in local government so that I can have the opportunity to raise the very real and pertinent concerns of my constituents, who, after all, rely on the political management of the authority to deliver essential services to them?

Mr. Cook: I heard what my hon. Friend said with interest. I am very pleased that the business statement has given her the opportunity to complete the intervention that she attempted earlier this afternoon. I certainly take a dim view of the conduct in local government that she describes, and I very much hope that the electors of Lincolnshire will find a happier and better outcome in future. *[Interruption.]* If the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) wants to help to raise standards in local government, the best way for the Conservatives to do so would be to encourage Dame Shirley Porter to return to answer the very grave and serious charges that are still outstanding from the period when she was a senior Conservative leader in London and a close friend of the then Conservative Prime Minister.

Annabelle Ewing (Perth): The Leader of the House will be aware of the concerns that have been raised about the operation of removal centres for asylum seekers, such as Dungavel, but he may not be aware that a cross-party

[Annabelle Ewing]

delegation is to visit Dungavel a week tomorrow. If concerns arise further to that visit, will he try to find time to ensure that those matters can be debated in the House?

Mr. Cook: I am advised that that delegation will be the third cross-party delegation to visit Dungavel in recent times, which shows the commitment of the authorities to transparency. I understand that there are deep concerns. Indeed, as a Scottish Member, I have seen them expressed in the Scottish press. Opportunities are open to the hon. Lady and her colleagues to raise that matter in the House if they wish to do so—it would seem to be an appropriate issue to pursue in Westminster Hall.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): The Leader of the House has been very patient with my frequent questions about the future of the reform of the second Chamber. I am concerned that there are still not very clear smoke signals about where the process is going. I wonder whether we might have a discussion shortly so that we can see the future shape of the Government's proposals and so that hon. Members can discuss them.

Mr. Cook: I am not sure that I can promise smoke signals. I do not really think that they would help us to shed light on the topic. My hon. Friend congratulates me on my patience. She must be patient for a little longer: her patience may not be exhausted.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): The Leader of the House may recall that I raised the issue of Powderject and the smallpox vaccine last week. Is he aware that there have been some new developments? First, it has been announced that the chief executive officer of Powderject, Paul Drayson, has given another £50,000 to the Labour party.

Secondly, we know that, having paid £32 million by Her Majesty's Government for the contract, Powderject subcontracted the work to Bavarian Nordic for the sum of 17.5 million euros—a profit of £22 million. Bavarian Nordic, however, went on to subcontract the work, as we now know, to IDT, the German company, for less than 10 million euros. In other words, there could have been a saving to the taxpayer of £28 million.

The Leader of the House said last week that it did not matter what Powderject did with the contract having won it. Surely, if we had had an open, competitive tender, we could have gone straight to the east German company and saved £28 million. The Labour party has gained £100,000 out of this and the taxpayer has lost £28 million.

Mr. Cook: Business questions would not be complete without the hon. Gentleman raising a question about Powderject. I anticipated that he might ask about it again today, and I am in danger of becoming a walking expert on the Powderject contract. First, it was known from the start that Bavarian Nordic would be the company that would receive the work and provide the vaccine. Indeed, right from the start, Bavarian Nordic made it plain that Powderject would be its chosen supplier through the United Kingdom. There is no evidence that the contract would have cost any less had we dealt directly with Bavarian Nordic, had Bavarian Nordic been willing to deal with us.

Secondly, I remind the House that five companies bid for this tender. Of the five, only the Powderject/Bavarian Nordic tender could provide us with the vaccine that we needed in time—by the end of the year. It was on that basis, and solely on that basis, that it won the contract.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): On Select Committee modernisation, which my right hon. Friend mentioned in his statement, will he join me, as a member of the now ubiquitous Public Administration Committee, in welcoming the Prime Minister's historic decision to appear before the Liaison Committee? Does he agree that the House, as much as the Prime Minister, will be under the spotlight when that happens? Does he agree that the Prime Minister appearing in front of a Committee of 34 members does not necessarily show the House in its most modernised light?

Mr. Cook: I appeared, at length, before the Liaison Committee yesterday, and we had a consensual and friendly exchange of views. One of my proposals had been to reduce marginally the size of the Liaison Committee, which I discovered was not welcome with the Liaison Committee, which then produced a report that said that the number of members should stay the same. Yesterday, I accepted its view that it should stay at the same number, and was much entertained that some members of the Liaison Committee immediately expressed disappointment that I had not rejected their recommendations.

This matter is in the hands of the Liaison Committee, and it must address it. I know from exchanges yesterday that it is also conscious that this will be a very high-profile occasion, and that it will also be under the spotlight. It is important that that exchange—which will be significant in improving the accountability of the Government to the House—should go forward with dignity, and there should be a robust but, nevertheless, civilised exchange on the policy issues, of which many Chairs of Select Committees and the Liaison Committee have a detailed knowledge and which they will want to explore in detail.

Points of Order

3.3 pm

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you advise me how to correct a false impression given to the House earlier by the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice)? I have tried to contact him, but, regrettably, I have not been able to do so in time. The problem arises from an exchange with the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, and it matters because it touches on the careers of senior public servants in this country who are not able to defend themselves in public and who often serve the country for a very long time and very loyally. They have been dragged into this matter, and the very least that we can do is to quote their words correctly.

I quoted precisely from the record in my question of the Secretary of State. From memory, the hon. Member for Pendle said that the Secretary of the Cabinet had told Sir Richard Mottram to make a personal statement. When I asked the Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir Richard Wilson, whether he had instructed or told Sir Richard Mottram to make a statement, he said:

"He was not acting on my instruction".

Clearly, the two men had discussed the matter because they were creating an important precedent for the civil service, but Sir Richard Mottram was not acting on instructions. The problem arises because the Secretary of State chose not to answer the question that I asked. Characteristically, he answered a different question, and that is his problem. We should not, however, drag civil servants into debate in the House in such a way unless we can be very precise. I would like to know if there is any way in which this can be put right.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): That is not a point of order for the Chair, but the hon. Gentleman's comments are now on the record.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the course of the Deputy Prime Minister's prepared statement, he made a reference to Conservative party policy on devolution of institutions in Northern Ireland that was wholly inaccurate. It is not a matter of debate but a matter of record that the Conservative party supported the Belfast agreement and continues to do so. It therefore continues to support the devolved institutions. Could you advise the House and the Deputy Prime Minister as to what would be the most appropriate way for him to come to the House to correct the record? I hope that that will be an opportunity for the Deputy Prime Minister to set an example to other Ministers.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, that is not a point of order but a point of debate. The hon. Gentleman's comments are on record.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In response to me just now, the Leader of the House indicated that he understood that S.I. 843 dealt only with the carcases of animals. That is not the case. Part 5 deals specifically with live animals. The statutory instrument extends the regulations on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies in a way not seen previously. Indeed, some sections deal with the Minister's right, after appeal, to withdraw the notice of intended slaughter. This statutory instrument, which has been put through the House in the most covert way, replicates a large portion of a Bill that lies in another place. The Government therefore felt that primary legislation was needed. I fail to understand why the Government, without proper consultation with the industry or veterinarians, and without proper scrutiny by the House, are now seeking to use the secondary legislation route when, only a few months ago, Ministers told us that they urgently needed to pass the measure through primary legislation. I urge that we have an opportunity to question the Minister responsible before it is too late, and it is past the date by which we have an opportunity to make representations.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am in no position to adjudicate on what the hon. Lady or the Leader of the House has said. I suggest that she contacts the Legal Services Office to see if her interpretation is correct.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Following these exchanges, could you ask Mr. Speaker whether consideration could be given to providing a routine extension to Question Time to allow time for correction of inaccurate statements by Ministers? It appears that serious inaccuracies are arising frequently in Ministers' statements, and it seems appropriate that they are given an earlier or an immediate opportunity to correct what they have said wrongly to the House. Perhaps Mr. Speaker could consider offering the House that opportunity so that there is not a long delay between the original inaccurate statement and the correction, if we ever get the correction at all.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that that is the whole purpose of being able to ask questions and raise points on statements.

NATIONALITY, IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM BILL (PROGRAMME) (No. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Order [28 June],

That the Order of 24th April (Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill (Programme)) be amended by the substitution in paragraph (3) (proceedings in Standing Committee) of the words 'Tuesday 21st May' for the words 'Thursday 16th May'.— *[Mr. Kemp.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Finance Bill

(Clauses 4, 19 to 23, 26 to 29, 87 to 92, 131 and 134, and Schedules Nos. 1, 5 and 38)

Considered in Committee [Progress 8 May].

Clause 89

CONTROLLED FOREIGN COMPANIES AND TREATY NON-RESIDENT COMPANIES

3.9 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I beg to move amendment No. 34, in page 63, line 33, at end insert—

'(iii) has otherwise been resident outside the United Kingdom and not resident in the United Kingdom for a period of three years.'.

The clause would extend the regime for controlled foreign companies—CFCs—to parent companies that emigrate from the United Kingdom after March this year so as to protect the tax profits of their overseas subsidiaries in certain circumstances. Its objective is to prevent the abuses that could flow from the new substantial shareholders exemptions in other parts of the Finance Bill. Non-UK subsidiaries will have to demonstrate that they are not CFCs and will pay UK tax if they cannot meet the exemption requirements.

Will the Economic Secretary tell us how practical the arrangements will be and how the Revenue intends to operate them? Let us suppose that a company that is UK resident or UK incorporated moves its central management to Holland or to Germany—both probably have more attractive taxation arrangements for multinationals—and let us suppose that it has a subsidiary in Hong Kong. That subsidiary might meet the requirements of the equivalent Dutch or German CFC rules, but not those of the UK. As a result, the Hong Kong company might be liable for tax in the UK. That is extraordinary, because a German-resident company could complete UK returns in respect of its Hong Kong subsidiary.

The point should also be made that emigration does not always take place for tax-motivated reasons. In the global world in which we live, the UK obviously needs to be tax competitive to attract and retain the headquarters of multinational companies. The more European Union member states compete, the more that will become an issue, but companies' motivation is not necessarily fiscal.

The clause will treat companies that emigrate as though they are UK tax resident for ever. There is prima facie legal argument that the provision should lapse after a certain period, and the amendment, on the suggestion of legal advice, proposes that the provision should lapse after three years.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): I thank the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) for the measured way in which he moved the amendment. I note that he made general points about the purpose and appropriateness of the clause, so I hope that, by explaining its purpose, I shall be able to reassure the Opposition about the detail and persuade them that the amendment is wholly inappropriate.

Clause 89 is part of the package of measures that provides for an exemption from tax for the gains and losses made by companies on the disposal of substantial shareholdings. That package is being introduced to enable UK-based companies and groups to restructure flexibly and rapidly in response to emerging global opportunities without facing the prospect of a large tax charge. The clause updates the existing protection against companies artificially leaving the UK and will maintain existing defences against abuse following the introduction of the widely welcomed substantial shareholdings exemption.

The updated protection affects only one specific—and rare—type of company: one that is resident for tax purposes both in the UK and another country but, for the purposes of a tax treaty, is treated as resident outside the UK. In practice, the protection will bite only where the company is treaty non-resident for mainly fiscal rather than commercial reasons—in other words, in essentially contrived, inherently artificial situations in which companies are unlikely to find themselves by chance. When the protection applies, UK companies that have become treaty non-resident through such artificial contrivances will remain within the scope of the UK's CFC provisions in respect of their overseas subsidiaries.

The clause reflects extensive consultation with business in the course of which there was a general agreement that a revenue protection measure was appropriate, although admittedly there was less consensus about the form that the revenue protection measure should take. The approach taken by the clause was adopted after careful examination of alternative options. Its effectiveness will be kept under close review. It will have no application to the vast majority of companies and, in practice, as I have already said, it will affect only the companies that seek to migrate from the UK for mainly fiscal rather than commercial reasons after 1 April 2002.

3.15 pm

The amendment would restrict the continued application of the UK's CFC rules to just the first three years following a migration—whether or not that migration was wholly artificial, and whether or not the substance of the company's operations remained in the UK. Although I understand the concerns that underlie the amendment, I do not think that it represents the right way to address them.

Mr. Flight: If I understand the Economic Secretary correctly, what she says amounts to a three-year period. However, it will operate in the background and is not specified in the clause.

Ruth Kelly: I shall explain precisely how the provision will work in practice.

As I have said, the clause is all about protecting the Exchequer from those companies that would seek to use artificial means to avoid UK tax. I do not think those who have proposed this amendment would wish it to help such companies but, unfortunately, it would. It would enable such companies to indulge in artificial migration schemes at relatively little cost. They would be subject to the CFC rules for just three years after they had put the artificial structure in place and would be free to divert profits from the UK for ever after. The artificiality could, and in most cases no doubt would, remain for ever and, for that reason, I cannot accept the amendment.

That is not to say that I do not recognise that there is a legitimate concern over companies that migrate for genuine, non-tax-driven reasons. It is helpful that the Opposition have raised this issue as it has given me the opportunity to allay that concern. The clause is not aimed at companies who migrate for genuine, non-tax-driven reasons and will not, in practice, affect them because the CFC rules apply only to companies where one of the main reasons for their existence is to achieve a reduction in UK tax by a diversion of profits from the UK.

I recognise that, although the clause will not affect such companies in practice, compliance with the administrative requirements of the CFC rules might be an unwelcome burden. The answer is not, however, to exclude all companies from the ambit of the clause after three years. The answer lies in finding sensible ways of minimising that burden. I think that we have done that with this Bill. The Inland Revenue already operates a well established CFC clearance system that, in certain circumstances, can amount to an across-the-board clearance for all a company's CFCs. The Revenue has already indicated to business representatives in the constructive consultation period leading up to this clause that it will extend this clearance system, where appropriate, to companies which have left the UK for genuine commercial rather than fiscal reasons.

Indeed, the Revenue has confirmed that, although each clearance application will be dealt with quite properly on its merits, it would envisage such clearances, where appropriate, to be effective for between three and five years. It would also expect them to be automatically renewable thereafter so long as the relevant facts, circumstances and applicable law remain unchanged and the company has laid all its cards on the table. Of course, such clearances are legally binding on the Inland Revenue so long as the company has disclosed all the relevant facts. That should ensure that the clause will not, in practice, affect those companies which migrate for genuine commercial reasons and ensure that any residual compliance burdens for such companies are minimal. At the same time, the Exchequer will be protected against essentially contrived, artificial migrations.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs raised a specific point about how we can ensure that a company will not be subject to the CFC laws of more than one country. Each country has, of course, the right to apply its CFC rules at it sees fit within the constraints of international law. It has always been technically possible for a CFC to fall within the CFC rules of more than one country. The Inland Revenue, however, has published guidance on how the UK's CFC rules will be applied in such situations, and has confirmed that it has encountered no difficulties to date in the application of that guidance. I do not see any reason why this measure should make a significant difference. On those grounds, I urge the House to reject the amendment and to accept the clause unamended.

Mr. Flight: I thank the Minister for her comments. I want to be clear on the matter, so I shall use simple language. One or two Finance Bills ago, Vodafone disagreed with the Government about certain tax proposals. Had it migrated, as it threatened, the immediate reason would have been fiscal. However, it could have been argued that it was also commercial. I cannot imagine that had Vodafone gone through the due legal process and migrated to Germany, or wherever, it would have been practical for the United Kingdom Inland Revenue to pursue a CFC case across the world.

We support and understand the need for the anti-avoidance objectives, but I am not clear about the practicality of the proposals as they relate to company mobility, especially of multinational headquarters. The Minister said that the CFC rules will end after three years. I repeat my request: does that serve to produce the same effect as our amendment, which advocates the same three-year limit?

Ruth Kelly: I repeat that we want to ensure that companies do not migrate from the UK purely for fiscal reasons rather than for genuine commercial reasons. There will be a process of negotiation between the Inland Revenue and an individual company. As long as the facts are clear and the Inland Revenue is convinced that the migration is for purely commercial reasons, it will be approved.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): So that we understand the Minister's point with even greater clarity, will she comment on the motive test that is used to determine the adjudication of the Inland Revenue as part of the process that she describes?

Ruth Kelly: The purpose of the clause is to build on processes that are in place. The Inland Revenue informs me that two thirds of the applications that are made to it for migration on the basis of commercial reasons are approved. It has encountered no particular difficulties. The facts of the case are not often in dispute and it is usually apparent whether the move is for genuine commercial reasons or tax reasons. The Inland Revenue hopes to continue that practice.

Mr. Jack: I did not ask for a description of how the Inland Revenue operates. I want the Minister to tell us a little more about the method of adjudicating the motive for companies that move, such as the example cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). It is the motive test that interests me, not the fact that the Inland Revenue is performing its duties successfully.

Ruth Kelly: I shall certainly write to the right hon. Gentleman on the detail, but the clause is not about judging motive. It relates to the facts on the table and making a decision about whether an arrangement is artificially contrived to avoid tax. If the board of a company gets on a plane every month and holds its meetings in a different country while retaining control within the UK, that would clearly be artificially contrived to avoid our tax legislation. The Inland Revenue would reasonably wish to recover tax in such circumstances, and the clause will allow it to do just that.

Mr. Flight: Again, I thank the Minister for her comments. I believe that she is saying that if a company emigrates for genuine reasons and its management and control are clearly overseas, that is acceptable. However, if it gets up to wheezes such as holding board meetings abroad when most of its activities at headquarters are conducted here, that is avoidance. The clause appears to be capable of operating in that context.

[Mr. Flight]

I had in mind a company that has left the country properly, taking its control and management overseas, because of lower taxation in, for example, Germany. The Minister implied that that would be a commercial reason for migrating and not a false fiscal reason. I thank her for clarifying how the clause will work and I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 89 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 90

SUPPLEMENTARY CHARGE IN RESPECT OF RING FENCE TRADES

Mr. Flight: I beg to move amendment No. 2, page 63, line 38, leave out "17th April 2002" and insert "1st April 2003".

The Temporary Chairman (Mr. Joe Benton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 22, page 64, line 10, leave out "17th April 2002" and insert "1st April 2003".

No. 33, page 65, line 17, at end add—

"(11) This section shall come into force on such day as the Treasury may by order made by statutory instrument appoint, but no such order shall be made until an economic impact assessment has been made of the effect of the changes on activity and employment in the oil industry in the North Sea.".

I have agreed to allow a separate vote on amendment No. 33.

Mr. Flight: The issues raised by the amendments are some of the most important that we shall consider. The Committee and the Government will be aware that a broad cross-section of people in political parties—certainly Scottish MPs of all parties—and the oil industry think that the proposal is not wise. I hope that the Government will listen to the arguments and think about them before we reach the Bill's final stages.

To make sense of the amendments, I shall run through the arguments. The clause imposes a 10 per cent. supplementary charge on top of the 30 per cent. corporation tax charge on oil companies. Clause 91 sets out the process for assessment and clause 92 sets out the transitional provisions. The amendments are designed, in different ways, to prune back or check what is provided and, in some cases, to delay implementation until proper further consideration is given.

The central issue is that the Treasury argues that it will be commercially successful to levy significant extra tax on the oil industry. The Treasury knows that independent assessment estimates that, if oil prices remain reasonably stable, between now and 2010 that will generate about £6 billion in extra tax, some £2 billion of which will be realised in the coming fiscal year. The Government's case is that that would not materially damage investment, employment and operations in the North sea.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Paul Boateng): So much to learn.

Mr. Flight: I beg to disagree with the Minister, and I shall run through why. If he is not aware of the industry's concerns, he has not done his homework. The trade representative body for the industry has set out in detail the full reasons why the industry believes that the proposal will be extremely damaging.

The Government have made the wrong judgment. On the central issue of the movement of oil prices, I suspect that they did their thinking earlier in the year when oil prices were higher. They did not expect oil prices to be in the order of $18 to $20 or take account of the increases in output from Russia over the next few years.

Mr. Jack: Has my hon. Friend in his researches discovered any analysis to explain whether North sea oil production is undertaxed, which would justify the proposals dealt with by his amendments?

3.30 pm

Mr. Flight: I have found no such evidence; if anything, oil production is overtaxed, particularly in relation to the risks and nature of the businesses, as I shall explain. I have been trying to stress that the Treasury decision was made in the expectation of higher oil prices and was commercially wrong. That has nothing to do with whether it was morally right or wrong. The Treasury's analysis was grounded on excess profitability, but was based on far too short a period of profitability in recent times when oil prices have been higher. Independent analysis of profitability shows that between 1996 and 1999 profit margins have been as little as 1 to 8 per cent., based on an oil price of $15 to $20 a barrel. The United Kingdom needs to be fiscally attractive to meet the challenge of a mature industry that has an unfavourable risk reward profile compared with other parts of the world, particularly the Mexican basin, and whose operations are relatively expensive.

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): The hon. Gentleman's arguments would be a little stronger were it not for the fact that in 1993 the Conservative Chancellor raised oil taxes and took £600 million to £700 million from the North sea. Some commentators, encouraged by the then Chancellor, described that as a boost to the North sea oil industry. How is that consistent with the hon. Gentleman's position?

Mr. Flight: First, the lesson was learned. I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman gave the correct date. He mentioned 1993, but I think that the lesson was learned in 1983 when the Conservative Government put up taxation on the back of rising oil prices. There was a reaction, which will be repeated if the present measures are accepted, but thereafter there was a settlement with the industry.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): The hon. Gentleman may recall—I was in the House then and remember it well—that we divided the House and voted against the Conservative Government. The then shadow Chancellor refused to join us on the grounds that he supported the then Government's tax.

Mr. Flight: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who has beaten me to it. I was about to say that we learned our lesson in 1983 and a stable tax regime for the oil industry has been a necessary and effective platform for success ever since.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): It is true that there was a tax change in 1983, which the then

Government described as a boost for the industry. Over the past few days, the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) has been describing the current proposed tax change as a boost for the industry. It appears that he has been learning lessons from the Conservative Government.

Mr. Flight: Things never change.

Before the proposed income tax increases, in a comparison of the profitability attractiveness of 57 countries, the UK was ranked 31st for the North sea basin and 40th for the southern basin. The UK fields are smaller, the costs are higher and the risk reward is considerably less attractive than in most other parts of the world. Extraction costs are about $8 a barrel, which are among the highest—58th out of 59—anywhere in the world. Those figures, as I am sure the Minister is aware, were produced by Wood Mackenzie investment bank.

Investment decisions by the industry are not based solely on rate of return computations, but are made in the context of fiscal considerations, cash flow and risk reward in relation to the size of the investment programme. They are also—this is very much what we have just been talking about—a factor in the stability of the tax regime in which they are made. Many people inside and outside the industry view the Government's proposals as a breach of faith, given their pilot scheme, which has been extremely successful in recent years in encouraging a significant increase in North sea investment. In 2001, 21 new fields went into operation at an investment cost of £8.23 billion—double the 2000 level—so, not surprisingly, it is felt that the significant tax increase will have a retroactive impact on investment decisions, which the Government have encouraged people to take on the basis of a stable tax regime. People are zapped with significantly higher tax on investments to which they have committed themselves.

If there is a breach of faith, previous experience shows that there is a serious risk that the multinationals, which are the main participants, will look at other areas of the world, particularly the Gulf of Mexico, as they offer much more attractive fiscal arrangements, risk rewards and field sizes.

Roger Casale (Wimbledon): The hon. Gentleman did well to remind the Committee that the previous Administration extracted a substantial revenue stream from North sea oil throughout their period in office, as they did from the privatisation of many national industries. However, the Committee will not need reminding that the Conservatives did very little with those resources. In fact, at the same time as drawing that income stream from the taxation of North sea oil, it piled up more and more national debt. Just when we are at the point of using those resources to invest in public services, the hon. Gentleman opposes the tax from which his party profited throughout its period in office, although the nation gained precious little.

Mr. Flight: That is a pretty feeble and irrelevant comment by the hon. Gentleman. The issue is simply whether additional taxation of the industry will have a major impact on investment, employment and the health of the industry. Self-evidently, as I have said, the Treasury has decided upfront that the proposal will not lead to that. However, as I am endeavouring to explain to the Committee, the industry and most outside commentators believe that that is not the case; the change is unwise because it will seriously damage employment, investment, operations and the amount of oil that we produce; we are now virtually self-sufficient. All Governments, going back to the Labour Government of the 1960s, have taken tax revenue from North sea oil.

The net effect of the measures will be to take £6 billion of cash flow out of the industry over the next eight years and to produce an annual fall of about £2 billion in retained earnings, which will clearly have an impact on the cost of raising capital for oil companies through their share prices and gearing.

Historically, independent analysis has shown, for better or for worse, that tax more than the price of oil has driven North sea development and North sea investment. The measure will make the UK uncompetitive and unattractive. It will increase the UK marginal tax rate from 69.4 per cent. to 73.7 per cent. at a time when the industry has been doing extremely well in a mature environment. I congratulate the Department of Trade and Industry on the success of its pilot scheme. We are producing 85 per cent. of our primary needs.

The measure will put the future of the industry at risk, and many companies have indicated that they will rebalance their world activities. I shall deal later with the depressing figures that indicate that the proportional interest in investments offered since the Budget show an immediate downwards reaction.

Finally, the tax will apply to the 41 per cent. of production that constitutes gas. In the past three years, gas prices have been falling, not rising.

Let me deal with specific issues arising from the tax proposals. Not only are financing charges, as provided, not allowable against expenses, but as the charge is a special supplementary charge, it is unclear whether brought-forward losses could be offset against it. It is not a standard corporation tax charge. More fundamentally—I raised the issue on Second Reading—will the tax paid with the supplementary charge be creditable by non-UK parent companies receiving dividends from their UK subsidiaries under double taxation treaties against their tax liabilities elsewhere? If not, there is a significant risk that double taxation will be paid, particularly by US companies. If that is the case and if it is not changed, the UK will be saying goodbye to the very favourable double taxation treaty that we negotiated with the United States last year but for which, for reasons not explained, the Government have not yet put through the necessary legislation. Although that is a different issue, it would be interesting to know why.

On royalties, the Government have argued that a combination of the offer to negotiate and get rid of royalties, and capital allowances, would go quite a long way to offset the proposed increase in taxation. That is not the view of the industry. Indeed, many in the industry would argue that the abolition of royalties is not a particularly good idea as it does not encourage new developments, which have been exempt since 1982, and could give rise to windfall profits on old fields.

However, the Government have not given a commitment to abolish royalties—there is nothing in the Red Book to that end. Current royalty receipts are of the order of £500 million per annum. They are not allowable against petroleum revenue tax and corporation tax

[Mr. Flight]

computations, and the independent assessment of the future saving up to 2005 is £120 million to £150 million per annum.

The Chief Secretary argued on Second Reading that the additional taxation would be entirely offset by first year allowances. The Wood Mackenzie figures that I quoted suggested that that is nonsense. They show an impact of £8 billion on profits, assuming stable oil prices between now and 2010, versus a deterioration of £6 billion in the cash flow position. That suggests that the Chief Secretary's claim is not correct.

3.45 pm

Given that 6 per cent. of Scottish employment is in the industry, no wonder most, if not all, Scottish Members of Parliament are worried. Given the way in which the Chancellor usually protects his back-garden Scottish interests, I wonder whether he is fully aware of the likely impact. As the House may be aware, in the past 10 years the only two economies to introduce tax increases of comparable size have been Argentina and Venezuela.

In view of all the Government's claims about consultation before imposing major measures, the industry is rightly offended that there was no consultation on these proposals. They are ill-conceived and, as precedent shows, it is dangerous to think that Governments can merrily dip into profits every time oil prices rise. When oil prices fall, that is followed by a major decline in new investment. The long-term confidence and trust that has been built up over the past 20 years has been severely knocked. Because of its mature nature, the UK industry cannot afford to take risks with its outlook.

Amendments Nos. 2 and 22 propose a year's delay in the introduction of the charge. Other amendments deal with the rate of the charge and the treatment of financing costs. Amendments Nos. 2 and 22 seek to ameliorate the impact of measures which we believe are unwise and not in the national interest, and which will do more damage to an important industry and employer than they will bring benefit in terms of additional tax revenues.

Mr. Salmond: This subject was vigorously debated in the Scottish Grand Committee yesterday, and I do not intend to repeat the contributions that some of us made there. None the less, the issue is vital and current enough for at least some of those arguments to be brought to the Committee of the whole House.

I want to try and sweep away some of the nonsense in the debate. It is not the case that Governments do not have the right to change oil taxes. For example—never mind 1993—one of the initial acts of the Thatcher Government in the early 1980s was dramatically to increase the tax regime for North sea oil. The previous Secretary of State for Energy was Tony Benn. Margaret Thatcher decided that a more vigorous taxation regime was necessary than had been decided by Anthony Wedgwood Benn. It was extraordinary. The Government's argument was that oil prices were high and they wanted to get some of that endowment into the Treasury. Similar arguments had been used for previous oil tax changes.

So oil tax changes do take place. What is significant and different about this oil tax change is that the industry and others were led to believe, after a consultation exercise following the 1997 election, that there would be a stable tax regime. It is true that the Government can argue that the Chancellor always reserved the right to change taxation. I have no doubt, because I have been through the record, that we will not be able to cite a ministerial statement, although there were plenty of Back-Bench statements, not from the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran), but from his hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), who triumphantly told us that lobbying by her and her colleagues—presumably, she included the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central by implication—had succeeded in producing a stable tax regime in the North sea. So only last year, those hon. Members were claiming the credit for producing a stable tax regime. The same Members—and certainly the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central—now welcome the massive change to that tax regime that is proposed.

After the Budget announcement, I know that Labour Members feel that they must loyally dragoon themselves behind the Chancellor. His power over Labour Members in Scotland means that they will not enhance their career prospects by trying to gainsay him. None the less, hon. Members representing areas in north-eastern Scotland and more widely have a clear constituency interest in terms of employment. They should at least want to know about the impact on jobs and investment before they unthinkingly line themselves up behind the Chancellor and vote at their party's call without thinking of voting for themselves. It would be unreasonable of constituents in the north-east of Scotland to have to expect anything else.

The second bit of nonsense in this debate is the Government's argument about the impact on jobs. I used to deal with field financing, so I recognise what can be done with the figures. The Government cannot take £1 billion in a full year out of the North sea industry and claim that it will benefit investment in the sector. I remember a debate for the Republican nomination that occurred a long time ago between George Bush senior and Ronald Reagan, in which Ronald Reagan advanced a similar argument, although it was on a different matter, and George Bush called it levitation economics. That is what the Government are engaged in. According to them, we can take £1 billion out of the industry not only without damaging it, but benefiting it. They are saying, "We are going to take £1 billion out for your benefit; we're from the Treasury and we're here to help you"—one of the great creative lies in life.

The measure will damage the industry; the only thing to be estimated is how much damage will be caused. The demeanour and body language of the Secretary of State for Scotland was yesterday even more vigorous than usual. I would say that it was defensive, and I am pretty certain from that alone that she found out about the proposed change in Cabinet on the day of the Budget announcement. She did not confirm that in the debate, but I detected that the measure was probably as much of a surprise to her as to the industry and the rest of us.

In the Scottish Grand Committee yesterday, the Secretary of State said that she thought that the measure would minimise the impact on jobs. That is an interesting phrase, because it concedes that there will be an impact on jobs. Will the Economic Secretary tell us how minimal

that "minimal" is? Are we talking about 5,000 or 10,000 jobs? Or will 500 jobs be lost? The Secretary of State said that

"we should minimise impact on our jobs".—[*Official Report, Scottish Grand Committee*, 8 May 2002; c. 21.]

In order to make that statement, she must have had some sort of figure or quantity in mind. Surely the Economic Secretary will tell us that, before the Government undertook to make such a substantial change in oil taxation, they had at least taken into account the probable impact on jobs. If they had taken that impact into account and conducted an analysis, as was suggested to me by the Paymaster General, they must have arrived at some sort of projection.

Whatever else the Economic Secretary says, she must tell us what the figure is. How minimal is it? Is it 500, 5,000, 10,000 or more? If the Treasury cannot provide such a figure, it will, by introducing a short-term and unexpected tax change that is a reversal of what was expected only last year, stand accused of putting at risk a substantial number of jobs. I take that ill. Successive Chancellors have done well out of the North sea. Some £160 billion—£32,000 a head for every man, woman and child in Scotland—has come from the North sea in the past 20 years or so and gone straight into Treasury coffers. The percentage allocated directly to Scotland was zero.

So there was a huge windfall, and it continues; the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) was right to say that many positive things were happening in the North sea. Indeed, I listed a number of them at yesterday's sitting of the Scottish Grand Committee. They are reflected in the estimates of the Chancellor, who says that he is expecting another £32 billion out of the North sea in the next six years, which is £5,000 for every man, woman and child in Scotland. When the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs speaks about the Chancellor feather-bedding Scotland—that was the implication of his remarks as I understood them—he should reflect on such figures and on how successive Chancellors have themselves been feather-bedded by that flow of revenue from the Scottish sector of the North sea. The expected £32 billion is double the amount produced in the past six years. As the Chancellor is receiving such substantial largesse from the North sea, I think that we are entitled to ask what analysis was conducted on the jobs and investment impact of the substantial tax change in question; and to ask how specific it was and why it was not published.

Many good things are happening in the North sea, including 21 new field developments last year and the discovery in the Buzzard field of the biggest accumulation of oil found for a generation—a huge development that might generate 400 million barrels. Unfortunately, it has been confirmed that some of the DTI management for that project will be based in London, not Aberdeen, although it would have been reasonable to assume that management for a field that is located to the north-east of Aberdeen would be based there. None the less, that is a huge accumulation of oil and there are many successful developments in the North sea.

There are, however, worrying signs for the future. As I pointed out to the Scottish Grand Committee, the number of wells currently being drilled is sharply down on the number only a few years ago. In 1996, 112 exploration and appraisal wells were drilled in the waters around Scotland. Last year, 51 were drilled—a decline of more than half in the past few years.

I had a discussion yesterday with the Minister for Industry and Energy about licensing. I pointed out that for the first time ever, as far as I can remember, the DTI did not issue a press release to announce take-up of this year's levy. I speculated that the reason for that might be that out of the 289 blocks offered, only 36—12 per cent.—were applied for. I had to gain that information from the trade press, as there has been no official DTI press release. The Minister said that I was being alarmist and scaremongering, and he told the Committee—the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central will remember this—that we should not worry too much, because in last year's round the take-up was only 10 per cent. I have since looked at the figures for the 2000–01 round, which was the 19th. There were 44 blocks in all, but 12 were applied for; my arithmetic produces a take-up rate of 27 per cent.

I know that it is becoming commonplace for Labour Ministers to manage to muddle, mislead and misunderstand, but never to take responsibility for doing so. I shall derive some entertainment in the next few days from gaining from the Minister for Industry and Energy information on how the 10 per cent. mentioned yesterday in the Committee can become 27 per cent. when one looks at the figures. Even if the level was 10 per cent., it would still be a matter of huge concern to me and anybody else who is interested in the future of the industry that only 36 blocks out of 289 were taken up in the latest licensing round. That is not an issue for prolonged exchanges and parliamentary debate, but it is a matter of concern, as it tells us what will happen in the industry not in the next five or 10 years, but in next 15, 20 and 25 years. The tragedy is that all available evidence suggests that if the blocks were drilled, they would have a substantial success rate.

Perhaps the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central will anticipate my next remarks. I seem to remember him saying yesterday that the success rate in the North sea was pretty low. I have also looked at that rate in the past five years. The success rate in drilling was 17 per cent. in 1996, but in 2001, the rate was 25 per cent. in terms of the finding costs and the success rates of drilling and appraisal in the North sea.

Mr. Doran: The figures that I quoted in yesterday's Scottish Grand Committee debate, which were published by Professor Alec Kemp three or four years ago, show a one in 14 success rate. I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that exploration has reduced. That is partly because the industry has become much more focused. It is not prepared to take the risks that it took in the early 1990s.

4 pm

Mr. Salmond: I hardly think that that supports the argument that the hon. Gentleman has been pursuing in the press in the north-east of Scotland, which is that the measure is somehow a boost to the industry. If he believes, as he seems to, that the discovery rate is very poor, surely that would be a reason for him to argue against his Front Benchers. In fact, the discovery rate is high. I got these figures from Professor Alec Kemp on Monday, which postdates the hon. Gentleman's information. I shall make a copy available to him. The success rates since 1996 have been 17 per cent., 18 per cent., 17 per cent., 38 per cent., 23 per cent. and, for last year, 25 per cent. Those are good success rates.

[Mr. Salmond]

Obviously, they are not the same as they were 20 years ago—one would not expect that—but for a mature province they are excellent.

We know from the figures that the number of exploration and appraisal wells is down—there has been a sharp reduction. We know—even the Government will concede this, whatever they say about individual field projections in economics—that such aspects of oilfield financing are financed out of cashflow. Unless there is an offsetting measure in the taxation regime, the measure will result in a further decline in exploration and appraisal drilling, and hence a further decline in employment in the North sea.

The purpose of amendment No. 33—

Mr. Doran: Before the hon. Gentleman moves off the subject, I have the same figures from Professor Kemp. I want to make two points. First, I have never once said publicly that the tax change will be a boost to the North sea, so I hope that he will not continue to say that.

Secondly, the point that I was trying to make earlier, which is made forcefully by Professor Kemp in his presentation and analysis of the figures, is that the oil industry has become much more risk-averse. That has nothing to do with this tax change: it is a direct consequence of the tax changes made in 1993, which Conservative Front-Bench Members seem to have forgotten. Nowadays, most drilling is satellite drilling around existing fields, rather than the wider exploration that used to take place in the early years of the oil industry. That change has nothing at all to do with, and is unlikely to be affected by, this tax change.

Mr. Salmond: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I saw a quote from him in *The Press and Journal*, a notable paper in north-east Scotland, which seemed to suggest that he regarded this—*[Interruption.]* I shall do this for the hon. Gentleman. I dare say that he intends to speak in the debate, and I shall arrange to have the quote available by the time he does so. We can then test whether he has been misrepresented by *The Press and Journal*. I doubt that.

At the very least, the hon. Gentleman has given the impression that these tax changes are nothing much to worry about. Perhaps he will concede that point. He is not responding. Perhaps we are making progress, and the force of our arguments over the past few days are finally convincing him that some of his constituents may have something substantial to worry about owing to the changes made in the Budget. That may be belated, but better that one sinner repenteth by recognising that the Budget might damage employment prospects in his and my constituencies, and in those of many other hon. Members. If the hon. Gentleman accepts the force of that argument, I hope that his vote will follow his conscience. Hon. Members may think that unlikely, but it happens occasionally, although it is almost as rare as catching a Minister telling the truth. Such things may not happen often these days but are none the less welcome when they do.

I have never argued that it is not the Government's right to make a tax change or that it is impossible to make such a change and not damage activity. There is an argument that producing fields in which the capital outlay took place a considerable time ago are making substantial and healthy profits. However, if the Government are to make such a tax change, it should be accompanied by three things. First, there should be proper consultation and proper notice, as the Government have promised us in relation to other tax changes over the past few years. Secondly, we should have an analysis to show the impact on jobs and investment, so that we can all identify how many of our constituents will be at risk and whether the "minimal" figure is 500 or 5,000.

The third factor is the most crucial, and I want to put to the Minister some of the points that I put to Ministers in the Grand Committee yesterday. Even within the framework of this tax change, it is possible to introduce other changes that would boost investment—for example, through a further uplift for exploration and appraisal drilling. That used to be done through petroleum revenue tax. That was a very high tax, but it did not damage activity because there was an encouraging and substantial uplift to allow for exploration and appraisal drilling. Many companies, even when they were facing a high tax regime, decided to keep on drilling because it was tax efficient. It would be helpful to have an uplift for exploration and appraisal drilling.

Jim Sheridan (West Renfrewshire): The hon. Gentleman suggests that before introducing tax increases we should have analysis and consultation. Perhaps that should start within his own party, because, as he will know, the fundamentalist wing of the Scottish National party argues consistently for increased taxes on oil in an independent Scotland. How does he square that circle?

Mr. Salmond: SNP policy is clear. I have articulated it many times, as has the oil spokesperson. In a past life, the hon. Gentleman was councillor in a robust local authority in Scotland, and perhaps he carries some of those battles with him into the House of Commons. SNP policy is clearly spelled out in documents, and if he cares to look at them and restate his argument, I will respond to it. Other than that, I shall leave him to his historic battles in council chambers around Scotland.

It is possible to introduce other substantial changes to try to boost investment. I mentioned exploration and appraisal drilling and a further uplift. It might be possible to do something about field financing. Because the change will affect cash flow, in future more fields will be financed by specific field financing from financial institutions. The Liberals have tabled an amendment, which they may or may not wish to press to a vote, although I am not sure whether it would achieve what they want it to achieve. There is potential to relieve interest payments on field financing that will encourage the financing of field economics.

Conservative Members talked about the abolition of royalties. It would make a great deal more sense to abolish royalties for companies that are pursuing incremental investment in these fields. In other words, instead of people getting something for nothing, they should get something for something.

This is a substantial tax change. It is impossible to take £1 billion out of an industry without having a major impact on jobs and investment. If the Treasury gave more thought to the matter, it would be possible to make consequent changes that would encourage investment,

drilling and exploration in field development, thereby sustaining jobs in the North sea. In the long term, that would be a good deal for the Treasury. The oil revenue outlook is bright for the next six years, but I understand that the Chancellor believes that he will be in power for generations to come. In generations to come, the amount of oil revenue that comes from the North sea will be decided by the exploration and appraisal drilling that takes place now. So even in the Chancellor's self-interest, there is a substantial argument for making those changes and ensuring that we keep the show on the road.

Above all, the people of Scotland, having seen so much flow for so long from the Scottish sector of the North sea to the London Treasury, are entitled to ask Treasury Ministers to produce an analysis of the impact on jobs and investment of this tax change. If that is not produced, and no further changes are made to boost exploration, appraisal and field development, Treasury Ministers, led by a Chancellor who represents a Scottish constituency, will stand accused of sacrificing Scottish jobs for a smash-and-grab raid to fill Treasury coffers.

Mr. Doran: As the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) made clear, we had a vigorous debate yesterday in the Scottish Grand Committee, and I do not intend to repeat the points made there. He has made some substantial points, and I shall try to deal with some of them.

It is important to examine the amendments tabled by the Conservatives and the SNP. They would delay the tax for a year, and I understand the reasons for that. However, I was not clear from the speech of the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) whether the amendment was a probing amendment or a serious attempt to delay the tax. The latter entails serious dangers.

It is important to focus on a point that several hon. Members will raise today and that was made yesterday in the Scottish Grand Committee—the lack of warning that the oil industry received. I deliberately raised the 1993 Budget with the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs because there was no warning of the tax changes that the then Chancellor announced. The industry suspected that some of the larger, more substantial companies had an inkling of the changes. It was even suggested that they had actively promoted them. However, one of their effects was removing petroleum revenue tax. That had direct consequences for the reliefs that were available to the industry for exploration and appraisal. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan made that point. It is important, because that is when the difficulties in exploration and appraisal started. The industry has been contracting its efforts on that ever since.

In 1993, it was clear that substantial parts of the oil industry had no inkling of what was about to happen. I would argue strongly that the position has changed dramatically. In 1997, the new Chancellor announced that he would review oil taxation and he set out the terms for the review. As the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan made clear, I perceive the oil industry as extremely important in my constituency. It accounts for 6 per cent. of Scottish employment, but a much higher proportion in the north-east of Scotland where most of it is based. It is an important employer in my constituency.

The industry was well warned about the review. Like many other hon. Members, I lobbied strongly against it and any change in the taxation regime. I believed that that was important for one specific reason: to have a sustained period of low oil prices. There was a major problem, and I therefore believed that it was inappropriate to review the taxation at that time.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): There is a fatal flaw in the logic of that argument. It implies that the hon. Gentleman has a crystal ball that tells him that we will have a sustained period of high oil prices. We are not considering a price-sensitive profit tax.

Mr. Doran: I do not accept that. The industry was going through severe difficulties; many jobs had been shed, and it was unable to cope with the changes in the review. With many colleagues from all parties, I argued and lobbied strongly. I am clear about the reason why the Chancellor dropped the review in 1998 and decided not to press ahead. I am clear about it not only because of private discussions with the Ministers who undertook the review but because of the public statements that were made at the time. A sustained period of low oil prices was an inappropriate time to introduce any substantial tax changes to North sea oil.

I shall not bore the House with figures; the Secretary of State for Scotland read them out in the Scottish Grand Committee yesterday, but the past three years have been a period of sustained high oil prices. The industry can therefore cope with changes.

Mr. Salmond: To refresh the hon. Gentleman's memory, in 1997 the Chancellor announced that he would review oil taxation. I have a copy of the press notice, which stated that a consultative document would be issued and that people would have plenty of time to comment on it. If, after consultation in 1997, it was decided not to alter the taxation, why was no consultation document issued this time to allow the hon. Gentleman's amazing lobbying powers to come back into play? Where was the consultation?

4.15 pm

Mr. Doran: The hon. Gentleman should hear me out. The brand new Government issued a consultation document; it was a different time in the industry. I am trying to make the point that the change this year should not have come as a surprise to the oil industry. It employs some of the most sophisticated lobbying techniques of any industry in this country. All of us who have an interest in the oil industry have been subjected to that lobbying. Its lobbying of Ministers is even more intense; we know its effectiveness. The signals were there for those who chose to look. Not least were the Chancellor's declared intention in 1997, the new circumstances that have pertained for three years, and a position whereby the returns on capital in the North sea were as high as 34 per cent. That is higher than in almost any other United Kingdom industry. The change should not therefore have surprised the oil industry.

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, Maryhill): Andersen, which was part of the big six but is perhaps now part of the big five and a half, issued a post-Budget bulletin. It boasts:

"A detailed report by Andersen Petroleum Services"—

which is issued to major players in the industry—

"in September 2001 anticipated and analysed the impact of 10 per cent. SCT for North Sea oil."

That suggests that the oil industry was well aware that the change was likely to happen in the current financial year.

Mr. Doran: Absolutely.

Sir Robert Smith: If the industry has such a sophisticated and effective lobbying operation, and it knew about the change before the Budget, why did it not lobby about it before the Budget?

Mr. Doran: The hon. Gentleman might well ask that question of the oil industry. It is clear to me that it should have been more awake; it fell asleep.

Mr. Salmond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Doran: No, I have given way. Let me make a little progress.

Sir Robert Smith: Does the hon. Gentleman admit that we have a point?

Mr. Doran: I am not sure whether we should have this dialogue.

The Temporary Chairman: Order.

Mr. Doran: The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith) asked from a sedentary position whether I admitted that the change was a surprise. Of course I admit that because, as I said earlier, I believe that the oil industry fell asleep. The people who should have been in contact should have known about the change and the industry should have been prepared.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Ann McKechin) made an important point. The oil analysts do not necessarily mirror the views that have been expressed by some of the oil companies. It is no surprise that the industry opposes an increase in taxation. I would not have expected any less than its campaign. However, all the focus is on the 10 per cent. increase; the Opposition happily ignore the other side of the equation.

There has been a shift in taxation focus to profits. That will be effected when royalties are abolished, which I hope will happen soon. The 100 per cent. capital relief will change significantly the way in which work is done in the North sea. It will allow companies to get a return on their invested capital much more quickly.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan made a point about exploration and appraisal. We are not a million miles apart on that; perhaps our interpretation of the current position differs. There is a strong argument that the oil industry is being encouraged to focus on marginal drilling and enhancing existing fields. There is not a huge amount of activity. Buzzard field is an exception; much of the industry is concentrating its resources on the assets that it already has and on using existing infrastructure to develop.

In addition, we have seen a number of new companies coming into the field—the Talismans of this world, and companies such as Kerr McGee. Kerr McGee has been there for a long time, but it is one of the companies now operating in the older fields and building up a portfolio of assets in the smaller fields—the fields that the larger companies, such as the BPs and Shells of this world, will not touch because the returns on investment are not adequate.

The profile of the North sea is changing, and this Budget will accelerate that. Smaller companies such as Talisman are welcoming it, now that they have had a chance to look at it. They are welcoming the change in focus.

Mr. Jack: Can the hon. Gentleman tell the House whether all the newer fields will be profitable in the first year?

Mr. Doran: No, I cannot, because every field has its own individual profile. I, and some of the analysts I have spoken to, expect to see a change in the way money is spent in the North sea. There will be a much longer lead-in time before construction starts and money is spent on the kit that is necessary. Expenditure on that kit will be concentrated in a 12-month period so that returns can be made much more quickly.

Mr. Jack *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Doran: That is what the analysts tell me. They believe that one of the consequences of the Budget will be a change in the investment profile of the North sea. That is good news for the North sea, and it is certainly good news for employment.

When the 1993 Budget came into effect, there were about 19,000 people working in the offshore oil and gas industry, on the drilling rigs, the stand-by vessels, and so on. The number fell to 17,000, which is where some people expected it to remain. The figure today is nearly 25,000, which is a sign of the change in the industry.

We all cried doom about the tax changes in 1993, but many other factors are at play in North sea investment. Tax clearly plays a part. Despite all the doom and gloom merchants, the fact remains that the North sea will still be the lowest-taxed area of any oil province anywhere in the world.

Mr. Salmond: I am finding it quite difficult to understand the hon. Gentleman's position. Earlier, I suggested that he had said in the papers that this was a boost for the industry. My recollection is that the hon. Gentleman denied that. I have now found the quotation that I was looking for. The Aberdeen *Evening Express* of 18 April stated that

"city Labour MP Frank Doran was predicting a boost for the industry.

'It should encourage development of smaller fields, especially by smaller companies,' he forecast."

Is he saying that, on balance, this provision is a boost for the industry? Is he—like the Secretary of State for Scotland—saying that it will have minimal impact, or, like us, that it will have a substantial impact? Which of those three positions, on balance, does he adopt?

Mr. Doran: I may have to accuse the hon. Gentleman of ignoring the second part of the Budget, which provides 100 per cent. capital relief. The quote that gave relates to that relief. It is a direct quote and I accept it. I am proud to repeat it here today. That capital relief will be a boost. The overall picture for many companies in the North sea will show an improved financial position. Yes, there will be losers, and they will, generally, be those with existing installations. The effect will be spread across a fairly wide field and, on the basis of all the companies' returns over the past three years, I believe that they can well afford to pay the tax, so I make no apologies for the comments that I made.

Sir Robert Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Doran: No, I have given way quite a lot, and other Members want to speak.

In summary, the amendments are simply a spoiling tactic. It was necessary to change the taxation position. The Chancellor delayed the changes from 1997, and, in my view, the industry should have been aware that they were coming. It was not difficult to see them coming, and it should not have been difficult to plan for them. The North sea has a very adaptable and innovative industry, and it will adapt to this situation. I accept that it would have preferred the tax changes not to be made, but many companies will benefit.

The long-term future of the North sea will not be damaged by the changes; indeed, I believe that we will see increased investment, particularly in the enhanced recovery techniques in existing fields because of the full capital reliefs, and in new projects. There is every incentive to make those investments, and there is nothing to stop oil companies investing in the North sea as opposed to in any other oil regime in the world.

I want to raise with my hon. Friend the Minister an issue arising from the proposed tax changes. I have received a letter from Kerr McGee North Sea, a company based in Aberdeen. It raises an issue that no other company has raised, and I would appreciate hearing my hon. Friend's views on it. Kerr McGee suggests that one of the consequences of the tax changes will be that the supplementary charge will not be creditable against US taxes. Kerr McGee is an American company, and it is concerned about double taxation. That would be a worry, and I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to reassure me that that would not be the position.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): It is not often that I find myself putting my name alongside that of the leader of the Scottish nationalists on an early-day motion. Early-day motion 1237 states:

[That this House notes that the North Sea oil and gas industry supports six per cent. of the Scottish workforce and as such is vital to the Scottish economy; recognises that Scotland is competing against other potential investments around the world, acknowledges a marked 55 per cent. decline in exploration and appraisal since 1996; expresses its concern that the Chancellor announced a 10 per cent. supplementary charge on North Sea profits without any public economic impact assessment or formal industry consultation further notes that it contradicts the Chancellor's own policy of consultation for the Government to usher in changes to policies without public consultation; and calls on the Government to delay any changes to the fiscal regime until a full economic impact assessment can be conducted which looks at the current and future likely effects of a tax increase on employment, exploration and appraisal, and utilisation of UK pipeline infrastructure related to the North Sea.]

The motion was signed by Scottish nationalists, by Conservatives north and south of the border, and by representatives of Wales and Northern Ireland. It emphasises our concern about the impact of this measure on the oil industry in Scotland. This is not, however, an issue only about the oil industry in Scotland, or industry in Scotland. It is an issue for the entire United Kingdom. This is a fundamental, strategic industry for the whole United Kingdom, and if it suffers as a result of an ill-thought-out tax change, we will all suffer.

This measure is just another example of a lack of understanding in the Budget of the financial impact of tax increases on business. We have talked a great deal about the impact of the increase in employers' national insurance contributions. This is another example of money being taken out of business. There is no way credibly to argue that removing hundreds of millions of pounds from an industry will benefit it. That does not add up. If we take money away from somebody, they will have less money, not more.

Scotland can ill afford a drop in manufacturing investment or a drop in support for manufacturing industry at this time. At Scottish questions last week, we heard that employment in manufacturing industry in Scotland was at a low level of 281,000. There is no way in which taking this money out of Scottish manufacturing will increase that figure rather than reduce it. The Treasury Minister, who is not in his seat at the moment, argued earlier that the industry was positive about the steps being taken. I pinched myself when I heard that.

I have picked up some of the feedback that the industry has given since these measures were announced in the Budget. Let us start with the UK Offshore Operators Association, the trade association of the offshore oil and gas industry:

"UKOOA is surprised and concerned at the decision to introduce a 10 per cent. supplementary charge on North Sea profits."

The association

"fears that this could undermine investor confidence in the long-term viability of the North Sea, the very thing that the Industry has been working with Government, through PILOT, to achieve."

I could be wrong, but that does not sound to me like a ringing endorsement of the Budget's tax changes.

Lord Browne, chief executive of BP, said:

"Taken together, those steps are likely to reduce investment and to hasten the decline of production. Their direct impact will be compounded by the fact that a change made in this way reduces confidence in the stability of the regime going forward and imposes an added element of risk on all future decisions."

That does not sound like a ringing endorsement of the tax changes from the industry, either. These measures are bound to have a practical and direct consequence on

[Chris Grayling]

business decisions taken in the North sea, in the Scottish economy and in the economy throughout the United Kingdom.

On investment, Wood Mackenzie, the acknowledged industry leaders in the financial services sector, said:

"Overall, Brown's adjustments will be a blow to new UKCS entrants who have been acquiring assets unattractive to the major companies, thereby breathing new life into the North Sea. With some more marginal fields failing to be economic when taxed at 40%, several of which would have been developed, or had their life extended, could now be mothballed.".

How is that a reflection of increased investment in the North sea?

4.30 pm

There will also be an impact on suppliers—the manufacturing businesses in Scotland that produce equipment to support the oil industry. How can the removal of hundreds of millions of pounds from the industry make it more likely that those businesses will expand rather than contract? How can it make it more likely that oil companies will buy additional equipment, rather than making cuts when it comes to investment decisions?

Sir Robert Smith: May I reinforce a point that the hon. Gentleman made earlier? We should bear in mind that this change will affect not just manufacturing industry in Scotland but constituencies throughout the United Kingdom. There are businesses well away from the North sea that start the supply chain. It is the money invested in the North sea that pulls in their products. Many Members who do not think the oil industry is important to them will find that it is.

Chris Grayling: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern. My constituency, Epsom and Ewell, is quite a long way from Scotland, but I view this as very much a United Kingdom issue. As the hon. Gentleman says, there are firms throughout the country—consultancies, design companies, technology companies and manufacturing organisations—whose business will inevitably decline because the industry has less money to spend, because the Treasury has taken it. There is no other way of looking at this tax change.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart): IHS Energy Group Consultants has produced a table showing the tax take from oil in different countries, based on certain criteria. It is 88 per cent. in Norway, 70 per cent. in Canada, 75 per cent. in Australia, 80 per cent. in Angola, 65 per cent. in Brazil and 66 per cent. in the United States. The British figure has risen from 35 per cent. to 40 per cent.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman can quote all the figures he likes, but the fact remains that if £600 million is taken from an industry it has less to spend. That is basic 2 plus 2 arithmetic. Inevitably, companies operating in the North sea will have less money to spend on people, equipment, new designs, new investment and new exploration. It stands to reason. There is no escaping that reality. Moreover, our balance of payments will be affected.

Mr. Flight: The crucial point is that the marginal tax rate, which relates to new investment, will rise to about 75 per cent. The overall impact on the industry depends on that marginal rate.

Chris Grayling: That point speaks for itself.

Exports are bound to be affected. One of the problems experienced by many of our manufacturing firms results from the weakness of the euro in particular, which has led to a substantial imbalance in the currency markets and has put our manufacturers at a significant disadvantage. Every additional step taken by Government that worsens the financial position of domestic manufacturers is likely to result in equipment being bought from overseas. The firms that are investing will decide that they can save money by going to other countries—and they will have to save money, because they will have less disposable cash following the tax increase.

The consequence of all that is inescapable: there will be a cost to jobs. There is no way in which it will not feed through to the jobs market. The chief executive of the Aberdeen and Grampian chamber of commerce, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran), has said:

"There is no doubt that there will be a knock on effect on jobs. These changes will not just affect the oil majors but the countless small businesses operating in the supply chain."

That is what the chief executive said. Members should not take that from me; they should take it from her.

The measure will affect jobs and the industry, and damage the Scottish economy. It is badly thought out and badly timed, and it deserves to be opposed.

Malcolm Bruce: During my 19 years as a Member of Parliament, I have been around this course rather more often than I would wish.

Let me, like others, recall what happened in 1993, when tax changes were introduced without consultation. Whatever the longer-term implications, the short-term consequences were immediate and dire. Rigs were stacked, people were laid off, and there was a serious downturn in activity. Wildcat exploration has never recovered from the tax change—and that certainly has long-term implications.

As I said earlier in an intervention on the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), we should also remember what happened in the House when those changes were proposed. My party opposed them. It was the only party to do so, although I think the Scottish nationalists supported us when we forced a Division. In the Division Lobby, the then shadow Chancellor—the current Chancellor—rushed across to ask why I was forcing a Division. I said I was standing up for jobs and investment in the Scottish oil and gas industry. I accept that it is in fact the United Kingdom oil and gas industry, but it is heavily concentrated in the north-east. The right hon. Gentleman's response was "But when I am Chancellor, I will need that money. I am not going to support you."

I must tell the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) that two wrongs do not make a right. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs, on his own

behalf if not on that of his party, suggested that the Conservatives might have learned something from that approach. Unfortunately, so have the Labour Government, to the detriment of the industry.

I am not surprised that the Chancellor has done this. He has been yearning to do it since the day he walked into No. 10—*[Laughter.]* The right hon. Gentleman does, in fact, live at No. 10 Downing street. I meant the day he walked into the Treasury, although of course he is longing to walk into No. 10 through the front door.

The point is that the Chancellor has always seen the industry as a milch cow to fund whatever programmes he has in mind. He has never seen it as an industry. It is surprising and disappointing that he has not, given that he is a Scottish Member.

I am fairly certain that when the Chancellor instituted the review he intended to review the tax and increase it. Thanks to effective lobbying by the industry, and indeed by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central and others—and, I accept, the background of a low oil price—he was persuaded that there was no justification for such an increase, and he did not proceed.

I think those in the industry, having initially feared the worst, emerged feeling that they had engaged in worthwhile consultation, and had had a real opportunity to explain to the Chancellor the complexities of the industry and the dynamics of taxation. They felt that an understanding had been reached—that the Chancellor would not change the tax regime in future without consultation. It is pretty clear, however, that the Chancellor was shedding crocodile tears, or donning a disguise. His initial instincts remained unchanged, and in this Budget he did what he would have liked to do in his first: he grabbed the money.

It is interesting to hear Labour Members who I suspect know in their heart of hearts that what we are saying is true trying to justify the position that they have acquired. It is all very well for the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central to say that the capital uplift will in itself enable investments to go ahead. Of course we welcome the uplift, but for investment to take place companies must have the money. If that money has been creamed off in tax, there is less to invest, and there will be a consequent impact on the number of investments that take place with or without the uplift. I think the industry is conceding that across the board.

The most damaging effect, however, is the shattering of confidence. The industry felt that it had an understanding with the Government—that the Government recognised that it operated against a background of long-term horizons. It has to make calculations above oil prices that fluctuate a great deal. One thing it looks for from the Government is a degree of stability in the tax regime. I agree with the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) that that does not mean never changing the regime. None of us is suggesting that. I have certainly not opposed every tax change proposed for the North sea; but I have vigorously opposed changes that have been applied without consultation and full assessment, and which have been damaging. There have been a number of such changes, and this change is in that category.

Yesterday, the Financial Secretary put on a fairly typical bravura performance when he appeared before the Scottish Grand Committee. Nevertheless, he let slip some pretty serious errors. He compared the performance of the Scottish economy to that of the Japanese economy, which was a particularly unfortunate comparison. He also accused those of us who expressed genuine concerns on behalf of the industry, businesses and our constituents of special pleading on behalf of one sector of the economy. That one sector of the economy accounts for about 20 per cent. of all fixed investment in the United Kingdom. Collectively, it spends £8 billion a year. It is a pretty important sector that spawns Britain's biggest company. We heard one or two full-blooded red socialist speeches from Labour Back Benchers—perhaps we will hear some more—about how we should squeeze these big capitalist corporations until the pips squeak. Doing so might warm the red blood in their veins, but they should recognise that, if we squeeze those corporations too hard, the investment will not flow, jobs will dry up and we will undermine the industry's long-term future. We need a clear strategy in terms of what we want out of the North sea in the next 10, 15 or 20 years. Those short-term changes would completely destroy the credibility of such a strategy.

Jim Sheridan: The hon. Gentleman's party is well known for arguing that revenue raised from taxes should be invested in public services. He opposes these proposals, but how else does he suggest that tax revenue be raised to fund the public services that his party is glad to tell everybody they support?

Malcolm Bruce: That is a perfectly fair intervention, but I should point out that we are debating the Government's proposals. We had our own alternative Budget, and we set out our platform for how to raise the money. We were particularly in favour of increasing tax on very high earners—a proposal that old Labour also used to be keen on. We would have inposed a 50 per cent. tax on earnings over £100,000, which would have yielded substantially more than changes in oil tax.

The best way to raise taxes is a matter of judgment, and in our view this tax change is damaging to jobs, to investment, and to the long-term health of the economy. We are entitled to argue that as a perfectly reasonable debating point.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is making a characteristically sensible speech. Given the naive anti-capitalist prejudices that still permeate the thinking of all too many Labour Members, would the hon. Gentleman care to comment on the enormous capital requirements of UK continental shelf projects, and the very long time scales over which returns on capital are achieved?

Malcolm Bruce: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well—this is the point of his question—that we are talking about field lives of 20 or 30 years, and sudden fluctuations that have to be averaged out over time. The industry has to make very fine judgments on whether to invest at all. In introducing further uncertainty into a business that is already uncertain, the danger is that financial planners, in particular, might conclude that is better to invest where the uncertainties are less. It is all very well talking about taxation regimes in, say, Angola, but what concerns the industry is cash flow, the likelihood of finding a field, and the cost and scale of production. When it considers those

[Malcolm Bruce]

factors as a package, there are many more attractive prospects than the North sea. We must woo the industry and keep it here.

The issue is one of great concern. Although the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central and I are in broad agreement, he is missing one point. It is fine to promote enhanced recovery, and to encourage companies to squeeze as much as possible out of the existing infrastructure, and I accept—with the qualifications that I have already identified—that the capital uplift makes a contribution in that regard. However, it is also important that the industry be encouraged to make wildcat wells in the interests of serendipity. Such exploration has declined to an alarming extent.

We support the amendment tabled by Conservative Members, and happily support the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan. It is not a wrecking amendment but a cooling-off amendment. It points out that the Government have introduced changes that have not been fully evaluated, and which could prove deeply damaging. It invites them to delay those changes, and to discuss with the industry not necessarily abandoning them, but whether other measures could be introduced on a case-by-case basis to ensure that the damage that we fear can be avoided. Such measures might involve a combination of capital uplifts to encourage more wildcat exploration wells, or even "serendipity" appraisal wells. People forget that many holes are drilled that prove dry. Looking for and producing oil is a very uncertain science. Such measures could also include additional help, in the form of innovative techniques, for companies that want to develop technology.

4.45 pm

We do not expect the Government to abandon their proposals, although we can vote on that issue as well. The amendments invite the Government to wait for a year, consult in the light of their proposals, and before implementing them, establish on a field-by-field basis whether offsets can be found to minimise, reduce or preferably eliminate the potentially damaging effects. That seems to us a constructive engagement. I suggest to the Economic Secretary that that would also genuinely restore some of the confidence that has been lost. When I made that point before, she shook her head, but the Treasury needs to recognise that it has seriously damaged a relationship built over many years, in which the industry and the Government had a degree of confidence that they understood each other. The industry now feels that the Government do not understand, and that they are not prepared to accept what the industry regards not as special pleading, but as a genuine argument about how best to retain enough money to maintain investment, thereby maintaining the long-term future in the North sea that we want.

Professor Alec Kemp has said that, if these tax changes are implemented, the Government would yield an extra £3.7 billion from the North sea, even if the oil price fell to $15. In fact, I think he is working on a flat-line presumption. Most people in the industry say that, if the oil price fell to $15 under such a regime, activity would drop, and so would revenue.

That brings me back to another somewhat ill-judged intervention by the Financial Secretary during yesterday's Scottish Grand Committee. He alluded to the whisky industry, and boasted that, for the fifth Budget in a row, there has been no increase in spirit duty. He suggested that that is a fine achievement, and given that I have several distilleries in my constituency, I have some sympathy for that view. However, what the Financial Secretary did not say was that the last time a Chancellor—the right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke)—increased such duty, he got less revenue the following year, because the increase had a negative impact.

We need an impact study, and the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan might also want such an assessment to point out the possible range of revenue implications for the Treasury. The forecast returns might be rather less than anticipated, because of the downward effect on activity.

Although the Economic Secretary is perfectly capable of making a robust defence of the Government's position, without qualification, I urge her not to do so. Instead, I urge her to accept the genuine worries that the tax could have on long-term planning, development and investment in the North sea. I urge her to listen to those of us who have monitored the industry for many years—in my case, I have been close to the industry for 30 years. On every occasion that I have specifically lobbied against changes that I perceive to be damaging, I have been proved right and the Government of the day have been proved wrong. Therefore, the Government might have to act the wrong way round: to take a decision and then consult is sometimes better than taking a decision and then ignoring the evidence.

Ann McKechin: In today's debate, it is essential that we have regard to the context of the current state of the oil and gas industry, both nationally and internationally. It has not been a focus of the debate, but oil and gas are finite and valuable resources and they should be viewed as national resources for the benefit of a nation's citizens rather than just an industrial commodity. The UK is no different in seeking to maximise the benefit of those resources while at the same time encouraging investment and growth.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris) pointed out, the UK tax regime is favourable for the industry. For example, Norway, which operates adjoining fields in the North sea, has a tax take-up return of 88 per cent., so the increase to 40 per cent in the UK is more than reasonable. It should also be borne in mind that oil and gas producers have benefited in the Government's recent Budgets from a reduction in corporation tax, low interest rates and the introduction two years ago of roll-over relief. We must view this proposal in the general context of taxation in the past few years.

Much of our oil exploitation is carried out by some of the largest multinational companies in the world. BP alone produces 20 per cent. of our oil and gas. Given the huge wealth of those multinationals—bigger than the gross domestic product of many nations—it is perfectly fair and equitable for their tax burden to include a contribution to the health of the citizens whose natural resources they exploit to considerable profit.

Sir Robert Smith: Does the hon. Lady realise that less than 15 per cent. of BP's profits come from the North sea

and that this tax will only apply to that area? As she said, it is a major international company that can choose to invest elsewhere if it does not wish to pay the tax.

Ann McKechin: The hon. Gentleman shows precisely why the tax increase will not have a substantial impact on BP's profitability or investment policy, as has been argued this afternoon. BP's decisions will have more to do with the return that it gets from its investments, the existing investments in the field and the security of supply, which contrasts with some other parts of the globe—as the hon. Gentleman is well aware.

As I have said, it is reasonable for tax policy to require oil and gas companies to contribute to the health of citizens. Let us not forget that with the worldwide increase in oil prices in recent years the profit levels from North sea exploitation have remained very high. Currently the UK continental shelf makes significantly higher profits than the rest of UK industry, with a pre-tax rate of return of 34.3 per cent. last year against a UK average of 12.2 per cent. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why in the last year BP has sought to justify an increase in the basic salary of its chief executive, Lord Browne, of 58 per cent., taking his salary to a staggering £3 million a year. Added to that, he has been awarded further benefits that bring his package up to £6.2 million. No sooner had Lord Browne secured his increase than the new executive chairman of Shell won an 82 per cent. pay rise, although that only took his salary to a very modest £1.59 million.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): In view of my hon. Friend's argument, does she agree that it might be a better idea to tax Lord Browne, rather than an industry in a way that might cause problems with jobs?

Ann McKechin: I am sure that Lord Browne's national insurance contributions will rise, because he is paid above the threshold.

The reaction of the oil companies is all too predictable. Their financial advisers were preparing detailed reports last autumn about the effect of this tax, so it is naive to say that they did not predict it. They were aware as far back as 1998 that the Government's review of the North sea fiscal scheme concluded that aspects were unsatisfactory and that one of the two main reforms identified was a supplementary charge on North sea profits. Given the rapid increase in profits in the past three years, the use of such an option should not have come as a total shock. The oil industry is cyclical in nature and is currently enjoying a boom time that gives support to the argument for higher taxation—indeed, one which was advanced by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) in earlier years. For the major companies such as BP and Shell, the UK only accounts for a small amount of their global trade—as the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) pointed out—and the lack of reaction in the stock market to the Budget announcements is, I believe, a good signal of how little the changes will affect those companies' profitability.

At the same time the Government are well aware of the need to preserve investment and employment. The PILOT initiative has been working successfully to maximise the potential of what are now mature fields in the industry—especially in fallow fields—and to retain our skills base. More than 70 licence holders are currently active on the UK continental shelf, which—according to the industry's own economic report in 2001—is a strong indication that despite its maturity it still contains a wide range of oil and gas companies. In fact, in today's edition of the *Daily Record*, the Shell company is advertising for yet more technicians in the North sea oil industry. The tax changes do not seem to be affecting that company's continued investment in the sector.

Encouraging new companies is likely to be the way forward in the new market emerging in the mature fields. That is why I welcome the Government's decision to provide a 100 per cent. first-year allowance for capital expenditure.

The new tax regime will certainly have both winners and losers. New investors will benefit the most, and in some cases their tax burden will be less. The relative newcomer Venture Productions was quoted in *The Scotsman* of 18 April as welcoming the proposal, and said that it would provide short-term tax relief that would help development.

Oil taxation specialist Martin Kirkham is a KPMG senior manager. He has stated:

> "The new companies are going to be the winners because they will get a higher rate of relief than they would have previously. People who are sitting on their assets and who are producing and not exploring or developing are likely to be the losers."

That is exactly the investment structure that should be followed in the industry.

The Government's proposals are sensible and well balanced. They will give us the necessary income to invest in our public services. At the same time, they will encourage investment in this important industrial sector.

Mr. Jack: I am pleased to be called to speak in the debate. I want to analyse the Government's proposal, and to speak specifically to the amendments. I have some sympathy with them, as they offer the opportunity to pause to reflect on the matter.

I have been interested by the Economic Secretary's body language in the debate. From time to time she has smiled, or shown that she does not agree with what is being said, but I do not sense that she feels an obligation to the Committee to justify and explain the Government's policy. I know how these things are done, and I suspect that the Oil Taxation Office will have provided a raft of arguments for her to use to justify her position. I do not expect her to admit that there may be merit in the argument of those who oppose the proposal.

However, it is time for a more forensic examination of the Government's use of language. The Red Book states that the changes will ensure

> "a regime that raises a fair share of revenue and encourages long-term investment".

Will the Economic Secretary say what the word "fair" means? Will she say, in some detail, why the present regime is unfair, and why there is a need to raise more revenue from a sector that the Government believe has been successful? Will other industries in effect be hit by the windfall tax that the supplementary charge could be interpreted to be? That is the wider question, and it is why the amendments would either reduce or remove the supplementary charge. Others will be waiting in the wings to know the Government's exact intentions.

I am intrigued too by what the Red Book reveals about the research and development tax credit. The Government are putting forward the thesis that much economic activity

[Mr. Jack]

can be stimulated by an expenditure of £400 million, but the Red Book seems to claim that removing £450 million in year two of the proposed regime will have no effect at all. The two arguments cannot be right.

We need to look carefully at the justification sustaining those Labour Members who have spoken against the amendments. A few years ago, the Government were willing not to alter the current North sea fiscal regime, but the Red Book now says that that regime

"fails to strike the right balance between promoting investment and taking a fair share of revenue".

On Second Reading I asked the Chief Secretary to the Treasury if he would be kind enough to provide an economic justification for the Government's position. I asked him if he would place in the Library of the House some form of business model that would provide a justification for the phrase "fair share". In its own way, the evidence that the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) kindly provided makes a case for the amendments. The covering letter talks about the need for the North sea fiscal regime to strike the right balance between stimulating investment and getting a fair return. I would like to know what "fair" means in this context. Let us look at the example. The word that shines forth from the Treasury's analysis is "hypothetical".

5 pm

The Chief Secretary did not respond in the way that I had hoped. I thought that he would produce an analysis showing the overall investment position, the factors that would be taken into account by the oil industry in determining its investment and a review of the taxation regime. I thought that there would be some attempt to provide us with a business model of the North sea gas and oilfields to show that the amount that the Government want to take out by these tax measures would not have any impact on investment intentions.

In that context, I was intrigued by the remarks of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Ann McKechin), most of which were predicated on an analysis built on the attitudes of BP and Shell. However, many of the representations that have been made to me have been from smaller oil companies. Many of them finance their investment opportunities in places such as the North sea oilfield and off the west coast of the United Kingdom, where my interest lies, by debt financing. They operate a very different financial regime; they are not the big oil barons of this world and this measure will have an impact on them because of the way in which they conduct their business.

Coming back to the Chief Secretary's example, the Government's justification, as published to date, is one hypothetical, arithmetical net present value calculation on one field using one set of assumptions. The real world of oil finance varies considerably. I want the Economic Secretary to describe in detail what the real world impact is rather than giving a hypothetical project justification. Although the Treasury may draw some comfort from the fact that it shows in net present value terms that under its proposed regime for that field, which invests £100 million, there is a gain in return, no sensitivity analysis has been made by making a marginal change to some of the variables. No analysis has been made of existing fields.

One of the problems with the measure is that it will be introduced at a given moment in time. We have no information from the Treasury about the rates of return for fields that are currently in production but which will, under clause 90, be affected on their present earnings by the arrival of the supplement. The amendment to reduce or postpone its introduction would enable us to look at that aspect.

Malcolm Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Does he acknowledge that some companies made investments a few years ago for which they did not get an uplift because the forecast oil price was not met because the price collapsed? Only now are they getting the returns that they anticipated, just to find that their payback has been further cut by these proposed changes.

Mr. Jack: The hon. Gentleman makes the point that this is a variable business. I am aware that when any business is threatened by an increase in tax cries foul. Businesses can sometimes bear additional tax charges just as the citizen has to make provision for additional tax charges because nobody can predict what the Treasury's demands will be year on year. The oil business deals with long-term investments, and as Members on both sides of the Committee have said, people in the oil industry wanted a degree of stability in planning their forward investment strategy. However, they have now been hit by an element of instability.

I received a copy of a letter, which was sent to the Chancellor by the Non-Operators Forum on 24 April. It states:

"The taxation changes announced on 17th April give us a great deal of concern, particularly since we had been working extremely hard with officials and ministers in the Department of Trade and Industry towards improving the commercial environment in the North Sea to encourage further investment."

The letter also mentioned the PILOT forum—as have other Members who have spoken in the debate—which is also designed to improve extraction rates and new exploration in the North sea. The 17 companies in the Non-Operators Forum are at the lower end of the scale and they stressed the impact of the proposal, especially as it came on 17 April. The companies made a second, and important, proposal on which I should like the Economic Secretary to reflect.

The Government justify their position by arguing that new investment can be funded from cash flow, but there are two flaws in that argument. The first is that not all new investment will be so profitable in year one that all the 100 per cent. allowance can be used up. The Treasury's example assumed that a field is fully profitable in year one, but that might not be the case, so as profits build up in years two, three and four, that must adversely affect the net present value calculation. There is a flaw in the Treasury's argument.

There is also a problem for fields that are funded by borrowings. Currently, the clause would not permit the costs of extra borrowing to be offset against the new 10 per cent. charge. That is another failure in the argument. Faced with those problems the smaller oil companies—those with existing fields—would be harshly penalised. It might be true—as the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill said—that a large, multinational company could, in theory, absorb the effects of the

charges on some of their activities. However, as has been pointed out, they do not currently exploit the North sea and the offshore continental shelf for the very reasons given by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran).

The debate has been strongly focused on oil, but I should also like to hear the Economic Secretary's justification for the proposals as regards gas. Gas prices are considerably lower than they have been for some time, and it is likely that there will be significant effects on gas exploration.

We need to reiterate the questions about the costs of the proposals. The amendments correctly call for the reappraisal, justification or reduction of the costs. Professor Kemp's work has been much quoted, so I feel justified in referring to it. He has carried out some sensitivity analysis of the effects of the measure. Even assuming an oil price of $15 a barrel, he shows that, cumulatively, until 2010, there would be a yield of £3.7 billion from the North sea. A price of $25—perhaps rather high on the scale—would mean that the yield was £9.6 billion. A price of $20 would give an amount of £6.5 billion. Those are serious amounts.

The Chancellor's analysis in the Red Book covers only the next three financial years. It seems to me that the Treasury must have decided that the measure would not bite this year and would have only a small effect next year. However, given that it will really start to bite only in year three and that the oil industry looks to the long term, we have completely dodged an analysis of the full-scale effect of the proposal on the long-term investment opportunities of the industry—*[Interruption.]* The Economic Secretary shakes her head. I hope that she can offer a justifiable argument that such considerations would not have an impact, given the fact that oil fields are developed over 10, 15 or 20 years.

Mr. Salmond: May I draw the right hon. Gentleman's attention away from the Economic Secretary's body language for a second? Is he aware that the Wood Mackenzie analysis shows that, after the fifth year, the full-year effect, once it has worked through at the current oil price, will be more than £1 billion a year?

Mr. Jack: The hon. Gentleman, who speaks with great authority and knowledge on this subject, makes a very important additional point.

One very interesting thing is the number of different measures that can be used to determine rates of return. I should like to ask the Economic Secretary why the Chief Secretary used a net present value calculation based on a 10 per cent. discount rate when he wrote to me and other hon. Members, whereas the Paymaster General chose an altogether different calculation based on an IHS Energy Group analysis using a 12.5 per cent discount rate to justify her position on Second Reading.

Interestingly, in justifying taxation regimes for different oilfields, the Inland Revenue uses the very same analysis as that used by the Paymaster General on Second Reading. However, if I understand the analysis correctly, the Inland Revenue advised the United Kingdom Offshore Operators Association that the marginal tax rate in the United Kingdom would be 73.75 per cent. under the current proposals, but that, in fact, for places such as the Gulf of Mexico and Angola deep-water fields the respective rate would be at 60 per cent. and 71 per cent. Those figures are relevant because they illustrate the fact that we are talking about an international and dynamic oil investment regime, which the proposals could well disrupt in the long term.

I also support the amendments that argue that this measure be postponed because of certain accounting impacts. Again, I should be grateful to the Economic Secretary if she would comment on those effects. Obviously, the first amount of the current tax charge would affect profitability, as has been said, on the 10 per cent. supplementary rate, but I am interested to know whether the Treasury has taken into account the balance sheet effect of the fact that deferred taxes will have to be revalued. That will obviously affect the profitability and future position of many companies.

I should be interested to know whether the Economic Secretary thinks that those accounting implications will affect the ability of those companies to raise funds for their future investment plans. The Government do not seem to have fully considered the effect of those implications. It is easy to cry foul when any extra increase is imposed, but, in the light of the arguments adduced so far, it is up to the Treasury meticulously to argue a case for imposing extra taxation on the industry against the background of the critical appraisal that has been made so far in the debate.

Mr. Blizzard: There can be no doubt that the key issue is what effect these oil and gas tax changes, especially the one proposed in clause 90, will have on investment. Investment is all about the future; we cannot have such a good future if we invest less. I, too, should like to know what assessment of the tax changes' impact on investment leads the Treasury to conclude that the changes represent the right balance between the nation's taking the proper share of its asset, which we would want to do, and securing and stimulating investment for the future.

What assumptions has the Treasury made about the impact on investment in the figures that it has produced so far? For example, we have all seen the Red Book figures for the net tax take from the industry to the public purse in the forthcoming years. Do those figures assume the same level of investment as that assumed before the tax changes were proposed, or do they assume a reduced level of investment? Has the Treasury discounted the figures in the light of that? That important issue needs to be clarified.

5.15 pm

Many hon. Members have referred to the work carried out by Professor Kemp. The interesting aspect of Professor Kemp's work is that, while the Red Book looks only at the years up to 2006, Professor Kemp looks beyond that. He comes out with some staggering figures of up to £1 billion a year. Altogether, between now and 2010, Professor Kemp says that the net tax take from the industry will be £6 billion. Does the Treasury really believe that we can take £6 billion out of the industry and avoid having an adverse effect on it? I find that difficult to believe, as there will be less money available to invest. That must have an impact on where multinational companies direct their investments around the world.

[Mr. Blizzard]

Whatever we think of oil companies, they do direct money around the world, and we must face that real-world situation and act accordingly.

Mr. Doran: All the assumptions made by the Opposition, which my hon. Friend may also be making, are that, somehow, North sea money is ring-fenced. In fact, profits from the North sea do not stay in the North sea—they go to Dallas, Houston, San Francisco or wherever the company's headquarters are. Exactly the same factor applies to investment decisions: they are made on the basis of the attractiveness of the regime and the likely return. We must not operate on the basis that £6 billion is coming out of the industry, because it is not. There will be an impact on the attractiveness of the area, but not to the degree suggested by my hon. Friend.

Mr. Blizzard: I thank my hon. Friend. I was not making that assumption—quite the reverse. I was saying that a managing director of the part of an international company that resides in this country must argue, whether in Houston or elsewhere in the world, as to what slice of the global investment will come to this country each year. I have a letter from a managing director of an international company with a portfolio here—I shall not name the individual—who says, when making that case at the company's worldwide headquarters, that

"It will be harder for us to attract capital investment into the UK".

The fact that the money is not ring-fenced is part of the difficulty.

Another point is the signal that is sent out. As the oil price cannot be predicted, it is necessary for as many of the other factors as possible to be stable. If we have a tax regime that can change around rapidly, that will be taken into account by an industry with very long-term investment.

Mr. Salmond: It is not possible to ring-fence investment in an international market, but investment can be locked in if consequential tax changes are made. So far in this debate, exploration, appraisal and additional uplift, financing charges for field development, more tax relief and more uplift for incremental development have all been mentioned. All those measures should be included in the Treasury's analysis—which we do not have—of the impact of possible changes. Those suggestions do not even seem to have been considered.

Mr. Blizzard: I agree in the sense that the key to the future is the amount of exploration and development that can be stimulated at any one time. If that dries up, the future looks bleak. It is therefore important to send out the signals that will encourage more of that activity, not less.

To return to the Red Book figures, they are lower than those that Professor Kemp predicts for the immediate years up to 2006. I therefore wonder, again, whether the Treasury has done some discounting. Has it estimated what can safely be taken out of the industry without damaging investment? If so, as we reach those years, if the tax revenue is greater than the Red Book predicts, will it be prepared to adjust that tax, for example, by reconsidering whether financing charges should be made deductible on a 10 per cent. basis? At the moment, the proposal is that they should not. I would like an answer to that.

Other impact assessments should be considered. What will be the impact on the 20th licensing round? What will be the impact on the PILOT targets? Those targets are Government policy, because they have been agreed between the Government and the industry. However, I have seen nothing about them. What will be the impact on the PILOT organisation itself? I have a letter from someone who writes:

"I have expended a great deal of time and effort in developing measures to stimulate greater exploration activity on the UKCS . . . under PILOT. I, like others, now find it very difficult to see where this initiative goes next."

That will be the reaction of a number of people.

What will be the impact on the amount of indigenous energy resources that are recovered in future years? Are we accelerating to the point at which we shall have to start importing oil and gas? Have we considered the effect on the balance of payments if that day is hastened forward?

I wish to make a point that is relevant to amendments Nos. 2 and 22. One of the perceived unfairnesses with the changes relates to people who have made recent investments as a result of the collaborative PILOT atmosphere in which the Government encouraged people to invest in fields in which they might not otherwise have invested. Those people will not now receive the benefit of the 100 per cent. capital allowances, but they will pay the tax from 17 April. They did what we asked them to do and put their toe into the water. I am afraid that their toe is probably feeling a bit hot at the moment. Will the Treasury consider some form of transitional arrangements for companies that have done what we asked them to do? We could either give them exemption for a period or apply some of the 100 per cent. allowances retrospectively. That would be playing fair with people who have done the right thing.

I also feel for those companies that have shown commitment to the UK by having a large percentage of their portfolios here. They will be hit much harder than the companies that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) mentioned, which have large portfolios around the world. We must be careful that we do not punish those who have shown the greatest commitment to the country by investing in the UK continental shelf.

Mr. Bill Tynan (Hamilton, South): Does my hon. Friend believe that a pre-tax profit of 34.3 per cent. in 2001 was an inadequate return on the investment that companies made in the North sea? If you do not, what level do you believe would be an adequate return?

The Temporary Chairman (Mr. Roger Gale): Order. The hon. Gentleman should address other Members through the Chair.

Mr. Blizzard: I accept what my hon. Friend says. That is a generous return. However, when the oil price is $10 a barrel, the return is nowhere near that figure. It is difficult to link the tax to the oil price, because one cannot predict the oil price. I am arguing that we should ensure that we get the full investment. The longer we keep the industry going, the longer we shall receive the benefits.

I want to say a little about royalties. A tax change in terms of the supplementary charge will come in straight away and the Government have made it clear that they want to abolish the royalty. However, there will be a consultation period and the worry is that there could be up to a year's gap between the two things taking place. The industry has told me that it believes that the consultation could be carried out in one month, so when does the Treasury intend to begin the consultation? Will it commit to a short consultation period and can we have a firm date as soon as possible for the abolition of the royalty? Will the Treasury consider whether it is possible to carry out the consultation in one month, because it is important, if we are to attract new investment, that people know soon when the royalty will be abolished? It strikes me that no one will invest until they know when the royalty is to be abolished. If we are trying to attract investment, we do not want to wait too long, so it is important to have those commitments on royalty.

Hon. Members have made international comparisons and highlighted different tax regimes around the world, but tax rates cannot be considered in isolation. What matters to investors is the overall expected return, which takes into account the cost of finding oil and gas and the chances of finding them. That cost varies around the world. A fair assessment of how attractive we are in the international investment game takes into account development cost and the field size, which gives an idea of how many years and how many millions of barrels will be produced for the initial investment. That is related to the field's maturity. When we add up those considerations, it is clear that the North sea is not especially attractive in an international context. We must be careful that we do not make it more unattractive.

We must also ensure that we compare like with like. Some of the figures that have been bandied around are for standard developments. We can only compare deep-water developments with deep-water developments. Perhaps the easiest comparison to make is with Norway, because we are both dipping in the same area. Norway has similar unit costs of $8 or so a barrel and a similar tax regime: Norway's is 78 per cent.; ours is increasing to a marginal rate of about 74 per cent. The difference is that the fields in the Norwegian sector are 100 million-barrel fields, whereas the fields that we are developing are 25 million to 30 million-barrel fields. It is clearly less attractive to invest in smaller fields.

Although Norway will face the same challenge as us, its fields are not in the same state of maturity and it is doing fine out of larger fields. When those start to run out and it is considering developing smaller fields, it will face the same problems as us.

Sir Robert Smith: Like the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), many of my arguments and concerns were voiced on Second Reading, in the Budget debate and in the Scottish Grand Committee—*[Interruption.]* The problem is that the Financial Secretary made his statement in the Grand Committee and then left. If he left this debate before the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan finished his speech, he will have missed the important point that came out of yesterday's Grand Committee, in which one member of the Cabinet recognised that there will be an impact on jobs. Given Cabinet collective responsibility, one would assume that the Government hold the same general analysis. If there is to be an impact on jobs, it behoves the Government to say what that might be.

Mr. Tom Harris: In defence of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, she did not say whether the measure would have a negative or positive impact on jobs.

Sir Robert Smith: The right hon. Lady did not have to. She said:

> "My assessment of the jobs impact is that if we link the supplemental tax on profits to the first-year allowances and the abolition of royalties, we should minimise impact on our jobs."—*[Official Report, Scottish Grand Committee*, 8 May 2002; c. 21.]

I suppose that, arguably, she might have been saying that the abolition of royalties and the first-year allowances are designed to make more job losses, which would support the hon. Gentleman's way of looking at the issue. Clearly, however, she recognised that the tax on its own will have a major impact on jobs and that the Government hope to limit the damage by introducing other measures.

Mr. Salmond: The hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris) seems to be suggesting that the Secretary of State for Scotland is trying to minimise a job boost in Scotland, which makes what the Government have been playing at over the past year in general manufacturing industry altogether clearer.

5.30 pm

Sir Robert Smith: The Secretary of State was clearly saying that there will be a negative impact as a result of the measures. The question is the scale of that impact; she tried to play it down, but some of us are worried that it could be significant.

Mr. Tom Harris: You hope so.

Sir Robert Smith: No, we do not.

Mr. Harris: Doom merchants.

Sir Robert Smith: We are not; we are reflecting our constituents' concerns. Some of them have already experienced such an impact, when the tax changes alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) were introduced. One of them came to my surgery in 1997, after the Chancellor threatened to do something similar, and said that he did not want what happened to him, his business and all the people he employed the first time round to be repeated under the present Government. Some of us have been concerned ever since; our constituents who have worked in the industry for a long time, understand how it works and know what has happened, want us to impress their anxieties on the Committee. We are doing so not because we are doom merchants but because we are success merchants—we want to promote the wider benefits of the industry.

When the Financial Secretary dismissed the industry as just one sector—*[Interruption.]* The Financial Secretary may care to remember what he said.

Mr. Boateng: I did not dismiss the industry, but I did dismiss the hon. Gentleman's arguments.

Sir Robert Smith: The Financial Secretary dismissed those of us who expressed concern about the oil industry

[Sir Robert Smith]

for promoting just one sector of industry. However, the oil industry is not only a major sector for employment and investment but is of strategic importance, as it gives this country the luxury of our own energy supply on our doorstep. The Minister for Industry and Energy is worried that we will lose that supply in the long run—hence the report by the performance and innovation unit on energy supplies.

The Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry need to be more joined up, which was the point of the PILOT initiative and the taskforce. Those who accuse us of being doom merchants may not have heard the praise that we have heaped on the Government in the past few years for the taskforce's achievements. The Financial Secretary did not attend previous sittings of the Scottish Grand Committees and did not hear that praise—*[Interruption.]* No, there were benefits, as we have seen, in signing up to the commitments in PILOT; the taskforce had a positive outcome in bringing together the Treasury, the DTI and the industry. Unfortunately, the Treasury has chosen not to learn the lessons of that, and we are now facing a surprise consequence for the industry.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) made an extremely important point that comparisons must not be hypothetical. The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) made an equally important point that Treasury analysis has been based on hypothetical analysis. People who make investment decisions base them not on hypotheses but on real possibilities. Comparisons between fields must take account of the fact that our fields are smaller now, and we need a regime that recognises that. There are larger fields elsewhere, where returns and the risk-reward ratio are better, so the country must maintain attractiveness for the sake of the tax regime.

The amendments on the timing of the tax are useful because they make the point, as others have said, that the Government's proposals are out of phase. The royalties are supposed to be the upside of the change, but we do not know when they will be sorted out. It would be far better to postpone the tax. Indeed, if analysis proves that it will have a negative impact, the Government should not merely postpone it; they should withdraw it. There should be a chance to sort out royalties and introduce proposals on them as soon as possible. An impact assessment should be made; we need far more substantial Treasury data in the Library than the two sides of A4 produced so far.

The Government are committed to consultation. The hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) said that the industry was asleep, but communication is a two-way process. If the Government wanted genuine consultation, they should have woken the industry up first, thus negating the element of surprise that causes long-term damage. No one knows what the Government's intentions are, whether the Chancellor is just trying it on this year, and what the tax regime will be in the future.

I repeat what was said in the Grand Committee, as it is relevant to the assessment of the impact of the tax. Labour Members, trying to straddle a compromise between recognising the concerns that will be evident in their constituencies, and their desire not to upset their colleagues on the Front Bench too much—because the Chancellor has made his statement and as Back Benchers they do not want to cross him—come up with the strange argument that the price is high at the moment, so it is okay to impose the tax now.

However, there is no undertaking that the tax will go away if the price drops. The tax, according to the Chancellor, is there to stay. It is in his Red Book for several years to come. Some in the industry have been privately getting the message that when the price falls, they can lobby the Government for a lower tax regime. That is no way to make a planning horizon for investment. It provides no sense of stability to tell the industry, "Come back and lobby us for a tax cut and we might see what we can do." In order to have the confidence to invest, people need to know in advance what the tax regime will be.

We need a return to such stability. The amendments provide the chance for a breathing space.

Malcolm Bruce: Is not the problem the fact that, in every other sector of the economy, the Chancellor has been telling us how important it is to provide a good business tax regime and why he has cut corporation tax? If that is the right way to promote investment in the economy, why is one sector singled out and told that it is to be boosted by being taxed harder than any other? The logic is contradictory, to say the least.

Sir Robert Smith: That is a worrying sign for other businesses, and there is a knock-on effect for other business decisions. If this is the way that the Government treat the successful oil industry, how will they treat the others?

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that yesterday, a Standing Committee on statutory instruments passed the Offshore Chemicals Regulations 2002, which will add a burden of a further £1 million a year for the oil industry simply to apply for permits under the new regulations?

Sir Robert Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing that to the attention of the House. It is not only such burdens of regulation, but the relationship with the regulator, the access charges into the network and other charges that make the UK an expensive place to operate. There is also the worry about gas balance, and so on. It is a dangerous time for the Treasury to change the tax system, when other regulatory impacts put additional concerns on to the industry.

It is important to emphasise the long-term nature of the industry. Yes, in one year there may be a higher rate of return, but in another year it may make a loss. The price of oil goes up and down. In the early 1980s, the price of oil was about $70 a barrel at present-day values. It is way down on that now, in real terms, and it could go down again. It is up to the Government in Saudi Arabia what price the world pays for oil.

Mr. Tom Harris: The hon. Gentleman is surely off on a tangent. The tax is profit-related, so if profits go down, the tax goes down. That answers exactly the point that he is making.

Sir Robert Smith: But the tax still takes more money out than before it was put on, so it makes the UK less

attractive to investors. At least there is agreement on both sides of the House that taking more money out of the industry means that that makes it less attractive.

I am explaining to those who pick out of thin air one statistic to justify the tax, that the industry looks at the return on its investment over the lifetime of the field. The bad years are paid for by the good years. If the tax comes on by surprise in the good years, investors will not take the risk of doing anything for the bad years. That damages the long-term profitability and attractiveness of the North sea and the rate of return for future generations. It fails to get every last drop of gas and oil out of the North sea, which would maximise our security of supply, the Treasury's take in the long term, and the benefits for future generations from an asset on our own doorstep.

Ruth Kelly: I have detected scepticism in some parts of the Committee, on the Opposition Benches and the Lib Dem Benches, from the Scottish National party spokesman and even on my own side, about the change in the tax regime for North sea oil. I have also heard genuine concerns about the effect on jobs and investment in the North sea. I shall deal with those concerns head on and in some detail.

The reform before us is a good reform. It is a principled reform. It is a reform for the long term which promotes investment in marginal fields and, in doing so, raises substantial revenue for the Exchequer—revenue that will help put the NHS back on a sustainable long-term financial footing, as a service that will remain free at the point of need. The Opposition refuse to commit themselves to our tax proposals and to a comprehensive national health service that is free at the point of use. In doing so, they are breaking a consensus that has existed for the past 50 years. I note that they are arguing that we should delay the introduction of the 10 per cent. supplementary charge on profits, but not implementation of the other important and very generous part of the package: full and immediate relief for North sea capital spending as it is incurred and the abolition of royalties, subject to consultation on timing.

Mr. Tom Harris: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Liberals tabled an amendment—it was discussed yesterday—that would have increased income tax rates from 22 per cent. to 23 per cent, but are asking today for a reduction in tax on big business. Three years ago, the Scottish National party was also calling for a 1p tax increase, but today it is calling for a cut in tax on big business. Will she comment on what that suggests about the priorities of those two parties?

The Temporary Chairman (Mr. Roger Gale): Order. I would prefer it if the Minister were not tempted down that road.

Ruth Kelly: Thank you, Mr. Gale. I shall not pursue the issue, but my hon. Friend makes a pertinent point: the Opposition want to cut taxes and slash investment, while we are committed to putting the needs of our people first.

The oil and gas industry has suggested that the measures will have a damaging impact on investment. Perhaps that is not so surprising—no industry likes paying more tax—but it is clear that oil companies are generating excess profits, and ours is the only major oil-exporting economy that does not have a special regime to reflect that.

Mr. Jack: Will the Economic Secretary please define what she means by excess profit?

Ruth Kelly: I am very pleased that the right hon. Gentleman brings me to the point of defining an excess profit. Since the tax changes made by the Conservative Government in 1993 and the abolition of petroleum revenue tax, the rate of return in the oil industry has risen from 10.5 per cent. to 34 per cent. last year. By comparison, other non-financial industries made an average rate of return of 11 per cent. last year. That difference is not due only to temporarily high oil prices. In fact, the North sea's rate of return was higher than that of other industries in every one of the past nine years. That was the case even in 1998, when oil prices fell sharply.

Back in 1993, we warned of a genuine risk that the oil taxation regime would fail in its objectives if North sea production held up better than was expected or oil prices rose. Our warnings have been borne out. We have been closely monitoring the position since 1998. It is abundantly clear that the regime is not securing a fair deal for the nation from this national resource, and the changes introduced in the Bill will remedy that for the future. At the same time, we fully recognise that the UK tax regime needs to be competitive. We have listened to industry, and the package that we are introducing, including the generous 100 per cent. relief for capital expenditure, focuses on investment. Companies that invest in the North sea will receive full and immediate relief against any tax liability, while those which do not do so will rightly pay a higher share of corporation tax, together with a supplementary charge.

In future, therefore, the Government will take a much greater share of the risk of investing in the future of the North sea. It is right that, as a consequence, the nation should also take a higher share of the profits of that investment.

Mr. Salmond: Would I be right in thinking that, under the tax changes, somebody using an existing and long-standing gas infrastructure such as the FLAGS—far-north liquids and associated gas system—line to St. Fergus will be charged tax at 70 per cent. of tariff income, somebody building a new pipeline to Bacton will be taxed at 40 per cent. in corporation tax plus the additional 10 per cent., but somebody taking a gas line from the same fields to Zeebrugge and transporting through the interconnector to Bacton will be taxed at 30 per cent.? Why is the Economic Secretary trying to encourage people with regard to Zeebrugge and Bacton, but not St. Fergus?

Ruth Kelly: I shall deal in detail with our analysis of the situation in due course. The typical Government tax take as a proportion of pre-tax net present value for fields that have been developed after 1993 is currently only 35 per cent., but will rise to 40 per cent. after the changes have been made. That is much lower than in most other countries, and the UK tax regime will therefore remain highly competitive. I shall turn to the detail of our analysis

[Ruth Kelly]

in due course, as I promised. On that basis, and on that of the industry's own figures, the UK regime is more favourable than that of Canada or the Gulf of Mexico.

5.45 pm

The oil industry sometimes emphasises the attractiveness of other international locations for investments, and it is absolutely right that it should try to convince the Government of the merits of as low as possible a taxation regime in this country. However, in a recent article in the *Financial Times*, Lee Raymond, chairman and chief executive of Exxon Mobil, said:

"I have often said that the best thing that Exxon Mobil could have done after it drilled its first well in the Gulf was to never drill another again."

He was talking about Mexico. The tax regime is one, but only one, factor in decision making. Other important elements are political stability, proximity to markets and the Government's overall approach.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), among others, questioned how the changes can raise significant sums from the oil industry, yet have no impact on investment and jobs. I intend to deal with that point in some detail. The changes have been carefully designed. They have two elements—the supplementary charge and the 100 per cent. investment allowance. The investment allowance means, even with the supplementary charge, that companies investing in new projects will have higher post-tax rates of return than under previous rules. In net present value terms, the benefit of the 100 per cent. allowance outweighs the additional tax for marginal projects. It is the effect on marginal projects that determines the effect on investment, and they will be encouraged by the change. Of course, the increased tax reduces the net present value of more profitable fields, as it should, but those are the fields that are likely to go ahead in any case. Overall, the impact on investment and jobs should be positive rather than, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan suggested, negative.

Mr. Salmond: In that case, can the Economic Secretary tell us why the Secretary of State for Scotland tried to minimise the impact in the Scottish Grand Committee yesterday? Why was the effect minimal and negative yesterday, according to a Cabinet Minister, but positive, according to the Economic Secretary, today?

Ruth Kelly: I have been explaining how carefully these tax measures have been designed to promote investment in North sea oil. I want to quote some slightly more objective analysts who have considered the question. Tony Wood, the Royal Bank of Scotland's senior economist, says:

"Although significant, these changes are unlikely to adversely affect the operating environment for companies within the UK. Our view is that there is quite a strong demand to acquire assets in the UK, so we don't think it will hit activity because it will not hit costs but be sliced off profits."

Mr. Jack: Over what time frame did he make that assessment?

Ruth Kelly: I understand that he was looking at the overall long-term effect of our tax changes. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to write to me to make a specific point, I will of course consider it.

Indeva Energy Consultants, which has been working on designing fiscal regimes for oil taxation in other jurisdictions, states that

"the UK fiscal regime remains attractive in global terms".

Mr. Blizzard: My hon. Friend has covered the supplementary charge and the 100 per cent. capital allowances. On royalty, can I press her to give a commitment to undertake the consultation on royalty abolition straight away and over a short period, so that it is possible to secure the abolition of royalty during the passage of the Bill rather than having to wait for a future Finance Bill?

Ruth Kelly: I understand my hon. Friend's anxiety for prompt consultation, but I do not want to speculate about its results or the timing of the royalty's abolition. However, we are committed to prompt progress, and the Department of Trade and Industry has said that it will effect that. We want to get the changes and their timing right.

I want to consider the analysis that the Treasury has undertaken in making the tax changes. I want to put on record the analysis and the criteria that we have used in designing them. A full analysis was made of reform's effect on investment. We examined the impact on all investment, exploration and appraisal, development projects that had already commenced, probable and possible developments on new fields that had already been discovered, and incremental developments of fields already in production. Let me consider each in turn.

On exploration and appraisal, companies are known to use the expected monetary value approach to exploration investment decisions. That is sound economic rationale. Using that method, we found that the rate of return on future exploration is likely to be improved by the tax change. That is because, in most cases, saving exploration and appraisal costs that arise from the higher rate of relief outweighs the loss of the expected development net present value from subsequent finds, thanks to the new 100 per cent. relief.

Our research on development projects that have already commenced, with the costs already sunk, suggests that it is unlikely that any project will become uneconomic, and we do not expect any loss of investment.

Mr. Blizzard: I am pleased that the Treasury has carried out some analysis based on expected monetary values. Will my hon. Friend please publish it and place it in the Library?

Ruth Kelly: I thought that I would place on the record our exact conduct of the analysis and the criteria that we used. I hope that my hon. Friend will be satisfied by what I am about to say.

Mr. Jack: Will the Economic Secretary give way?

Ruth Kelly: I must make some progress on setting out the analysis. If, at the end of my comments, the right hon. Gentleman still wishes to make a point, I shall take his intervention.

We conducted an analytical exercise on new fields, using empirical data. We used companies' projections of output capital and operating expenditure. Of course,

we use the data on real fields. We examined 108 new fields that will potentially commence development in the next five years. That information is commercially sensitive and we cannot put it in the public domain. Clearly, we have the advantage of being able to use the data.

We applied all the various investment criteria that companies use to establish whether projects will proceed. We used the long-term oil and gas prices that companies typically use: $17 to $20 per barrel of oil. We did not use recent oil prices. We also worked on the basis of 18p per therm for gas. We applied a safety check to ascertain that a lower hurdle rate of return would be achieved if oil prices were low.

We cross-checked that the quantity of new field investment that the industry planned according to its estimates was consistent with the required thresholds that we used. For projects to proceed, all the test thresholds had to be met. As an additional safeguard, we modelled more and less stringent tests and took the average effect on investment that the different assumptions produced.

We also considered incremental investment. It is generally expected that the spread of internal rate of return and net present value of incremental projects are broadly similar to those of new fields. We were therefore able to interpolate from the new field data.

The work concluded that the overall impact on North sea investment and jobs was likely to be positive. I hope that hon. Members will accept that we undertook the work thoroughly and responsibly, using real data and projects to which commentators have not been privy.

Mr. Jack *rose—*

Mr. Salmond *rose—*

Ruth Kelly: I must make progress; I have been very generous. However, I promised the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) that I would give way to him.

Mr. Jack: I thank the Economic Secretary for her kindness. Given all her work, which is genuinely interesting and impressive, why cannot the data and the methodology be put into the public domain on an anonymised basis? She prayed in aid her summary of it, and we should therefore be able to examine the calculations on an anonymised basis.

Ruth Kelly: I have been advised that that is not possible for reasons of commercial confidentiality. I have set out in the fullest possible way the analysis that we have conducted.

I want to turn to some of the other points raised in today's debate.

Mr. Salmond *rose—*

Ruth Kelly: Given the time, I must make some progress. I have been very generous in giving way so far.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) asked why the measure applied to gas as well as to oil. Gas, like oil, is a scarce national resource that often generates high rates of return. The special tax regime applied to the North sea has always applied to gas production as well as to oil production, and there is no reason to change that.

Hon. Members have pointed out that gas prices currently appear to be low. I would respond that there is a wide variety of gas prices, depending on when and where the gas is delivered. The profits to be made from gas will obviously depend on the average price over the year. The current market price for a year's supply of gas is 20p per therm. In April 1999, it was 11p per therm, so I do not accept the suggestion that gas prices are particularly low at the moment.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs argued that the changes amounted, in some respects, to retrospective taxation. I do not accept that. No profits arising before 17 April will be subject to the supplementary charge. Any change to business or personal tax rules will inevitably affect people who have made decisions prior to the change, but that does not amount to retrospection. The Government are making these changes because they are right, and we cannot be diverted from doing what is right just because some companies may be adversely affected.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) said, in his interesting and thoughtful contribution, that the Government had compared tax takes with those of other countries without taking it into account that field sizes are much smaller and costs much higher in the United Kingdom than elsewhere. I would like to put on record our response to that point. To take an example, let us suppose that, instead of comparing similar-sized fields, we consider a smaller field—say, a 25 million-barrel oilfield in the United Kingdom, with unit costs 50 per cent. higher than average. In such a field, the tax take will not rise under the proposed changes; it will fall from 45 per cent. to 40 per cent. in present value terms. Helping projects in a weaker economic position such as those—there are many in the United Kingdom—is the precise point of the package that we are putting forward today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) raised the concern that had been pointed out to him about whether the supplementary charge would be creditable under double taxation treaties. We believe that the supplementary charge is substantially similar to corporation tax, and that it should be creditable under most double taxation agreements. Ultimately, of course, that will be a matter for our treaty partners. I would be interested to hear from the industry if this matter is of particular concern. We shall certainly be able to take the issue up with the United States authorities if that proves necessary.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs asked whether losses could be offset. The supplementary charge applies from 17 April 2002, and it is based on adjusted ring-fence profits. If a company's adjusted ring-fence profits are negative in future years—in other words, if it makes a loss—it will be able to carry that loss forward for that year and subsequent years. Companies will also be able to carry forward losses arising from previous years, except losses arising from financing costs. We shall come to that matter in the course of our discussions on further amendments.

The right hon. Member for Fylde made a point about new North sea entrants having no corporation tax against which to use the new allowance. The first-year allowances

[Ruth Kelly]

are a tax relief, and a feature of any relief is that it can be used to offset tax only when there is a taxable capacity. These allowances, as I have just explained, will not be lost if a company has insufficient taxable profit to use the allowance against; they can be carried forward and used against taxable profits made in later years.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the impact on companies' balance sheets and the impact of the deferred tax reserve. I accept that there will be some impact on companies' balance sheets, but because these are one-off provisions, they should be interpreted as such by the stock market. In fact, we have seen only a modest effect on share prices, and I would suggest that this is not going to be a substantial problem.

The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith), among others, questioned whether the Government had considered future energy supply issues. Of course, our objective is to ensure that the full economic potential of the North sea is derived for the nation. The investment incentives provided by the new first-year allowance will ensure that. These measures are also particularly helpful in promoting the continuing life of mature fields.

6 pm

For example, a typical investment project to extend production in an older field that is paying petroleum revenue tax yielding a pre-tax rate of return of 20 per cent. has until now offered the investor a rate of only about 15 per cent. after tax. In future, thanks to the first-year tax allowance, the rate of return will be 20 per cent. after tax, the same as the pre-tax rate. If in future we decide to abolish royalty, that will have an additional impact on investment. We are committed to abolition, subject to consultation on the timing.

Members on both sides of the Committee mentioned the important and constructive work done by PILOT with the industry. That work is indeed very helpful. Much of it has focused on encouraging investment, and it has informed our approach to tax reform. We share the industry's desire to maximise the economic benefit to the United Kingdom of its oil and gas reserves, and provide incentives for the industry. We have learned from the work with PILOT that none of the tax changes will undermine that co-operation. We look forward to the furthering of PILOT's valuable Government-industry initiatives.

Members on both sides of the Committee also mentioned consultation. In 1998, during the last Parliament, the Government proposed to consult on the choice between two options for tax reform—the extension of petroleum revenue tax and a supplementary charge on profits. That made sense at the time, but in due course, in an environment of low oil prices, it no longer made sense to proceed with any change. Four years on, the proposal to reintroduce PRT is unrealistic. It would require companies to rebuild records on income and expenditure in all fields that had come onstream since 1993. Given that oil companies may have changed hands, that would be administratively very difficult—a bureaucratic nightmare.

As far as I know, no one in the industry has called for the reintroduction of PRT. We have opted for a simple, streamlined tax reform that promotes investment over the long term. We will of course continue to work with and listen to the industry as we implement the changes, and, as I have said, we are consulting on the timing of the abolition of royalty.

No speaker so far has given a single example of an economic project that would be prevented from proceeding as a result of these changes. As I explained, that is because the upfront costs of projects to investors will be significantly reduced by the new tax relief, and marginal projects will be encouraged.

The new tax regime is right. It is firmly based on sound analysis. There is no point in delaying its introduction. I urge the Committee to reject the amendments.

Mr. Flight: I shall not detain the Committee for long. We have had an excellent debate, in which Members on both sides—particularly those who know the industry—have presented their arguments extremely well.

I congratulate the Economic Secretary on responding to a number of points in some detail, although I do not think she fully answered the basic question about why the tax measures proposed in their net form would, allegedly, encourage investment rather than—as the industry claims—reducing it. It is ridiculous to argue that an extra £6 billion in tax will be good for, and welcomed by, an industry, and will enable it to increase its activities.

As for the fundamental issue of consultation, if the Government have such a good case to sell—unfortunately the Economic Secretary could not make it available to Members, for various reasons—there is all the more justification for our amendment. The Government should sit down with the industry, and persuade it that what is being done is reasonable and will not damage it.

The point about PILOT sums it up. I think the Economic Secretary deliberately misunderstood what I said. People were enticed by PILOT into committing themselves to new fields—twice as many as in the previous year—on the understanding that the tax regime would remain stable. However, no sooner have they committed than a third increase in tax is imposed on the fruits of those investments. Of course they feel that the provision is retroactive; they feel that the Government have deliberately set them up. It is not surprising, therefore, that a strong feeling of ill will exists.

The amendment would ensure the future of the industry and we want to press it to a vote. If the Government's case is correct, it is right that the industry should be able to consult properly.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 163, Noes 281.

Division No. 229] **[6.5 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Beggs, Roy
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Bellingham, Henry
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*	Bercow, John
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Beresford, Sir Paul
Bacon, Richard	Blunt, Crispin
Baldry, Tony	Boswell, Tim
Barker, Gregory	Brady, Graham
Baron, John	Brake, Tom
Barrett, John	Brazier, Julian

Brooke, Mrs Annette L
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Butterfill, John
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Öpik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, Dr John
Randall, John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen O'Brien and Mr. Laurence Robertson.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Bell, Stuart
Bennett, Andrew
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Challen, Colin
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kelly, Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David

King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moran, Margaret
Morris, Rt Hon Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Squire, Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watson, Tom
White, Brian
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. John Heppell.

Question accordingly negatived.

6.15 pm

Mr. Flight: The next amendment due for discussion, Mr. Gale, was to be amendment No. 3. However, given the amount of time that the Committee spent on the previous group of amendments, we do not want to put amendment No. 3 to the vote. It was designed as an alternative to the previous amendment, and would have halved the rate of the tax. It would have provided an opportunity to establish the correctness of the Opposition's argument that there is a risk to investment, especially given the outlook for oil prices and the nature of the UK industry. As we will have a chance to vote on other amendments, and on whether the clause should stand part of the Bill, I shall not move amendment No. 3.

Malcolm Bruce: I beg to move amendment No. 29, in page 64, line 2, leave out from "which" to "would" in line 3.

The Temporary Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 28, in page 64, line 2, leave out from beginning to end of line 17 on page 65.

Malcolm Bruce: The problem dealt with by the amendment was alluded to earlier in the debate.

The first matter on which we wish to probe the Economic Secretary is why the Government argue that the costs of financing developments should be excluded from the calculation. I am sure that the Minister is aware that the presumption that all oilfield developments are financed as equity is a long way from the truth. Many companies, especially smaller ones, finance their development by borrowing. That is a legitimate part of the cost of developing the fields, and if it is not allowed it will substantially alter the profile, the rate of return and even the viability of the developments. The Economic Secretary must explain why that should be the case.

Let me anticipate a possible answer. The hon. Lady may say that, using such pieces of information, companies could present a case that amounts to a spurious tax relief. The counter argument is that there is also a real cost. The relationship between the oil and gas industry and the Government is quite intimate. Despite the problems that have been alluded to in recent debates and the breakdown of confidence and trust, the reality is that relatively small companies deal daily with the Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry. It seems perfectly within the ability and capacity of the Government and the industry to work out a formula that achieves a fair and proper balance. Indeed, the Economic Secretary has been keen to address the question of fairness.

When the corporation tax rate is running at 30 per cent., financing charges are deductible—but not, apparently, against the extra 10 per cent. of a windfall tax. It has been put to us that in some cases the debt finance could amount to 70 per cent. of the project cost. Clearly, it is a significant factor, and simply to discount it could lead to considerable difficulties and destroy the viability of some projects.

It has been suggested that some of the smaller companies are having difficulties highlighting the problem that the Government's proposals present, because if they make a public indication of the difficulties imposed it could have an adverse effect on their share price or,

if they are not floated, on the financing that they wish to secure. Therefore, to some extent, they feel unable to speak out as forcefully as they might wish.

The point about United States companies has already been made. If this is not allowable, they could effectively be caught twice as it may not be a legitimate charge or tax. However, the Economic Secretary has indicated that the Government intend to address that issue.

The reality is that for the very companies and projects that the Government claim they wish to encourage, the costs are real and are financed from external sources. I suggest that if the Government feel uncomfortable about opening up total allowance, they could agree on a notional allowance. They could accept that borrowing and debt finance are legitimate and negotiate a deal on which both parties could agree. The Minister will acknowledge that that is not abnormal practice; it has been done in many other sectors.

I hope that the Minister will accept that the amendment, which may not be perfectly phrased, is designed to address what is perceived by companies in the industry as a real problem. If it is not addressed, it will seriously undermine the very objective that the Government claim to be pursuing—namely, to encourage small companies to develop some of the more innovative fields that they do not have the equity finance internally to develop but can develop in partnership with financial companies. I hope that the Economic Secretary will accept that this is a serious and real issue to which the industry needs answers.

Mr. Blizzard: I want to emphasise the point made by the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce). The presence of small companies working in the North sea province is most important; they are the key to making the most of the mature stage of its development.

As we know, finance charges form a major part of the exposure of small companies. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary made it clear that much study has been devoted to examining individual fields. I hope that we can identify the companies and modify the measure to address their problems. We do not want to put off such companies; we want to attract them.

We heard earlier that smaller, new entrant companies would not necessarily be able to benefit fully from the 100 per cent. capital allowances, as they have no tax against which to offset them. We should consider the matter seriously and try to find a way of allowing financing costs to be offset against the supplementary charge for the smaller companies, which hold the key to the future investment and success in the North sea that we all want.

Mr. Salmond: Several ideas were put to the Economic Secretary earlier. She did not deal with them at the time, but the debate on these amendments will give her the opportunity to do so.

It was argued that some relief for financing purposes would encourage development. The Economic Secretary has already heard the figures for exploration and appraisal drilling in the North sea, which are a matter of huge concern. The figures went down by more than 50 per cent. over the past five years, despite the fact that the success rate—25 per cent.—is good. That must be a substantial argument for some additional uplift for exploration and appraisal drilling. I am sure that the hon. Lady will agree that the future of the province in 10 to 20 years will depend on the exploration or appraisal drilling that is being carried out—or not—at present.

It was also argued that there should be some additional benefit for incremental investments. Those are positive ideas to modify the impact of the tax changes.

The hon. Lady told us that the tax changes would have a positive impact. I am sure that she wants to listen to these points, as she will soon be replying to them. She cited a mysterious analysis, which has been produced but cannot be published. In fact, it is so secret that it was not available to the Secretary of State for Scotland when she spoke yesterday about minimising the impact of the changes—she thought that they would have a negative effect.

Why is the analysis so secret that it remains in the Treasury? Have its benefits been shared with other Ministers? If so, would not the correct way forward be to publish the analysis, hold genuine consultations and debate, and then decide what to do about the taxation regime? The Government say that they have taken that course in respect of other taxation changes, so as this matter is of such importance they should adopt it in this case.

If the Economic Secretary is correct and the tax changes are so positive, the Government would attract massive support for their position during that debate. However, if we are correct in suspecting that £1 billion a year cannot be taken from the North sea industry to any beneficial effect, the hon. Lady will have a great deal to worry about in that debate.

I have a question for the hon. Lady about the financing costs. Am I right to believe that, under current taxation proposals, if an oil company chooses to transport gas through the FLAGS system to St. Fergus, it will be taxed at 70 per cent.; if it goes to Bacton, it will be taxed at 40 per cent.; and if it goes to Zeebrugge—which, as she knows, is in the Netherlands—it will be taxed at 30 per cent? Is that the current situation? If so, can she justify it? How will it benefit the Scottish economy, the English economy and the economy of the Netherlands?

Are the Government trying to encourage companies to bypass Scotland—even to bypass Bacton—to go to Zeebrugge and then transport their gas through the interconnector? It is a simple point; the hon. Lady can either confirm or refute it. If she confirms it, no doubt she will be able to give us an explanation.

We have had an interesting debate on a matter of enormous importance to many of our constituents. The Economic Secretary will forgive me when I say that I was not persuaded by a secret analysis that cannot be published or discussed, but that somehow shows that the industry will benefit from taking so much money out of it.

6.30 pm

If it is true that the tax changes will have a positive impact, why were they withdrawn when the oil price was low? Surely if the changes were positive, the Economic Secretary should have introduced them when the oil price was low in order to boost the industry. The oil industry knows and workers in the industry know that she is engaged in levitation economics. It is simply impossible

[Mr. Salmond]

to take out so much without people suffering as a result, and we should have a debate and consultation to find out how many jobs will be lost.

Sir Robert Smith: The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) makes the valid point that the two sides of A4 placed in the Library do not provide hon. Members with a substantial reassurance of the foundation of the Treasury's analysis. There must be some greater analysis that can be placed in the Library without breaching confidentiality.

The analysis presented in the table that we have betrays an assumption based on equity financing. Has any analysis been conducted based on debt financing? We understand that that there can be up to 70 per cent. debt financing, especially for smaller companies.

On ensuring that the right debts are attributed to the right income so that the Treasury gets its share, the briefing that we have all received from the industry suggests that the Oil Taxation Office already has sufficient powers to audit allowable charges and various methods to protect against excessive debt, which are outlined in the OTO ring-fence corporation tax manual. Consequently, the industry does not believe that there is any reason to disallow this measure.

A point was made earlier about Kerr McGee, which has also written to me, and I have dealt with the company before. The argument seems to be that, because of the specific measure that we seek to delete under the amendment, the United States authorities do not recognise this tax as being allowable for double taxation relief. Although the Economic Secretary will approach the Americans, I am sure that the United States will not necessarily change its tax regime, so it might be more sensible to try to accommodate financing costs in handling and assessing this tax. I understand that France may similarly treat the tax as not being allowable for double taxation relief because of the financing charges.

I should like the Economic Secretary to address those points, especially the concern that we all feel about the need for far greater openness and clarity so that the Treasury's analysis is put in the public domain to reassure our constituents, because we are concerned about their jobs and future investment.

Ruth Kelly: I do not think that, in response to some of these debates, I could have been more open and transparent than I have been this evening. I should like to concentrate on the amendments on financing costs, which we have not had an opportunity to discuss so far tonight, rather than to reopen previous debates, which I covered in substantial detail earlier this evening. However, perhaps I should start by answering the point about pipelines made by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), who speaks for the Scottish National party.

I freely admit that different pipelines have different tax treatments. That is due to changes made by the previous Conservative Government. I admit that the FLAGS pipeline is taxed at a higher rate, but full tax relief is available on the cost of its construction—also at a higher rate. The comparisons are not simple; these are complicated reforms.

Mr. Salmond *rose—*

Sir Robert Smith *rose—*

Ruth Kelly: I do not want to reopen previous debates; I have clearly made the case for the changes before us tonight. I should like to turn to the amendment on financing costs and consider whether such costs should be taken into account in calculating the profits base for the supplementary charge. If we were to take account of those costs, it would allow companies to manipulate their borrowing to minimise the effect of the charge. *[Interruption.]* There is some scepticism among those on the Liberal Democrat Front Bench, but I put it to the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith) and other hon. Members that oil companies have access to sophisticated tax planning advice.

One need not be a tax planner to realise that financing costs have to be disallowed if the supplementary charge is to work effectively; otherwise it would clearly be in companies' interests to arrange their affairs so that all their North sea activities were funded by borrowing, for which they could claim relief against a 40 per cent. tax rate, while their other activities—taxed at 30 per cent.—were funded by capital. I shall expand on those comments as I progress.

If we allowed financing costs to reduce the profits subject to the supplementary charge we would have to increase the rate of the charge to ensure that the nation received a fair share of the economic rent derived from the North sea. I cannot say what that increased rate might be; it would depend on how far individual companies were able or chose to arrange their affairs to reduce the impact of a 10 per cent. rate. Clearly, however, raising the rate would penalise those companies without the scope to manipulate their borrowings. A complete disallowance of financing costs for the supplementary charge is much fairer.

I understand the points made by the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce), my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) and the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan that debt relief for financing costs might be more of a burden for some smaller companies. An effective measure is needed, however, to prevent erosion of the tax base. It would not be feasible for us to try to differentiate one type of company from another. We are trying to simplify the oil taxation regime.

Sir Robert Smith *rose—*

Ruth Kelly: I shall continue my argument for a moment.

Companies will still be able to offset 75 per cent. of their North sea borrowing against tax, and with the 100 per cent. tax relief for capital expenditure, the package should still encourage investment by small and large companies.

Some people who are concerned about this issue have suggested alternatives. One is to try to apportion all the financing costs of a group between North sea and non-North sea activities rather than deny costs altogether.

There would not be a case, however, to apportion those costs purely for the supplementary charge and not for corporation tax generally. It has not been suggested to me or my colleagues that companies would want such a rule to apportion financing costs.

Mr. Flight: One aspect that I raised was that, in order for the supplementary charge, should it go ahead, to count for double taxation relief, it would be necessary to allow financing costs. It would be a disaster if it were not allowable, particularly for United States companies. As a practical matter, therefore, the Government may be forced to use a regime that permits financing costs to be deductible in some way.

Ruth Kelly: I said earlier in the debate that we listened to the industry and whether it had concerns about the double taxation treaty and the interpretation of it by our treaty partners. We remain committed to listening to those concerns. If there are real issues, we shall take them up with the United States authorities, or, if more general concerns are expressed, we shall deal with it in other ways. I would not want to rule that out altogether. We have opted, however, for simplicity and for a measure that will avoid tax evasion. What we have done is fair and simple. I have not yet heard a real call from the industry for an alternative. If I do, however, I shall listen to it. We must introduce an effective and simple regime for the future, which will generate investment, have a positive impact on jobs and raise a fair share of revenue for the future.

Sir Robert Smith: Will the Economic Secretary make sure that her colleagues who are no longer in the Chamber, but who were earlier praying in aid the fact that the changes would benefit smaller companies the most, read what she has said? As financing charges are being excluded, the smaller companies, which rely on borrowing, will suffer more under this part of the clause.

Ruth Kelly: I do not accept that. Although I accept that small companies may have a particular issue with financing costs, I do not accept that the Budget is in any way less good for small companies than it is for larger companies. The hon. Gentleman must also take into account all the other changes for small companies that we have introduced in the Budget, including the reduction in the corporation tax rate.

Overall, small companies will not be particularly disadvantaged by the change. However, I have been open with the Committee and said that there may be issues involved. If the industry has concerns, we will listen to them. We are committed to working with the industry to get the supplementary charge recognised under double taxation treaties. If there are concerns, we will act on them if possible.

Mr. Salmond: I think that the Economic Secretary has now conceded the point on differential taxation for pipelines. She may blame the Tories for the outrageous 70 per cent. tax on FLAGS at St. Fergus, but the differential between Bacton and Zeebrugge is created by this Budget. Now that it has been drawn to her attention, will she, in the interests of fairness and creating a level playing field, undertake to do something about not just the Bacton-Zeebrugge differential but the tax on tariff income going through the FLAGS line at St. Fergus?

Ruth Kelly: I have dealt in detail with the specific point that the hon. Gentleman raises. If he wishes to raise other issues with me, I can deal with them in writing.

I think that I have made the point fairly. We need to raise a fair share of revenue from North sea oil and introduce a system of taxation that is simple, transparent and will promote investment and jobs over the longer term.

Malcolm Bruce: I am grateful that the Economic Secretary has acknowledged that there is a problem that she is willing to address. However, I am disappointed by the way in which she dismisses a real and serious concern that will materially affect small companies.

I make no apology for using the UKOOA brief in this context, but we are told that 70 per cent. of a project's development funding could come from debt finance. To make no allowance for that would clearly have a devastating effect on some projects. Indeed, it would make them completely non-viable or, at least, non-viable for those companies that have to finance the projects in that way. In those circumstances, it is strange that the Economic Secretary regards her proposals as fair. They are fair for the large companies that can finance the projects from equity finance.

I accept the Economic Secretary's remarks that there is a worry that companies will change their method of financing to qualify for the tax relief. However, if the Oil Taxation Office has the power—on the basis of the detailed analysis that she gave in the previous debate, the Treasury claims to understand how oilfield financing operates—it should be possible to reach a conclusion that would allow at least some of the costs to be calculated.

Although I welcome the fact that the Economic Secretary has acknowledged that there might be a problem and that, if the industry can persuade her, the Government might adjust the scheme, the fact that she is not minded to do so means that the amendment is necessary. I ask the Committee to support it.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 160, Noes 276.

Division No. 230] **[6.43 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, John
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Ewing, Annabelle

Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell–Grainger, Ian
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, Dr John
Randall, John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Younger–Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Adrian Sanders and Mrs. Annette L. Brooke.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Bell, Stuart
Bennett, Andrew
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Challen, Colin
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca–Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kelly, Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy

Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Roy, Frank
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Squire, Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watson, Tom
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. John Heppell.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: No. 33, page 65, line 17, at end add—

'(11) This section shall come into force on such day as the Treasury may by order made by statutory instrument appoint, but no such order shall be made until an economic impact assessment has been made of the effect of the changes on activity and employment in the oil industry in the North Sea.'.—*[Mr. Salmond.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 155, Noes 272.

Division No. 231] **[6.55 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, John
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell–Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, Dr John
Randall, John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Younger–Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Simon Thomas and
Pete Wishart.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Bell, Stuart
Bennett, Andrew
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Brennan, Kevin
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Challen, Colin
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kelly, Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Squire, Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watson, Tom
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. John Heppell.

Question accordingly negatived.

THE TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN, *being of the opinion that the principle of the clause and any matters arising thereon had been adequately discussed in the course of debate on the amendments proposed thereto, forthwith put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 68,* That the clause stand part of the Bill:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 265, Noes 154.

Division No. 232] **[7.7 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Bell, Stuart
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Brennan, Kevin
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Challen, Colin
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca–Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kelly, Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Squire, Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watson, Tom
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. John Heppell.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair

Butterfill, John
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Norman, Archie
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, Dr John
Randall, John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen O'Brien and Mr. Laurence Robertson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 90 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 91 and 92 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 131 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 38

RECOVERY OF TAXES ETC DUE IN OTHER MEMBER STATES

Mr. Flight: I beg to move amendment No. 23, in page 475, line 11, after "his", insert "alleged".

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 35, in page 475, line 27, at end insert—

'6A Nothing in this Schedule shall contravene the presumptions in law against retrospection whether statutory or otherwise.'.

No. 24, in page 475, line 28, leave out paragraph 6.

Mr. Flight: The notes accompanying the Bill provide an innocuous description of clause 131 and schedule 38, saying that they

"improve existing arrangements for cross-border assistance between EU Member States in recovering indirect taxes, duties and penalties, and extend recovery procedures to cover direct taxes (income tax, corporation tax, capital gains tax"

and certain insurance premium taxes.

What the clause and schedule actually do is implement Council Directive 2001/44/EC, and provide a mechanism for its operation. They provide an automatic enforcement in the United Kingdom of any tax claimed in another EU member state against a UK party, without that UK party's being able to dispute the claim in the United Kingdom. The goods can be seized—it has to go through the standard channel—but the company or individual cannot question the amount or the circumstances of the claim.

Schedule 38 provides for the proceedings by the relevant UK authority to enforce the foreign claim by way of legal proceedings, through distress or otherwise, as for a corresponding UK claim. Unlike a claim by Customs and Excise or the Inland Revenue, however, such a claim will not involve any ability to question the claim: that is ruled out by paragraph 6(b). Similarly, paragraph 4(1) refers to "his liability", not to a claimed or alleged liability. An assumption of guilt is being introduced into the system of enforcement in the UK.

We consider that unacceptable. For one thing, there are major differences between the UK's tax law and that of other EU states, and between the tax laws of other EU states. Britain has what I would call the Magna Carta tradition. We may complain about the length of Finance Bills, but the law in the UK and the United States goes to great lengths to distinguish what is within the law and what is without, what is legal and what is illegal, what is avoidance and what is evasion.

In most EU states, there is no difference between those pairs of concepts. In other words, tax law is not clear. It is often ultimately political, and can be extremely arbitrary. For example, if the tax authority of another EU country—Greece, let us say—produced a trumped-up tax charge against a British company or citizen because it, or he, had a business or a property there, it would simply have to put the claim through its system, which does not involve the same abilities to dispute as ours, and then present it to the British tax authorities, saying, "Go get that money." The British company or citizen would be banned from disputing the claim in the British courts or with the commissioners for taxes. As I have said, an assumption of guilt is written into the Bill. That is why

amendment No. 23 would insert the word "alleged" before the word "liability". Amendment No. 24 would remove paragraph 6—the key paragraph—which prevents the UK party from challenging the otherwise automatic enforcement of the tax claim by the UK authorities.

Amendment No. 35 deals with the fact that the UK has a six-year back period for revenue claims, a three-year back period for customs claims, and a 20-year back period for revenue claims involving fraud. The provisions in schedule 38 include no such parallel time limits, yet circumstances could arise in which a claim was automatically enforced in the UK that related to an alleged tax claim from, say, 30 years ago. Under the provisions, the date will depend on the rules of the other member state. Of course, application for UK enforcement cannot not be made until the Bill is enacted. Once enacted, the proceedings in the other member state must apply within five years of coming to the UK to enforce the claim. That is what the five-year limit means. However, such proceedings could relate to a time period and a claim that go back substantially further than that, depending on the prevailing rules and customs of the country in question.

British citizens enjoy the law and rules relating to back claims as they obtain in this country, but under the Bill back claims arising in an EU member state could be enforced, and property seized, without any right to dispute. Moreover, such claims could relate to a period some 30 years ago. That seems somewhat objectionable. That rather contravenes the principles of UK statute and case law, concerning the extent to which claims can be made and enforced retrospectively.

I do not want to single out poor old Greece yet again, but the extraordinary recent plane spotters case highlights the fact that the legal arrangements in some other states are rather more arbitrary and political than in this country. In mentioning Greece, I am mindful of the famous Don Pacifico incident. Lord Palmerston would turn in his grave if he realised what the Bill proposes to write into our laws.

What is hidden away in schedule 38 is objectionable and authoritarian, and contrary to the traditions of British civil liberty. It is wholly wrong to allow a tax claim by a foreign country to be enforced in Britain without giving the person claimed against the legal ability to dispute. Moreover, the potential exists to go back much further than in the case of a UK claim. In terms of the EU directive that the schedule will incorporate in law, I should point out to the Economic Secretary that the schedule in part involves an element of gold plating. I also understand that the parliamentary draftsmen had believed that the word "claim", and the five-year arrangements, referred to the year in which the UK claim was alleged to have been made, effectively limiting retrospection to five years, but that is not reflected in the directive. The directive is also fairly woolly and unclear, but it has been put into effect in the schedule in the way that I have described.

Given the time of day, we do not seek to divide the Committee on all three amendments, but I give notice that we shall seek to do so on amendment No. 24.

7.30 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): The thrust of the schedule is probably right, in the sense that the mutual assistance recovery directive is important for the British taxpayer. We need to ensure that citizens from other EU member states who owe the UK Exchequer money are not able to avoid that debt to the British people by moving to other EU member states. Indeed, such a debt might have been accrued by a UK citizen, but we do not want people to be able to avoid their due tax liabilities to the UK Exchequer by moving to other member states of the EU. To that extent, the directive is correct and the legislation appropriate.

In order for the Committee to be assured that the Exchequer will be protected, we need to know from the Minister how many other EU member states have enacted the directive. If she cannot tell us that all the other member states have enacted it, we need to know when she expects that to happen. We do not want to be the only member state to comply with the directive and our partner states to catch up with us in 10 or 15 years' time. That would mean that the legislation would give the UK Exchequer no advantage, and in fact would put it at a potential disadvantage.

Mr. Bercow:: We are hearing an extraordinarily unbalanced speech by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Davey: I have not finished yet.

Mr. Bercow: I hope that we will hear more and that it will be better than what we have already heard. The hon. Gentleman, as a member of the Liberal Democrat party, which professes a belief in individual rights, is preoccupying himself with the protection of the Exchequer. Is he not concerned about schedule 38(6)(b) and the denial of individual rights that it entails?

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman should stay in his place and let other hon. Members finish their speeches. There are two aspects to the schedule, one of which is the protection of the UK Exchequer. That is the one that I was addressing because I wished to seek assurances from the Minister that other EU member states are enacting the directive so that the UK Exchequer is protected. That is an important point. Indeed, I was surprised that the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) failed to make that point. We need to ensure that the UK taxpayer is protected and I am surprised that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is so concerned that I am concerned about that. That makes the Tory attitude to financial improvements evident to everybody.

Mr. Flight *rose—*

Mr. Davey: If the hon. Gentleman will stay in his place, I am about to come to the issue of the rights of the individual. He is right to say that schedule 38(6)(b) is a matter for concern. We want to know what protection UK citizens will have if the tax authority of another EU member state makes a false claim. The directive, and the way in which it is being put into our law, does not give adequate protection. I hope that the Minister will make it clear to the Committee that she has been reassured that it will not be possible for a UK citizen to be pursued by another EU member state's tax authority on no grounds. We need to hear from the Minister what rights of appeal UK citizens would have. For example, if they believed that the highest court of another EU member state had not given justice, would they be able to go to the European Court of Justice to override the decision?

[Mr. Davey]

I hope that the Minister can reassure the House that important individual rights are not being overridden.

Ruth Kelly: I am quite surprised to hear the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) calling this provision objectionable and authoritarian. I completely agree with the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) that people who have failed to pay tax that is legally due should not be able to escape payment simply by moving to another member state. It would not be right to provide a tax amnesty to people when the means to collect tax that is legally due already exists.

The system will build on the existing inter-state debt recovery service that has operated successfully for indirect tax for many years. A joint Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue mutual assistance unit is being set up with staff from both departments working together to co-ordinate and send requests to other member states, and to deal with requests from other member states that relate to UK taxpayers.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs has unfortunately misinterpreted some aspects of the provision. His amendment suggests that the liability on which recovery is sought in UK proceedings should be an alleged liability. That is not the case. Recovery in the UK depends on the existence of liability in the member state making the request. Indeed, the applicant authority may not normally request recovery unless the claim, and the instrument permitting enforcement, are not contested in the member state in which it is situated.

It has been suggested that the provision involves some presumption of guilt. I dispute that charge. As soon as the UK is informed of a contested claim, either by the applicant authority or the interested party, the measure allows for the enforcement procedure to be suspended, unless the applicant authority requests that it continue, and the law, regulations and administrative practice in the UK allow for such action.

Chris Grayling: Will the Minister explain what the word "normally" means in that context?

Ruth Kelly: I think that most hon. Members understand what the word "normally" means. I do not think that this is the place to try to define such words.

I point out that provision to continue such actions exists already in UK law. For example, the requirement to pay Customs duty, even where an appeal against a decision of a Customs authority is pending under article 244 of the Customs code.

A key element of the measures is the provision that, once an instrument permitting enforcement of a claim has been received by the member state requested to pursue that claim, it must be recognised and acted on. That is the only practical way to handle such claims. The alternative would require the UK to review the procedures of other member states to ensure that their tax laws have been correctly followed in respect of each and every request for recovery.

The taxpayer's right to contest liability exists in the domestic legislation of each member state. That legislation must apply to each debt notified under the provisions. That avoids foreign courts having to familiarise themselves with the domestic tax legislation of each other member state. It also prevents the taxpayer from being able to delay recovery unduly through obstructive legal action.

Where a taxpayer can demonstrate that proceedings appealing against liability have been, or are about to be, instituted in another member state where the debt has been established, the member state attempting recovery is required to suspend its action, pending the outcome of the appeal.

It is worth pointing out to the Committee again that these provisions mirror provisions existing for indirect taxes since 1977. To date, those rules have caused no problems.

It has been suggested that it might be simpler if UK citizens were able to defend themselves in English in UK courts, but that would open up a new set of problems. We strongly support the principle of national competence in tax matters. The taxpayer's right to contest a liability will continue to exist, as I have said, within each member state's domestic legislation. To allow taxpayers to challenge the appeal system of other member states through their own national courts would be to subvert national competence for tax matters.

Mr. Bercow: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way; she will recognise that these important matters must be debated thoroughly. Subsections (4) and (5) of paragraph 3 of the schedule and subsection (1) of paragraph 4 refer to regulations. Can the hon. Lady tell the Committee whether those regulations will be subject to the negative or the affirmative procedure?

Ruth Kelly: I will write to the hon. Gentleman with those details.

I confirm that if appeals against the application of the directive are received, as the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton has requested, there is an appeal mechanism through the European Court of Justice. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be satisfied on that matter. I will write to him about the number of states that have already implemented the directive; I am sure that he will understand if I do not have that information to hand.

As I understand it, the implementation of the directive imposes no new liabilities on the taxpayer. It will not change the rights of the taxpayer or impose any tax liability that did not previously exist. Instead, it introduces procedures for recovering debts where the taxpayer has assets in another member state and allows arrangements for co-operation in collecting indirect taxes such as excise duties and VAT that have existed for many years to be extended to direct taxes as well. The only people who need worry about this measure are those who fail to pay the tax that they owe. I am sure that Members will agree that taxpayers should not be able to escape paying what they owe simply by moving to another member state. I urge the Committee to reject the amendment.

Mr. Flight: There is a huge difference between this matter and excise and VAT, which are administered on a fairly common basis throughout the EU. They are not personal taxes and not part of the EU territories, where much taxation can be arbitrary. The clause and schedule

are doing something new and different; they are following the same path but addressing tax areas that in the EU can be extremely arbitrary.

I understand the practical point that it would be a lot of hassle to permit Greek or Spanish tax law, to the extent that it exists, to be disputed in an English court, but not to do so still seems authoritarian to me. A claim could be submitted against a British company or individual in Spain which they may not even know about because the authority may not be able to advise of such proceedings in the UK. That claim could be nodded through, resulting in the sums claimed being enforced without any right of dispute or defence.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. However, this is a reciprocal arrangement and were the amendment to succeed, it would mean that Greek and Spanish courts, about which he seems so concerned, would have extra-territorial jurisdiction over British taxpayers about British taxation in this country. The interpretation of a Greek or Spanish court as to whether a British taxpayer was liable to pay British tax would supersede our own territorial jurisdiction. Is the hon. Gentleman not concerned about that?

Mr. Flight: Before I come to what other EU states are doing, let me make it clear that I believe that justice for British citizens is ultimately more important than the greater ease of UK tax authorities in collecting tax or instructing European authorities to seize goods on tax liabilities claimed here.

Furthermore, although the directive has not yet come into force in more than one EU member state, I am sure that the processes will be nowhere as diligent and efficient as in this country. The mere fact that the directive may have been incorporated in the tax law of all EU member states does not ensure that a claim advised by the UK authorities would be pursued and settled with the same efficiency as it would be in this country.

The self-interest tax-gathering point is not answered merely by asking whether the directive has been put into effect. My understanding is that the whole controversial issue of denying the right to challenge the claim is a relatively grey area in the EU directive. The UK authorities might have slightly gold-plated the requirements in the practical interests to which the Minister referred.

The arrangements that have operated for VAT and Customs have not presented such problems because the claims are not arbitrary. However, the proposal introduces a great deal of arbitrariness in claims for income tax and claims against property. It will permit an injustice against UK citizens, which the British authorities would be obliged to implement, denying British companies or citizens the right to dispute the claim. That is utterly wrong and objectionable and we would never have considered that such a measure could have been adopted in UK law in the past.

7.45 pm

Mr. Edward Davey: The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) has failed to acknowledge the fact that the measure is about reciprocal arrangements and that there could be an appeal to the European Court of Justice. The Conservatives are in danger of becoming the friends of the international tax avoider and the friends of the residents of the Costa del Crime.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

The Second Deputy Chairman: Order. Does the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) want to press amendment No. 23 to a Division?

Mr. Flight: No, Sir Michael. As I said earlier, I do not want to press the amendment—*[Interruption.]*

The Second Deputy Chairman: Order. Does the hon. Gentleman wish to withdraw the amendment?

Mr. Flight: Yes, Sir Michael, I beg to ask leave to withdraw that amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The Second Deputy Chairman: I understand that the hon. Gentleman wants to press amendment No. 24 to a Division. Is that correct?

Mr. Flight: Yes, Sir Michael.

Amendment proposed: No. 24, in schedule 38, page 475, line 28, leave out paragraph 6.—*[Mr. Flight.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 85, Noes 249.

Division No. 233] **[7.48 pm**

AYES

Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*	Lansley, Andrew
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Letwin, Oliver
Bacon, Richard	Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Barker, Gregory	Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Baron, John	Lidington, David
Beggs, Roy	Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Bellingham, Henry	Loughton, Tim
Bercow, John	Luff, Peter
Boswell, Tim	McIntosh, Miss Anne
Brazier, Julian	MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Burns, Simon	McLoughlin, Patrick
Burnside, David	Malins, Humfrey
Burt, Alistair	Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Butterfill, John	May, Mrs Theresa
Chope, Christopher	Mercer, Patrick
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Murrison, Dr Andrew
Collins, Tim	Norman, Archie
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*	Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Dodds, Nigel	Paice, James
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*	Paterson, Owen
Fabricant, Michael	Prisk, Mark
Fallon, Michael	Randall, John
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*	Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Flight, Howard	Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Flook, Adrian	Rosindell, Andrew
Forth, Rt Hon Eric	Ruffley, David
Francois, Mark	Sayeed, Jonathan
Gibb, Nick	Simmonds, Mark
Gray, James	Spink, Bob
Grayling, Chris	Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*	Swayne, Desmond
Grieve, Dominic	Syms, Robert
Hammond, Philip	Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Hawkins, Nick	Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Hayes, John	Tyrie, Andrew
Heald, Oliver	Viggers, Peter
Hoban, Mark	Walter, Robert
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*	Watkinson, Angela
Hunter, Andrew	Whittingdale, John
Jack, Rt Hon Michael	Wiggin, Bill
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*	Wilkinson, John

Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen O'Brien and
Mr. Laurence Robertson.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Bell, Stuart
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Brennan, Kevin
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Challen, Colin
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Doughty, Sue
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Annabelle
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai
Heath, David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Holmes, Paul
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miliband, David
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Roy, Frank
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Squire, Rachel
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Watson, Tom
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wishart, Pete
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Dan Norris and
Mr. Nick Ainger.

Question accordingly negatived.

Schedule 38 agreed to.

Clause 134

LORRY ROAD-USER CHARGE

8 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I beg to move amendment No. 32, in page 106, line 35, at end insert—

'provided that the charge shall be payable in respect of every lorry using a public road in the United Kingdom irrespective of the country in which such lorry is registered.'.

The Second Deputy Chairman: I gather that it will be for the convenience of the Committee if we discuss the following amendments together: No. 30, in page 106, line 35, at end insert—

'(2A) The rates at which lorry road–user charge shall be payable shall be determined so that the total of road user charge, vehicle excise duty applicable to lorries and fuel duty raised from lorries shall not exceed the total of vehicle excise duty and fuel duty raised from lorries in the year 2002–03 subject to indexation up to the year of introduction.'.

No. 31, in page 106, line 35, at end insert—

'(2B) Lorry road user charge shall be brought into effect no later than the commencement of the financial year 2006–07.'.

Mr. Chope: I am sure that it will be for the convenience of the Committee to consider the amendments together. They have been drafted to give the Government an opportunity to expand on the rather bland statement that the Chancellor made in his Budget statement. He said:

"Hauliers from overseas should pay their fair share towards the cost of using our roads".

So say all of us.

The Government rejected our proposals for a Brit disc, but they are now coming forward with their own proposals. However, clause 134 contains no reference to hauliers from overseas, to foreign lorries or to anything like that. *[Interruption.]* The Financial Secretary says that there is a good reason for that, and we shall have the opportunity to hear the explanation shortly. That is what amendment No. 32 is all about.

We welcome the fact that the Government have accepted the principle of a Brit disc that was outlined in our manifesto at the last general election. We recognise that, under European law, the maximum penalty on foreign hauliers is only about £750, whereas the tax differential between a French lorry and a UK-operated lorry is about £12,000. What the Government have in mind in the clause could do much more to bridge the gap than could be done merely by the introduction of a Euro vignette.

I hope that the Financial Secretary will also be able to address the concerns that prompted amendment No. 30. It is a reflection of the fact that the Chancellor also said in the Budget statement that there would be

"a road user charge for lorries that is distance-based, with offsetting tax cuts for the UK haulage industry."—[*Official Report*, 17 April 2002; Vol. 382, c. 583-4.]

Amendment No. 30 would put that proposal into the Bill.

It is not just today's proceedings that have caused Conservative Members to be rather suspicious about the Government's assertions and promises and about the words of some Ministers. We have cause to reflect on what happened with the climate change levy. The Government promised an offsetting reduction in national insurance for employers but, in the Budget, they have more than totally negated that reduction by their proposals for national insurance. Similarly, on the proposals for the aggregates tax, the goalposts were moved during the consultation with the industry.

Given that the discussion on this issue is likely to go on for some years, we want a guaranteed assurance from the Economic Secretary that the haulage industry in this country will not face additional costs. The only sure way of doing that is by putting such guarantees in the Bill.

Amendment No. 31 deals with the issue of when the proposals will come into effect. I understand that, at the consultation meeting that was held between the haulage industry and Ministers and Treasury officials, there was talk of the measure being introduced no later than spring 2006. However, the Government have tended to fail to deliver on their targets for the completion of such legislation. Because it is vital that our road haulage industry is allowed to compete on level terms with foreign hauliers, the Bill should contain the provision that the measure will be brought in no later than spring 2006. Some would say that that is far too late, but I understand that it would be complicated to introduce.

I hope that the Financial Secretary can explain how he will ensure that there is interoperability between foreign and British hauliers and the system that he has in mind for taxing lorries under the new regime. I also hope he will assure us that the commitment in the pre-Budget statement that there will be no net increase in taxation on truck operators in the UK will hold true. If he can explain how the proposal will be consistent with the Government's agenda for reducing and managing congestion on our roads when only one vehicle in 50 is a lorry, that would be a bonus. However, I fear that he will not want to explain why the Government think it right to have a charge for lorries that is based on their use of the road, but not to have a similar charge for motorists.

I hope that the amendments give the Committee the opportunity to discuss those important issues. Come 2006, there will be a complete transformation of the way in which the heavy goods vehicles on our roads are taxed. That will be to the benefit of the road haulage industry, but it needs some reassurances, which I hope the Financial Secretary will provide.

Mr. Edward Davey: I want the Financial Secretary to assure us that the clause is necessary simply to allow the Government to spend the money that is needed to have a viable operational scheme for lorry road-user charges. Once that is determined, I expect the Government to include the details of tax legislation in a future Finance Bill for the House to scrutinise. If the right hon. Gentleman can give hon. Members those two reassurances, we can proceed, hopefully to the Adjournment.

Chris Grayling: I want to put a different slant on the hon. Gentleman's comments. The issue is far greater than taxation. It represents a major change for the UK. For the first time, long-distance road pricing is coming into effect alongside the various plans that exist for congestion charging. It involves significant technology changes for our road industry and has significant implications for the Government's transport strategy. I hope that the Financial Secretary can reassure us that this is a piece of enabling legislation that will not preclude a full and substantive debate about the transport industry and the place of road haulage in that. I think that the right hon. Gentleman is nodding, and I am happy to receive that assurance.

I also hope the right hon. Gentleman can reassure us that the Government intend the measure to be revenue neutral. It must not be a way of introducing stealth taxes on the haulage industry. I am happy to give way if the Minister wants to intervene. I can see that he is keen to wind up the debate, but this is an important issue and it should not be nodded through because it is late on a Thursday evening.

[Chris Grayling]

Fundamental issues are at stake. The Government's proposals have implications for rail freight and for the roads that are not encompassed by the scheme and the traffic that uses them. They come at a time when the Commission for Integrated Transport has recommended a more wide-ranging and all-encompassing scheme. I want the right hon. Gentleman to assure me that the Government will not attempt to use the legislation to railroad through a measure that is taken in isolation from the rest of their transport policy.

Mr. Boateng: Clause 134 fulfils our manifesto commitment to make sure that lorry operators contribute to costs when using United Kingdom roads, regardless of their nationality. It has been widely consulted on and has been warmly welcomed by the industry. I have listened to the arguments behind the Opposition amendments, which are unconvincing and wholly misconceived. However, I shall briefly address their aims.

It would be wrong to commit ourselves to a fixed date by which the proposals are to be implemented, as the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) suggested, partly for the reasons given by the Liberal Democrat spokesman. We need to be sure that we tackle complicated issues of compatibility in a way favourable to Britain's competitive interests and the interests of the haulage industry. We have therefore chosen to proceed with enabling legislation, which, in all probability, will become law in future Finance Bills. We shall bring those matters before Parliament again when they have received the technical and other consideration that they deserve and when we have developed a successful scheme; the Committee should unite on that outcome.

We shall introduce a distance-based lorry road-user charge that will apply to lorry operators working in the UK regardless of their nationality. We have made it clear that the introduction of the new charge will not increase taxes for the UK haulage industry in recognition of the fact that it already contributes towards costs that it imposes on the UK. The Government will therefore introduce offsetting tax reductions when the new charge is introduced.

It would be grossly irresponsible of the Committee to seek to bind the Chancellor in future Budgets, as amendment No. 30 seeks to do. We recognise the fact that the UK haulage industry already contributes towards the costs that it imposes on the UK, and will introduce offsetting tax reductions when the new charge is introduced. That is a clear and unequivocal commitment, which the road haulage industry well understands. In amendment No. 32, the Opposition have misunderstood the nature of our proposals and the complexity of the task in hand. It is not desirable to seek to commit the Government to charge every lorry using every public road. We shall ensure that the industry and key stakeholders are all involved before making a final decision. There is a strong case for charging every lorry using every public road, but a decision should be made only after consultation with the industry and stakeholders. I hope that, as a result of my assurances, the Committee, having considered the matter fully, will give the clause a fair wind.

Chris Grayling *rose—*

Mr. Boateng: I fear that more wind is blowing in our direction.

Chris Grayling: The Minister said that the road haulage industry welcomed the proposals. However, it has said that it is extremely anxious about the time that it may take to introduce such as scheme. In the absence of a scheme, it faces several years of continuing competitive disadvantage. Can he provide reassurance on that point?

Mr. Boateng: The industry has said no such thing; it says that it is important to get the scheme right because we must ensure that it maintains its competitiveness. It welcomes the close working relationship that it has enjoyed with the Government since 1997. We would drive a coach and horses through that if we accepted any of the Opposition's amendments. I do not intend to do so, and I urge the Committee to reject the amendments, should the Opposition be foolish enough to put them to a vote.

Mr. Chope: The Financial Secretary blusters too much. His explanation implied that some foreign lorries may not be subject to the charge. Why should that happen? It could happen if there were no reciprocal arrangement and no requirements for interoperability. Some foreign lorries that do not have the necessary technological equipment on board and which could not be made subject to the charge would be able to continue to use our roads, in competition with our own hauliers, without having to pay towards the cost of those roads.

8.15 pm

The fact that the Minister is not prepared to accept amendment No. 32 must ring alarm bells in the British haulage industry. It will lead hauliers to believe that although the Chancellor says that hauliers from overseas should pay their fair share, the Financial Secretary is not prepared to commit himself to ensuring that all foreign lorries will be subject to such a charge. I find his response on that extremely unsatisfactory and probably rather revealing.

The Financial Secretary says that there will be offsetting tax reductions—a suitably vague expression. It is very hard to hold somebody to account for breaking a commitment to providing offsetting tax reductions. The Whip on the Treasury Bench smiles knowingly, but such language is so much part of new Labour. The Government say something that is designed to give the impression that the road haulage industry will not suffer any additional tax as a result of the measure, but they are using words that will enable them to wriggle later and use the measure to impose those very taxes.

When we see the Government's record, is it any surprise that we are suspicious? That is why we drafted an amendment that sets out precisely in legal terms what the Financial Secretary said to the hauliers at his meeting with them in January this year: that there would not be any additional costs for them, compared with the existing duty regime. The Financial Secretary shakes his head, but I am told that that is what was said at that meeting.

Amendment No. 30 gives the Financial Secretary the opportunity to put on the record and in legislation the terms of his commitment. He is right—it would bind his successors. However, if a commitment is made to a major reform such as this, which necessitates the co-operation of the road haulage industry, it is important that that should be carried forward on the basis of mutual trust. What the right hon. Gentleman said in response to the arguments in support of amendment No. 30 will not have enhanced that trust and will make the haulage industry much more suspicious.

I hope the Financial Secretary will recognise that what he said tonight will not have increased the trust between the road haulage industry and the Government. I hope that he will subsequently be able to put that right.

Mr. Boateng: Everything that we have said tonight is consistent with what we have shared with the road haulage industry over many, many months. Our commitment is to its competitiveness and to ensuring that we get a scheme that delivers to the industry what it seeks—equal, fair treatment with foreign road hauliers. That was our manifesto commitment, and our proposal will deliver it practically and in a way that enhances and strengthens the competitiveness of the road haulage industry, which does a great job for the country and which has widely welcomed the proposal. With his contribution tonight, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) has done nothing to enhance his own credibility and that of his party with the industry.

Mr. Chope: Why are we having a war of words about a matter that should be non-controversial? *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friends say that we may have to press the matter to a Division. When is the measure to be introduced? The Financial Secretary told the road haulage industry that it will be brought in by March 2006, yet he is not prepared to sign up to an amendment which states that that is the date by which it should be brought in.

Mr. Boateng: The measure could be brought in in 2005—as quickly as possible—*[Interruption]*

The Second Deputy Chairman: Order.

Mr. Chope: If that is the Financial Secretary's commitment, there is no reason why he should not accept amendment No. 31, which states that the measure should be

"brought into effect no later than the commencement of the financial year 2006–07."

If he introduces the measure in the spring of 2005, so much the better.

It is symptomatic of the arrogance of this Government that they are not prepared to agree to these modest amendments. If it is not the will of the Committee to vote on them now, hon. Members may well wish to return to them at another stage. The Financial Secretary will then have a chance to reflect with the road haulage industry on the words that he has uttered tonight. When the industry has had a chance to work out what those words amount to, it may insist that we put the issue to the vote on Report, so that it can have the assurances that it seeks. Meanwhile I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 134 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Bill (Clauses 4, 19, 23, 26 to 29, 87 to 92, 131 and 134 and Schedules Nos. 1, 5 and 38) reported, without amendment; to lie upon the Table.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Offshore Chemicals Regulations 2002, which were laid before this House on 26th March, be approved.

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Social Security and Child Support (Decisions and Appeals) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2002, which were laid before this House on 10th April, be approved.

SOCIAL SECURITY (NORTHERN IRELAND)

That the draft Tax Credits (Decisions and Appeals) (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2002, which were laid before this House on 10th April, be approved.

DENTISTS

That the draft Dental Auxiliaries (Amendment) Regulations 2002, which were laid before this House on 25th April, be approved.

That the draft Dentists Act 1984 (Dental Auxiliaries) Order 2002, which was laid before this House on 30th April, be approved.—[*Mr. Woolas.*]

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

RAILWAYS

That this House takes note of European Union documents Nos. 5721/02 Commission Communication 'Towards an integrated European railway area', No. 5744/02 draft Directive on the safety of the Community's railways, No. 5723/01 Draft Directive amending Council Directive 96/48/EC and Directive 2001/16/EC on the interoperability of the trans-European rail system, No. 5724/02 draft Regulation establishing a European Railway Agency, No. 5726/02, Recommendation for a Council Decision authorising the Commission to negotiate the conditions for Community accession to the Convention concerning International Carriage by Rail (COTIF), and No. 5727/02, draft Directive amending Council Directive 91/440/EEC on the development of the Community's railways; and endorses the Government's approach to negotiations on these proposals in the Council.—[*Mr. Woolas.*]

Question agreed to.

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Mr. Harold Best and Mr. Ivan Henderson be discharged from the Select Committee appointed to join with a Committee of the Lords as the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Huw Irranca-Davies and Chris Mole be added to the Committee.—[*Mr. Woolas.*]

TRAVEL BY HONOURABLE MEMBERS TO NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS AND EUROPEAN UNION INSTITUTIONS

Resolved,

That the Resolution of 26th May 1999 relating to travel by honourable Members to national parliaments and European Union institutions be rescinded and the following provision be made in its place:

(1) That, in the opinion of this House, provision should be made as from 1st April 2002 for reimbursing honourable Members in respect of the cost of travelling on parliamentary duties between the United Kingdom and any European Union institution in Brussels, Luxembourg or Strasbourg and to the national parliament of an EU state or a candidate country and any additional expenses necessarily incurred in such travelling, subject to the conditions that

(a) the amount payable to an honourable Member in any year, beginning with 1st April, shall not exceed the aggregate of the cost of three return business class airfares for the journey on the assumption that the journey begins and ends at a London airport and that the destination is any of the three cities mentioned above or the location of the national parliament of an EU state or a candidate country; and

(b) subsistence for each journey made under this Resolution shall be restricted to two nights at the Civil Service class A standard subsistence rate for the time being in operation;

(c) an honourable Member must submit in advance to the Fees Office, Department of Finance and Administration a statement of the visit's purpose, location and duration and the persons or organisations to be met; and

(d) expenditure in pursuance of this Resolution within financial year 2002–03 shall not exceed the total currently planned for expenditure on travel by honourable Members to European Union institutions or European national parliaments within that year.

(2) Expenditure under this Budget should form part of the General Services Budget and, if so advised by the Speaker's Advisory Panel, the Speaker and the Leader of the House shall have the power to vary the provisions of this Resolution in future financial years.—[*Mr. Woolas.*]

PETITION

Knutsford Crown Court

8.23 pm

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): I wish to present to the House a petition to save local justice in my county, organised by the *Knutsford Guardian* and many local shops, restaurants and businesses and signed by 2,603 local people in just a couple of weeks. The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Knutsford and the surrounding area declares that they wholly reject the plans to close Knutsford Crown Court and believe closure of the historic building will make the criminal justice system more remote from local people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Lord Chancellor to intervene on the petitioners' behalf and block the planned closure of Knutsford Crown Court.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Paul Edwards

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Woolas.*]

8.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): On 23 April, the Minister for Sport replied to my parliamentary questions about UK Sport, a publicly funded body, and about the case of my constituent Mr. Paul Edwards. That followed an exchange of correspondence between the Minister and me in January and February, and a meeting in March between Sir Rodney Walker, chairman of UK Sport, Michelle Verroken, director of anti-doping, Paul Edwards, his advisers and me.

In one of my questions, I asked the Government to

"take measures to ensure that UK Sport has sufficient powers to conduct inquiries into previous rulings on the alleged use of performance-enhancing substances."

I asked that because of the manifest reluctance of UK Sport, UK Athletics and the testing laboratory to reopen an issue that is convenient for them to keep closed.

The Minister's answer referred to future, not past cases. He replied:

"UK Sport is the lead agency for the Government's anti-doping programme. The National Anti-Doping Policy, recently launched by UK Sport, sets out standardised procedures to ensure that governing bodies of sport have consistent, transparent and accountable anti-doping procedures. The National Anti-Doping Policy has clearly defined independent review, disciplinary and appeal processes built into it."

I sincerely hope that the Minister's faith in UK Sport's ability to preside over

"consistent, transparent and accountable anti-doping procedures"

is well founded. My experiences in the past six months suggest that that may not be the case.

In those six months, UK Sport appears to have taken no effective action about Mr. Paul Edwards, and UK Athletics has refused to take any. The way forward that has been offered is, as I understand it, a recipe for even more delay. That does not inspire confidence in anti-doping procedures of the future.

In a reply to another question, the Minister stated:

"It would not be appropriate for Ministers to intervene in individual doping cases."—[*Official Report*, 23 April 2002; Vol. 384, c. 153W.]

I agree that that would be so in an ideal world. However, in the case of my constituent, UK Sport and UK Athletics appear so far to be institutionally incapable of tackling what has become an issue of morality and justice. We have encountered stonewalling, delaying tactics, wilful prevarication and appalling obfuscation.

There is no need for me to remind the Minister that UK Sport is wholly funded by taxpayers' and lottery money. Ultimate accountability for the use of that money rests with the Minister as a custodian of the public purse. In the case that we are considering, public money is working against individual justice.

Incredible to relate, the testing process in the case of Paul Edwards clearly infringed the code of the International Olympic Committee, UK Sport's requirements and those of the International Amateur Athletics Federation. The tests were therefore invalid and the case against Edwards collapses. UK Sport and UK Athletics have known that for many months.

In testing the samples, the British Athletic Federation infringed the IOC code of testing. Appendix C of article 5:6 demands that, to maintain the integrity of analysis, the two samples must be tested by entirely different personnel. If that is not possible, the B sample must be tested at a different laboratory. That did not happen with my constituent. The same person tested both samples in the same laboratory. The tests were therefore invalid.

The IOC medical code was also infringed. It requires the production of a chain of custody. A form, which accompanies the samples, must be signed by every custodian. In Edwards' case, it was never produced. When the deficiency was discovered. UK Sport tried to recreate one, but it did not account for the first 24 hours of the samples' transit. It is simply not possible to establish that the samples were kept free from contamination.

UK Sport's requirements were not observed. According to its newsletter in December 1996, the pH level of the sample had to be recorded by the sampling officer at the time of collection. In the case of Paul Edwards, the sampling officer did not do that. He thereby failed to follow the procedures required by UK Sport. By its own standards, the tests were invalid.

More than that, IAAF requirements were not observed. It has been accepted that poor storage leading to sample deterioration can distort epitestosterone-to-testosterone ratios. At the time, the IAAF required both pH and specific gravity data to be taken. In Edwards' case, they were not, so the tests also failed to conform to IAAF standards.

The IAAF would have required a second sample to be collected if the first sample had had a pH level in excess of 7—the acceptable range being between 5 and 7. Even if the pH had been measured and accepted at 7, however, the laboratory reading of 7.3 would indicate deterioration in the sample between collection and testing, owing to poor storage after collection and before testing. Moreover, a pH reading of 7.3 exceeds accountability guidelines for the processing of samples. I understand that it was this point that eventually cleared Diane Modahl. In Edwards' case, it has been ignored.

The infringement of IOC, IAAF and UK Sport requirements is not the end of the story, however: it is nothing like it. Just as extraordinary is the fact that the laboratory never produced the calibration data without which the soundness of the testing process cannot be established. It cannot, therefore, be established that the tests were sound. The disciplinary committee chairman confirmed:

"We observe that it is not possible to make a quantitative assessment of the epitestosterone to testosterone ratios because no calibration data have been provided. We consider that in the future it should be."

Amazingly, having admitted this deficiency, the chairman went on to base his ruling on what was an unproven and entirely assumed epitestosterone—testosterone ratio. It beggars belief that an athlete's career has been destroyed on this basis. Moreover, I am told that it was this precise point—the absence of calibration data—which led to the lifting of the ban on Mark Hylton on appeal. What happened with Hylton should have happened with Edwards.

In Edwards' case, credulity is stretched even further. His tests are recorded as having been completed in three minutes. Other sampling officers are prepared to stake their integrity on the assertion that accurate testing cannot possibly take place so quickly. On this, UK Sport's reaction is extraordinary. It hides behind its own regulations and refuses to comment. It has stated:

"As it is the policy of UK Sport that its sampling officers may not discuss individual cases or comment on procedures followed, comments by sampling officers are not recognised as fact".

In other words, UK Sport is prepared to ignore what a sampling officer says if his comments are inconvenient or embarrassing.

This is still not the end of the saga. For five years, my constituent has protested that information essential to his defence was withheld from him. The testing laboratory, UK Athletics and UK Sport denied this, time and again, until 5 February this year, when UK Athletics wrote to him:

"UKA accepts that certain information requested by you was not provided prior to the hearings."

As Edwards has always argued, this meant that he could not expose the defects of the testing process during the hearings. Even his many requests for data protection were refused.

The saga continues. The samples provided by Edwards were stored in Versapak containers. Even at the time, it was acknowledged that these were unreliable. In UK Sport's own words,

"we could not guarantee that it"—

the Versapak closure system—

"reached the standard UK Sport wanted to achieve for the security of its sample collection system",

but

"no reasonable alternative was on the market at that time."

In other words, there was no reliable container system at the time. Incredibly, UK Sport and UK Athletics persist in saying that this has no bearing on the case. In fact, this confirms absolutely the unreliability of the testing process in Edwards' case.

It would be hard to compose a saga of greater incompetence than that involved in the circumstances of the testing process and hearings that led to the imposition of Paul Edwards' life ban. There were appalling irregularities and glaring inconsistencies: it was a total shambles. UK Athletics insists that the panels hearing Edwards' case were independent, yet all three were wholly appointed by UK Athletics. Moreover, at one of the hearings there was no one competent or qualified to receive scientific evidence.

Mr. David Moorcroft of UK Athletics is on record as saying that the standard of evidence required in dope-testing cases must be at least as high as the standard required in a criminal court. If only that were true. In a criminal court, the so-called evidence against Paul Edwards would have been thrown out years ago on the basis that it was fundamentally flawed.

The Minister is a fair and reasonable man. He will know, even if is not politic for him to acknowledge it publicly this evening, that any one of the irregularities I have listed would be sufficient for the charges to be dismissed in a criminal court of law. An appalling injustice has been inflicted on my constituent, and I am dismayed that UK Sport and UK Athletics have so far failed to deliver justice.

[Mr. Andrew Hunter]

What confidence can anyone have that UK Sport can be an effective lead agency, and UK Athletics a led agency, in a national anti-doping policy that is consistent, transparent and accountable, when they cannot put right the monstrous injustice to my constituent that is being perpetrated? The time is long overdue for my constituent's life ban to be lifted. That is only right, and I appeal to the Minister.

8.37 pm

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): I congratulate the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) on securing the debate. I know that he supports his constituent passionately, as is absolutely right.

In recent months—indeed, years—this subject has risen on the political agenda. Most people now recognise that the use of drugs in sport constitutes cheating, and undermines the integrity of sport. Indeed, it probably tarnishes sport more than any other problem it encounters. The Government and I are committed to the battle against doping in sport, and I welcome the opportunity to debate it this evening.

In the United Kingdom, we are committed to achieving a partnership between sport and Government to tackle these problems. The Government fund UK Sport to undertake, among other things, the Government's programme of action to combat the use of drugs in sport. UK Sport's anti-drugs programme includes in-competition and out-of-competition testing of athletes, the development of a national policy framework, and the provision of education and information services for athletes and sports governing bodies. The cornerstone of the programme has been the introduction of the anti-doping policy.

Over the last two years UK Sport, in co-operation with sports governing bodies, has made considerable efforts to develop minimum standards for anti-doping procedures in the UK, and has consulted extensively on the proposals. I was pleased and honoured to attend the launch of the national anti-doping policy in January.

The need to respond to major changes in sport, such as the increased availability of supplements, the use of blood testing and concerns about the adequacy and consistency of disciplinary procedures, added a fresh urgency to the need for a strong national policy. That policy provides the framework for a coherent, rigorous and accountable anti-doping system that is based on four key elements. First, it promotes greater consistency in procedures and decision making across governing bodies and sports federations. Secondly, transparency and accountability enable the setting of clear minimum standards that need to be achieved, of clear lines of responsibility for all involved in the process, and the establishment of open accountability in the management of results. Thirdly, an independent review and disciplinary and appeals process sets out a clearly defined timetable for the initiation of each stage of the process. It also establishes standards and procedures for independent decision makers, and clear reinstatement conditions. Fourthly, accountability of funding provides a consistent framework for the investment of public funding in sport, and for the suspension of lottery funding for those who commit doping offences.

The purpose of the national anti-doping policy is to set out clear guidelines and lines of responsibility for all involved in the anti-doping procedures, not just governing bodies. The policy also requires ongoing compliance, so that all concerned are closely monitored to take into account developments in programmes and procedures. Through the development of the national anti-doping policy, the UK has established a rigorous and effective anti-doping programme that is rightly regarded as probably one of the best in the world.

UK Sport has also taken account of significant international developments in anti-doping. The welcome step of setting up the World Anti-Doping Agency in 1999 moved international co-operation against doping to a new level, and gave an added impetus to the development of the national anti-doping policy. WADA's ability to take effective action against doping relies on the existence of national standards that are in line with international agreements. The UK's national anti-doping policy has been developed in accordance with the international standards and procedures that WADA has endorsed and adopted.

We are one of the first countries to produce a national policy that complies fully with the international standard; in doing so, we are helping to maintain our leadership role on the international stage in the fight against doping. We are hopeful that the International Federation for Sport will adopt the standards promoted by WADA to ensure complete consistency worldwide.

UK Sport is subject to scrutiny by bodies such as the British Standards Institution, WADA and the international standards organisation. As we know, they are powerful, transparent and well-respected bodies, and we are scrutinised by them. Achieving certification by those bodies provides an independent assessment of the validity and effectiveness of their anti-doping programme and procedures. In addition, the National Audit Office—another well-respected organisation that does much work for this House, and which applies its principles rigorously—audits UK Sport's anti-doping procedures.

In short, the new policy provides a consistent and transparent system that benefits athletes, governing bodies and sports fans alike. Those key features should reassure the hon. Gentleman that our anti-doping programme has adequate levels of independent scrutiny, and meets the relevant standards currently in place nationally and internationally. I want to put on the record the fact that the staff of UK Sport carry out their work very professionally. The other day, I had a pleasant discussion on anti-doping with the president of the International Olympic Committee, who mentioned the role that UK Sport and the British institutions have played in developing international standards. Indeed, the treasurer of WADA is one of the officers of the British Olympic Association.

The hon. Gentleman expressed a number of concerns about the individual case of an athlete in the UK—Paul Edwards—and it is important to respond to those concerns. It would be helpful to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the different bodies involved in any doping case. As Minister for Sport, my role is to ensure that the UK has in place appropriate policies and procedures to achieve a drug-free environment in sport. To that end, we have put in place an anti-doping agency, UK Sport, to undertake the Government's programme of action.

UK Sport is responsible to the Government and its role is twofold. First, it is responsible for managing the UK's anti-doping testing programme. Secondly, it is responsible for ensuring that the national governing bodies of sport comply with the national anti-doping policy.

Following a positive test, it is the governing body's responsibility to decide what action to take and to ensure that an athlete receives full access to appropriate independent review and appeal procedures to establish the final outcome. That would include an independent review of the evidence in the case; a disciplinary hearing; and an appeal hearing, if requested. It should be made clear that Government have no direct responsibility for the actions taken by governing bodies here. Contravening anti-doping regulations is a matter of professional misconduct in sport, and the decision to ban an athlete as a result of a positive drug test is a matter for the national governing body of any sport and that sport's international federation.

In the Edwards case, the procedures operated by the relevant sports governing body at the time conformed to the national anti-doping policy by including an independent review of the evidence, a disciplinary hearing and an appeal hearing, all of which were conducted before a Queen's Counsel. The procedures and the appeal complied fully with the policy. However, Mr. Edwards has continued to query a number of issues relating to his case, so UK Sport has offered to look into his concerns. If a doping case has been through all the relevant independent review and appeal procedures, UK Sport is not required to do that. It has agreed to do so in Mr. Edwards' case because of his assertion that new evidence has come to light.

UK Sport's investigations will seek responses from the various parties responsible for the stages of the procedures being questioned and will confirm whether the procedures have been appropriately followed or whether new information or evidence is being presented that should be reviewed. UK Sport's investigation is still ongoing and it would not be appropriate for me to comment at this stage.

Apart from the investigation by UK Sport, Mr. Edwards could ask for his case to be referred to an independent sports tribunal such as the sports dispute resolution panel or the court of arbitration for sport. All the relevant parties involved in the case would have to agree to that course of action. If Mr. Edwards has concerns specifically about the role of UK Sport, it would be possible, within the constraints of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967, for the hon. Gentleman, on behalf of his constituent, to ask the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, the ombudsman, to look into its actions.

I would, therefore, like to reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are committed to ensuring that the UK has in place strong, robust procedures for tackling the problem of doping in sport. An essential component of such procedures must, of course, be the facility for athletes to have the opportunity to clear their names. As I have explained, there are clear and well-defined avenues to address complaints that arise from cases such as this one. As a result, I can also assure the hon. Gentleman that he can have confidence in UK Sport as the lead agency for anti-doping in the UK and in the national anti-doping policy as an effective instrument to combat the problem of doping in sport. That is the right way forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eleven minutes to Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 10 May 2002

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Orders of the Day

Home Energy Conservation Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 1

FUEL POVERTY

'After section 5 of the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 (c.10) there is inserted—

"5A Fuel poverty

An energy conservation authority in England and Wales shall, so far as reasonably practicable, perform its functions under section 2A in a way which, in the opinion of the authority, will contribute to achieving the objectives for the time being specified under, or mentioned in, section 2(2) of the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000 by the dates so specified".'.—*[Dr. Desmond Turner.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

9.34 am

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 5 and 6.

Dr. Turner: It is a pleasure to speak to the new clause, which reflects a certain amount of difficulty that we encountered in Committee. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment for agreeing to the tabling of the new clause; he and I had to resolve the difficulty by what is perhaps best described as a simultaneous withdrawal, in order to avoid a difficult confrontation.

I am happy to report to the House that the new clause does exactly the same with regard to fuel poverty as the equivalent amendment that I withdrew in Committee, as it seeks to make the work of local authorities in addressing fuel poverty a statutory duty. That is its intended effect. As far as I am concerned—and as I hope all hon. Members agree—that is a satisfactory outcome. The new clause returns to the Bill one of its three fundamental strands. The Bill is a package containing three interdependent and very strongly related elements. The intended effects of part 2 will be in place, assuming that the new clause is acceptable. I warmly commend it to the House.

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I am very pleased to confirm what my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) has said. We have had extensive discussions on this proposal and others—most notably amendment No. 11. My hon. Friend's remarks were quite correct.

I am pleased to speak to the new clause, which would require authorities, once targets have been set, to undertake their functions in relation to domestic energy conservation in such a way as would help achieve the national objectives of the Government's fuel poverty strategy. The main cause of fuel poverty in the UK is a combination of poor energy efficiency in homes, and low incomes. Other factors can also contribute, such as the size of properties in comparison with the number of people living in them and the cost of fuel. Estimates show that while the number of fuel poor was estimated to have fallen by 2000, some 4 million households in the UK were still believed to be in fuel poverty.

Local authorities have a pivotal role to play if the objective of the Government and the devolved Administrations to seek an end to the problem of fuel poverty is to be achieved. Our first target, however, is to end the blight of fuel poverty by 2010 for vulnerable households. In 1999, there were 3 million such households, accounting for about 70 per cent. of all the fuel poor in the UK. Once progress has been made on the priority vulnerable groups, the focus will be widened to include healthy adult householders in fuel poverty.

The health implications of fuel poverty can be extremely serious. A cold home can significantly increase the likelihood of ill health. Illnesses such as influenza, heart disease and strokes are all exacerbated by the cold. Cold homes can also promote the growth of fungi and house dust mites, and the latter have been linked to conditions such as asthma. Ill health can lead to enforced absences from work, and certain types of illness such as respiratory disease may restrict employment choices for people without work.

The need to spend a large portion of income on fuel means that fuel-poor households have to make difficult decisions about other household essentials, which can lead to poor diets and/or withdrawal from the community. For people in vulnerable groups, those problems are exacerbated by the fact that they are likely to be at home for more—and possibly all—of the day, so heating is needed for more time than in other households.

Cold can cause other discomforts for older people—for example, worsening arthritic pains. It can also contribute to a general feeling of illness. Research suggests that domestic accidents, including fatalities, are more common in cold homes in winter. Periods of prolonged immobility can result, making it even more difficult for older people to keep warm. People may need to go into residential care because of their injuries or because they can no longer live in a cold home.

The cost of fuel poverty can be counted in more than the misery caused to the affected individuals. Increased illness adds to the pressure on health and social care services. That is especially true in the case of the disabled and the long-term sick. Fuel poverty is likely to exacerbate their problems and lengthen their recovery time. Cold homes may also make it more difficult for carers to look after acutely or chronically sick people, more of whom will have to go into hospital needlessly or go into a nursing home permanently.

[Mr. Michael Meacher]

The amendment would require local authorities, when implementing their functions in relation to energy conservation, to contribute to the targets and wider objectives set out in the UK fuel poverty strategy. The strategy, published last November, sets out the range of programmes and measures that were put in place to address the main causes of fuel poverty. They include programmes to improve the energy efficiency of fuel poor households; continuing action to maintain the downward pressure on fuel bills; and action to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Those issues are wide ranging, and require a variety of approaches.

In England, our key mechanism for tackling fuel poverty in the private sector, where most of the fuel poor are, is the home energy efficiency scheme, which is now marketed, as hon. Members know, as the warm front team. The scheme gives grants of up to £2,500, and provides insulation and heating measures depending on the needs of the householder and the property type. Such action can have a direct impact on quality of life.

We have a target for warm front to assist 800,000 homes by 2004. I am glad to say that it is on target to deliver, with some 350,000 households already assisted and more than 30,000 new central heating systems installed. Difficult issues remain, and hon. Members have written to me about them. I readily acknowledge that there have been delays in the installation and repair of central heating systems, largely due to a shortage of qualified gas heating engineers. To help tackle that, my Department has funded training courses to help provide additional qualified engineers to work under the scheme. Consequently, the number of installations per month trebled last year.

For social housing, the Government objective is to bring all such properties up to a decent standard by 2010.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the design of some houses in the public sector is so poor that they need demolishing? For example, when I served on what was then the Select Committee on the Environment, I met someone in Glasgow who paid electricity bills of £20 a week, but whose home was colder than it was outside. The number of public sector houses being built is the lowest for seven years. Homeless people are increasing and the number of those in bed-and-breakfast accommodation with no home has soared by 150 per cent. since the last election. How will the Government square that circle?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled to raise the public sector, and the points that he made are correct. However, most of the fuel poor are in the private sector. I was addressing my remarks to that because the fuel poverty strategy deals mainly with that sector. However, there are many dwellings in the public and private sectors that simply do not have a life expectancy as decent homes. They can only be demolished. That forms part of local authorities' programmes. It is for them to decide what cannot be made into a decent home and should therefore be demolished and replaced. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that build must increase; that is the Government's intention. The Government have set a target to provide decent homes to all social sector tenants by 2010, and to reduce the number of social tenants living in homes that are not decent by one third by April 2004, with most of the reduction in deprived areas.

9.45 am

The energy efficiency commitment is another major programme, which will help fulfil the Government's fuel poverty targets. It came into force on 1 April, only a month ago. It provides an opportunity to take an important step forward in promoting domestic energy efficiency in Great Britain. It places an obligation on electricity and gas suppliers to make improvements in energy efficiency. That is not simply a matter of providing more electricity and gas units per household, hopefully at lower prices, but of the efficiency with which the existing units are contained in the house. It will do that by encouraging and assisting domestic consumers to adopt energy efficiency measures.

The energy efficiency commitment will have three important benefits. First, we estimate that it will cut greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 0.4 million tonnes of carbon a year. Secondly, by helping electricity and gas consumers to save energy, it will reduce their fuel bills, or they may choose to enjoy greater comfort by living in better-heated homes without increased costs. Thirdly, it will give specific help to lower-income consumers, who spend a larger proportion of their income on energy. That will contribute to the eradication of fuel poverty.

The energy efficiency commitment sets an overall obligation on all electricity and gas suppliers of 62 fuel-standardised TWh of energy savings. That phrase may not convey a great deal to hon. Members, but, as suppliers will confirm, it is a testing target for the overall improvement of energy efficiency. We believe that it is challenging and achievable, and represents a significant increase in activity over the programmes that have been running successfully since 1994. I believe that it will provide a clear stimulus to the sustainable development of domestic energy efficiency.

As I said, special help will be given to lower-income consumers, who are almost certainly in the worst category of fuel poverty, by a requirement on suppliers to achieve at least 50 per cent. of their energy savings from householders in receipt of income or disability benefit or working families or disabled persons tax credit.

The energy efficiency commitment is expected to produce total energy benefits worth approximately £275 million. The average annual benefit for consumers taking up measures under the commitment will be around £11. For those in the priority group of lower-income consumers, it should be more than £15.

Local authorities are important strategic partners. Only last month, five local councils were awarded beacon status for their work in tackling fuel poverty. The beacon scheme aims to identify centres of excellence in local government from which others can learn. That is an important element of our local government modernisation agenda.

The warm zone initiative is another example of strategic co-ordination on the ground. It channels existing programmes in a local area. To enable that to happen, warm zones have formed partnerships between the energy utilities, health authorities, community and voluntary sectors, the Government and, again, local authorities.

A pilot programme was launched last year with five zones across the country based in Northumberland, Stockton, Hull, Sandwell and Newham. The aim of warm zones is to deal with fuel poverty in a locality in three years. They are working on the basis of reaching all households in an area, providing assistance through available grant schemes.

I shall draw my remarks to a close, because this is rather a lengthy opening statement. Energy efficiency is a real win-win strategy, as all hon. Members will acknowledge. It takes people out of fuel poverty, creates jobs, cuts greenhouse gas emissions and reduces the burdens on the NHS and social services. One of the biggest difficulties, of course, is finding those in need. Schemes such as warm front can be helped by local community workers—doctors, nurses, social workers, voluntary groups and local authority officers—identifying and persuading vulnerable householders, particularly pensioners, to come forward.

There are other, often more difficult, issues that we need to consider: people whose homes are off the mains gas network; homes whose construction makes them difficult to heat; tackling fuel poverty among the healthy adult fuel poor in the private sector; and under-occupation. These are all challenging issues, and I would be the first to recognise that they still constitute a difficult problem for us. I believe, however, that the new clause will help to focus action at a local level, and, at the same time, ensure that a range of schemes and programmes remains to tackle the needs of the various groups in fuel poverty. I commend the new clause to the House.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): The Government have repeatedly pledged to eradicate cold-related diseases by 2010, yet current statistics show that up to 50,000 elderly people may be dying of cold in Britain every winter. Commenting on the apparently laudable intentions of the Government's 10-year fuel poverty plan, the Minister described himself as

"declaring war on fuel poverty".

When the fuel poverty strategy was announced, the Minister admitted—as he did again today—that the targets were challenging, but said that the strategy was

"an important element of our programme to tackle poverty and social exclusion."

I acknowledge that the Minister has addressed some of our concerns about fuel poverty in new clause 1, but he could have done so much more. If he had used the eight months since the Bill was published to devise and propose fundamental improvements, he would have earned the gratitude not only of all in this place but, even more important, of those in greatest need. If he had used that time to tackle energy inefficiency and reduce energy consumption, we all would have applauded. If he had used the time to reverse the farce whereby, under the Government's own plans for housing, the certified standard assessment procedure rating scheme for social housing is considerably lower than that set as part of building regulations for private housing, we would all have helped him.

That means—shorn of its jargon, so that all hon. Members can understand it—that local authority homes for poor people are being built to be less energy efficient than those of the better off. In consequence, those who are in local authority and housing association accommodation—often the poorest people in society—are likely to be those who will remain in fuel poverty the longest. When the Minister talked about

"declaring war on fuel poverty",

what he should have been doing was ensuring that local authority and social housing was at least of the same energy efficiency standard as private sector housing. If we add to that the absurdity that, under current plans for energy efficiency and fuel poverty, the poor pay more and the rich pay less to achieve the same degree of warmth, we have a very clear indication of how the Minister could usefully have spent the last eight months of his time.

This is a Government who continue to congratulate themselves on their commitment to lifting people—most prominently, children—out of poverty. I wish they would. But the figures show that if they think that they are achieving that, it is just another example of Labour's social delusion. *[Interruption.]* Just wait for it! At the last general election, the Chancellor asserted that Labour had lifted 1.2 million children out of poverty. Recently released Government figures show that the true figure was not 1.2 million but 500,000, which simply takes the poverty rate back to roughly where it was in 1994–95.

Another deception on the part of the Government has involved the definition of fuel poverty. The long-standing definition of someone in fuel poverty is someone who would need to spend more than 10 per cent. of their disposable income on the fuel required to heat their home to a reasonable level of warmth, disposable income being the money that people have left over after paying for housing costs. By sleight of hand, the Government changed the definition from 10 per cent. of disposable income to 10 per cent. of total income.

In other words, if a pensioner received £130 a week, paid £30 rent and had fuel bills of £12.50 a week, under the old definition they were fuel poor, because they were paying 12.5 per cent. of their £100 disposable income on fuel. However, once the UK fuel poverty strategy was introduced by this Labour Government—the same strategy that the Minister has been lauding today—that pensioner was suddenly no longer fuel poor, because their fuel bills were less than 10 per cent. of their £130 income. Of course they were not actually any warmer; they had just been defined out of fuel poverty. That is no doubt the reason why the Government now tell us that the number of households classified as being in fuel poverty has been reduced by about 1.5 million across the United Kingdom. That just shows how changing the definition has helped the Government to massage their figures.

We can give a muted cheer to new clause 1, so far as it goes, but, by George, the Minister could have used the eight months since this Bill was published much more profitably.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I am delighted to be able to contribute to the debate on new clause 1. The hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) has just said that he gives it a "muted cheer". In Committee, he gave more enthusiastic support to the strategy to combat fuel poverty, and I am slightly disappointed to hear his slight change of tone, now that we are discussing it on the Floor of the House. As a member of the Committee, I give my great support to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner). He has worked immensely hard on this Bill, and I am delighted that the compromises and

[Mr. Huw Edwards]

discussions that have taken place between him and the Government have now resulted in new clause 1, which we can all support.

My interest in fuel poverty goes back some 20 years, to when I first studied a book written by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks), now the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. He wrote several books, but his seminal work on this subject was called "Old and Cold: A Study of Hypothermia", which dealt with the problems of fuel poverty, especially among the elderly in this country. The hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire referred to the debate about the definition of fuel poverty. I understand that that definition is up for consultation, and I hope that an agreement will soon be reached.

I was the only member of the Committee from a Welsh constituency, and I would like to address my comments to the position in Wales. There is no direct estimate of the number of fuel-poor households in Wales, but there are some indications. The 1997–98 Welsh house condition survey estimated that 220,000 households were deemed eligible for help under the energy efficiency scheme in Wales, in that they lacked basic insulation and/or heating, and could potentially suffer from the problems of fuel poverty. One hundred and fifteen thousand people live in social housing, 84,000 in owner-occupied housing, and 23,000 in the private rented sector.

According to Age Concern Wales, 20 per cent. of the Welsh population are classified as pensioners, and, as my right hon. Friend the Minister has pointed out, the problem of fuel poverty is most serious among the elderly. A Shelter Cymru report estimates that a quarter of a million households in Wales are

"unable to adequately heat their homes and are at risk from serious health problems or death from the effects of cold housing."

10 am

Fuel poverty in Wales does not just affect densely populated areas; it is also a significant problem in rural areas. That was discussed at the rural fuel poverty conference in May 2001, when it was noted that

"Wales suffers from an underdeveloped infrastructure, particularly in accessing affordable fuels such as mains gas."

My constituency, which is very rural, contains a socially isolated community in Llanelly Hill, near Blaenavon. The area has no mains gas, and, being in a particularly cold part of Monmouthshire, it would benefit from a commitment by local authorities to provide the gas that it needs.

Help the Aged has contacted me about fuel poverty among the elderly, and the link with winter deaths. It estimates that, nationally, between 20,000 and 50,000 people die as a result of inadequate heating.

I commend the new clause, which is part of the Government's commitment to eradicating social exclusion. I also commend the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown.

Sue Doughty (Guildford): I pay tribute to all who have worked so hard over the past few months to bring the Bill to this stage. It has taken a tremendous amount of hard work and negotiation. Sadly, we are not out of the woods yet. On day one, we were presented with what appeared to be a practical solution to the problems of local authorities—what they were expected to do and how they would meet their targets while conforming to the Government's strategy for the eradication of fuel poverty and delivering on other environmental targets—but we are not much further down the line. Clauses go into the Bill and out again, and we still have the same worries about the Government's commitment not just to ending fuel poverty, but to meeting the environmental targets that the Bill supports so strongly.

The Bill goes some way towards dealing with fuel poverty. I am sure that we are all committed to dealing with that problem. It cannot be right for one of the most prosperous countries to suffer the scourge of fuel poverty nowadays. Its rapid elimination is essential as a matter of social justice. We must, however, give local government the tools with which to do the job. It is ridiculous that, while local government chases one Government target after another, measures that would make a real difference are inserted in the Bill and then taken out again. Now we are having to debate them yet again.

A fortnight ago, I visited a council house in my constituency. I was shown crumbling windows where people had put newspapers in the cracks to keep the warmth inside. Students line roof vents with newspaper, which causes a huge fire hazard. These people are among the poorest.

I asked the council's chief executive why the council was planning to have the windows painted. As they were falling apart, it would simply be throwing good money after bad. What, I asked, had happened to the window replacement scheme, which would have been of real benefit? The chief executive said, "We were going to do that, but we had to think again because the Government gave us a different set of targets." Eminently sensible schemes have been junked. The council will paint the crumbling windows, and people will go on lining them with newspaper. The newspaper may be painted at the same time for all I know.

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): So far, the hon. Lady has talked exclusively about local government housing. My constituency is in a former mining area and is very poor. It falls between two stools in that it is not quite rural and not quite metropolitan. Eighty-six per cent. of my constituents are home owners, and they suffer from exactly the same problems of fuel poverty. Is not the best way of helping people to rescue themselves from fuel poverty ensuring that they have more money in their pockets?

Sue Doughty: That is certainly fundamental to ending the problem, but housing standards must be improved so that the money that people have in their pockets can be used wisely.

If we are to deal with fuel poverty, we must give local government the tools that it needs. The inhabitants of houses in multiple occupation are often among the poorest people in society. They are the least able to deal with the properties that they occupy, especially when those properties are rented, because they cannot afford to do so. Someone must work on their behalf, and part 3 of the Bill is essential in that regard.

The Bill's structure is strong. Its purpose is the elimination of fuel poverty, the measurement of targets along the way, and the identification of households that should qualify for the energy conservation scheme. I pay tribute to the Government for the warm homes scheme, and the work of the Energy Saving Trust. I have attended meetings held by the trust in Surrey, which have brought together HECA officers—HECA stands for Home Energy Conservation Act—community health workers and a range of other people to share ideas, suggest innovations and consider the different ways of ending fuel poverty. The experience has been exciting and rewarding, but all those people still say the same thing: if they are to be empowered, they must be empowered by Government.

We are suffering some desperate disappointments. We are trying to support the sensible measures in the Bill, but the rug keeps sliding from under our feet. How do we know when we will meet our targets? We must pinpoint the failures and introduce measures to ensure that we meet the targets. Otherwise, in 2010 or 2020 we shall be saying, "We will not quite meet this or that environmental target", and claiming that the figures, or other factors, have changed.

We must take positive action. We cannot just tell people, "Do this; we do not mind how you do it". If we are to hold up our heads when we visit places such as Johannesburg, ostensibly leading the way on environmental issues, we must deliver on our own doorstep, and we cannot do that unless we enact the Bill in its original form.

Mr. Meacher: Let me say something about amendments Nos. 5 and 6. Amendment No. 5 removes the existing fuel poverty clause from the Bill. I have worked closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) on a new fuel poverty clause that better meets our joint aims of ending fuel poverty. Amendment No. 6 would establish a commencement date for the fuel poverty clause—12 months after the passing of the Act—bringing it into line with the deadline for the energy-efficiency provisions.

I never cease to be stunned by the brass neck of the Tory party, and especially by that of the hon. Member for Mid–Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed). As I said in Committee, poverty, and fuel poverty, trebled during the 18 years of Conservative government. In 1997 we inherited a situation in which, depending on the definition used, there were between 4 million and 5 million fuel poor. I will take no lessons from him or the Tory party about dealing with fuel poverty because the Tories massively exacerbated it. We are addressing it, reducing it and seeking to eliminate it by 2010.

The hon. Gentleman said that we could have used our time better. I do not think that we could have used it better than by the implementation of the home energy efficiency scheme, the warm front scheme and the energy efficiency commitment. Those three massive programmes require a huge amount of Government funding together with a significant upgrading of local authority stock to decent standards. We all want the Bill to succeed, and if it does, its success will overwhelmingly be due to existing components of the Government's programme.

The hon. Gentleman also said that we could have done better in promoting energy efficiency. He is probably unaware that the energy efficiency best practice programme operated by my Department reckons that it saves several hundred million pounds a year primarily at the industrial level, but also at the domestic level. We constantly promote energy efficiency to the fullest possible extent.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman suggested that we had somehow massaged the figures by changing the definitions. He completely misses the point that I have made repeatedly: whichever definition we use, whether it is based on gross or net income, we will achieve our target in respect of the main categories of fuel poverty—elderly people who are fuel poor, the long-term sick and disabled and low-income families with children—by taking them out of fuel poverty by 2010.

The hon. Gentleman's remarks are not only grudging and curmudgeonly, but unreasonable. I am glad to support this important Bill. It builds on the foundation of Government policy which is overwhelmingly driving in that direction, contrary to the record of the previous Government.

Dr. Desmond Turner: This morning is about private Members' legislation, where traditionally the party divides are a little less obvious, so I shall not get involved in the spat across the Front Benches. It is all too easy to get bogged down in statistics and lose sight of the basic truths. However, there are two simple truths: first, whatever statistical definition is used, we all agree that there are still too many people in fuel poverty; secondly, the Government are working hard to address fuel poverty and investing heavily to that end. The new clause helps to focus that investment at a local level to make sure that it delivers most effectively. In that respect local authorities can do a more effective job than a national organisation. They know their areas, they know where the people with the greatest problems are and they can point strategy in the right direction We all want to end fuel poverty, and the new clause expresses the original intentions of the Bill by requiring local authorities to play their role in doing so.

10.15 am

I point out to the hon. Member for Guildford (Sue Doughty) that we are building on the provisions of the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000, because the fuel poverty strategy was a requirement of that Act. The Government have delivered the fuel poverty strategy, but it needs to be implemented physically. Unfortunately, that Act, which was an excellent private Member's Bill, did not have any statutory teeth in respect of local authorities and placed no statutory burden on them. This Bill does and new clause 1 sets it firmly in the centre of the Bill. It may not be all that everybody wants and I do not pretend that it is, but it represents a considerable and significant advance. On the basis of moving towards the achievement of an aim for which we are all striving, I commend the new clause to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 2

REVIEW OF SCHEMES NOT CONFORMING TO MODEL SCHEME

'After section 349 of the Housing Act 1985 there is inserted—

"349A Review of schemes not conforming to model scheme

(1) This section applies to a registration scheme ("the scheme") made by a local housing authority which—

(a) at the time it came into force did not conform to the model registration scheme, and

(b) has not been subsequently varied so as to conform to the model scheme.

(2) Every five years after the coming into force of the scheme the authority shall decide whether or not to vary the scheme so that it conforms to the model scheme.

(3) At least six months before the time at which a decision under subsection (2) is required the authority shall publish a notice which—

(a) states whether or not they intend to vary the scheme so that it conforms to the model scheme, and

(b) invites persons to make written representations in relation to that intention within the period of three months beginning with the day the notice is published.

(4) In making the decision under subsection (2) the authority shall take into account any written representations which are made to them within that period.

(5) If the authority decide not to vary the scheme so that it conforms to the model scheme, they shall publish a notice of that decision.

(6) In this section "publish" means publish in one or more newspapers circulating in the district of the local housing authority concerned."'.—*[Dr. Desmond Turner.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Dr. Desmond Turner: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendment No. 10.

Dr. Turner: Again, I am happy to endorse the new clause. It amends the provisions on houses in multiple occupation and seeks to address some of the concerns expressed by landlords. If anyone thinks that we are out to clobber landlords for the sake of it, it shows that we are not. Indeed we have been listening to their concerns, putting them to the Government and, I am pleased to say, getting a positive response, which is illustrated in the new clause.

The National Federation of Residential Landlords considers that licensing is a mistake from a policy point of view. We would expect that because nobody wants to be licensed if they can avoid it. However, they also find that the basis now proposed is

"reasonably palatable, provided the scheme is reasonably implemented."

That is a reasonable point and it is precisely where new clause 2 comes in.

The Bill provides for the Secretary of state to prepare model registration schemes. There is, however, the possibility that local housing authorities may depart from model schemes. In certain areas, existing schemes may not conform to the Secretary of State's model and landlords may well consider some of the provisions and demands of the scheme unreasonably onerous. I will not try to pretend that genuine problems will not arise.

New clause 2 would ensure that schemes that do not conform to the Secretary of State's model are reviewed after five years of operation, that there is public consultation and that the results of that public consultation are taken into account in deciding whether the scheme should continue in its existing form or be modified.

The new clause is intended to address landlords' very reasonable fears and provide a mechanism for doing so. That is the simple rationale behind it and I commend it to the House.

Mr. Meacher: I am glad to endorse what my hon. Friend has rightly said, and to join him in supporting new clause 2. Local authorities that use their discretionary powers to extend the licensing of HMOs to properties not covered by mandatory national registration will need to report, and consult, on their local schemes after five years. We do not propose that the Secretary of State should have to approve every local authority scheme after five years, because that would create a sizeable bureaucratic logjam. However, it is right that, in the context of local housing policies, local variations should be subject to local consultation after a reasonable period. I am happy to go into more detail if hon. Members wish, but that is the basis of the provision.

In taking this opportunity to discuss Government amendment No. 10, I should point out that, according to the terms of amendment No. 9, regulations under clause 3 will involve the potentially time-consuming process of seeking the affirmative resolution of both Houses. The Bill prescribes a deadline of two months for its coming into force, and Government amendment No. 10 will extend that period by four months, to six months. The Bill prescribes a deadline of 12 months, after its coming into force for local authorities to have in place registration schemes. The amendment will therefore allow up to 18 months for the putting in place of regulations to define the HMOs that local authorities must register. That will follow a period of public consultation and debate in both Houses. On that basis, I commend both amendments to the House.

Mr. Sayeed: I had intended to confine the majority of my remarks on HMOs to the third group of amendments, but given what the Minister has just said about Government amendment No. 10, I shall mention some of them now.

We have no particular difficulty with new clause 2. We acknowledge that the Government have recognised, and sought to address, several of the worries that we expressed in Committee and the on Second Reading. However, my understanding was that all regulations subsequent to the Bill's enactment will be reviewed in Parliament by affirmative resolution, and that amendment No. 9, to which the Minister referred, will apply only to HMOs. I ask the Minister to confirm that it will apply to regulations that define a "prescribed relationship", and to regulations "prescribing descriptions of buildings". Why will regulations dealing with registration schemes after the Bill's enactment not be reviewed in Parliament by affirmative resolution? That would at least ensure that we can debate them. For the avoidance of doubt, I will also

ask the Minister to confirm various other points that we raised in Committee, but they would be best discussed when we consider the fourth group of amendments.

I am slightly worried by the Minister's comments. I understand his point about time scales, but the fact is that, although the Bill was published some eight months ago, the Government decided to table amendments to it just 24 hours before today's debate. I fear that the explanation is that ill-thought out legislation, drafted by civil servants, has been pushed past Ministers without their understanding its implications. Unless we in this House can scrutinise new proposals, I fear that we will end up with thoroughly bad regulations—a point on which I shall expand later.

Although we support new clause 2, which addresses a number of questions that we raised on Second Reading and in Committee, we expect the Minister to explain why all regulations subsequent to the Bill's enactment will not be reviewed by Parliament through affirmative resolution.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) on introducing this Bill, and I am honoured to be a sponsor of it. I fear that it has been somewhat emasculated, but we are all adults, and we know the practicalities involved in getting legislation on to the statute book. However, having listened to and participated in the debates on new clause 2 in Committee, I say in support of the hon. Gentleman and the Minister that this constitutes a much better way to get the legislation on to the statute book. The original measure was seen by private landlords, at least, as far too inflexible and draconian, but the Bill before us strikes a better balance. I conclude by reiterating my support for new clause 2, and for Government amendment No. 10.

Mr. Meacher: The complaint raised by the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) is unreasonable. He seems to want to extend the proposal in amendment No. 9 so that regulations under clause 3 are made by affirmative, rather than negative, resolution, but that would also extend the requirement to other regulations. If we went down that route, the Government would not only need to seek Parliament's affirmative approval for regulations defining properties classified as HMOs but regulations prescribing the form of registration, the model scheme and control provisions would also require debate in both Houses. That would involve significant parliamentary time.

Regulations prescribing the form of registration will seek to define the number of storeys of buildings covered by the definition—a significant aspect of that definition. However, the key point is that, in general, matters that are not envisaged as being subject to affirmative resolution are those that are not currently subject to parliamentary scrutiny. I believe that we have struck the right balance between an appropriate use of parliamentary time and ensuring that measures that are subject to parliamentary scrutiny are indeed so scrutinised. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are certainly not trying to pass legislation through this House without proper scrutiny.

Dr. Desmond Turner: Happily, I have not heard any serious opposition to new clause 2, so I hope that it is acceptable to the House. The debate has ranged on to amendment No. 9 and other amendments that some hon. Members, including myself, would have liked to see and, indeed, expected.

10.30 am

Mr. Sayeed: The hon. Gentleman mentioned amendments that he had expected. Did he mean that he had expected that negative regulations to be made subsequent to the passing of the Act would be considered by Parliament under the positive resolution procedure?

Dr. Turner: That was what I meant. I was as surprised as the hon. Gentleman to find only one amendment to clause 3 to that effect on the amendment paper when it was published yesterday, when it was of course too late to correct that by tabling further amendments. However, depending on Mr. Speaker's ruling, we may be able to return to that point later this morning. I hope that the House will endorse new clause 2.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 1

TARGETS FOR ENERGY EFFICIENCY IMPROVEMENTS

Dr. Desmond Turner: I beg to move amendment No. 11, in page 1, line 4, leave out from beginning to end of line 17 on page 2 and insert—

'(1) After section 2 of the principal Act there is inserted—

"2A Energy efficiency reports

(1) Where a target applies for the time being to an energy conservation authority in England and Wales, the authority shall prepare a report in accordance with this section.

(2) The report shall set out the energy conservation measures that the authority considers practicable, cost-effective and likely to result in the target being met.

(3) An energy conservation authority in England and Wales shall, so far as is reasonably practicable, implement so as to meet the target any report which it has prepared in accordance with this section and published.

(4) In this section a target means a requirement to achieve an improvement (which may be expressed as a percentage) in the energy efficiency of residential accommodation in the authority's area within a specified time.

(5) A target applies to an authority at any time when—

(a) the Secretary of State, after consulting the Local Government Association of England and Wales, has made a determination specifying the target and providing for it to apply to the authority or to authorities including the authority, and

(b) the target has been published in any manner the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(6) The Secretary of State may by a further determination made after consultation with the association and so published vary any previous determination and any target shall have effect accordingly.

(7) Subsections (3) to (7) of section 2 apply for the purposes of this section.

(8) On the application to an authority of a target under this section, this Act so far as it relates to reports under section 2 ceases to apply in relation to the authority".

(2) In sections 3 (functions of Secretary of State) and 5(1) (modification) of the principal Act, after each mention of "section 2" there is inserted "or 2A", and—

(a) at the end of section 4(2) there is inserted "for the purposes of reports under section 2",

[Dr. Desmond Turner]

(b) after section 4(2) there is inserted—

"(2A) The Secretary of State may give energy conservation authorities in England and Wales such guidance as he considers appropriate in relation to the exercise of their functions under section 2A and (so far as relating to that section) section 3(2)(a).",

(c) in section 5(2), for "subsections (2) to (6) of section 2" there is substituted "sections 2 and 2A".

(3) In section 6 of the principal Act (supplementary), after subsection (2) there is inserted—

"(3) An energy conservation authority in England and Wales must—

(a) at all reasonable times keep a copy of any report under section 2 or 2A, and of any report sent to the Secretary of State under section 3(2)(a), available for inspection by members of the public free of charge, and

(b) provide reasonable facilities for members of the public to obtain copies of such reports on payment of a reasonable charge.

(4) The Secretary of State may by regulations made by statutory instrument require registered social landlords to provide each energy conservation authority in England and Wales within whose area they have residential accommodation with prescribed information, in the prescribed form, as to the levels of performance achieved by them in relation to the energy efficiency of the accommodation.

(5) A registered social landlord who, without reasonable excuse, fails to comply with a requirement imposed by regulations under subsection (4) is guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.

Proceedings for an offence under this subsection may only be brought by or with the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

(5) In this section, "prescribed" means prescribed by regulations under subsection (4) and "registered social landlord" has the same meaning as in the Housing Act 1996; and a statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (4) shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament".'.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment (a) to the proposed amendment, in line 1, at beginning insert—

'(A1) The appropriate Minister shall in exercising any functions under this section or under the principal Act, and in considering whether or not to exercise those functions, have as a principal aim the achievement of an improvement in energy efficiency in residential accommodation of at least 30 per cent. by the end of 2010, taking 1st January 1996 as the base line date.'.

Government amendments Nos. 12 and 8.

Dr. Turner: I think that all hon. Members agree that targets are an essential part of delivering the energy efficiency and the fuel poverty components of the Bill. To some extent, I share the disappointment of other hon. Members that the Bill contains no specific targets, in terms of percentages. However, more importantly, Government amendment No. 11 contains a mechanism to make energy conservation a statutory burden on local authorities. At present, it is an optional activity that some authorities pursue with more vigour than others.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I also join hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Gentleman on promoting this important Bill. He mentioned concerns about non-statutory requirements, but does he share my concern that the amendment will mean that it will no longer be a statutory requirement on the Government to set targets in that area, even at a level that meets the performance and innovation unit recommendations?

Dr. Turner: I do not in practice share the hon. Gentleman's concern, because whether we are talking about the HECA target or the PIU target, they mean the same in practice. They will deliver the same total quantity of energy conservation if they are achieved. No one disputes the desirability of achieving that target or the consequences of not doing so. Anyone who set out to try to achieve a lesser overall target would, rightly, be scorned. That is not going to happen. It is unthinkable.

The 20 per cent. PIU target and the 30 per cent. HECA target may not be formal Government policy, but they are the centrepiece of everyone's thinking on energy conservation. They have effectively been endorsed by Ministers from all the Departments concerned, so it is inconceivable that they would not form the working aim. I wanted to put it in the Bill that the Secretary of State should have the PIU target as his aim. I chose the PIU target, but the Liberal Democrats have tabled an amendment, in the same words as my original amendment, that refers to the HECA target. They come to the same thing.

I know that it is psychologically important to have one of those targets in the Bill and I would have preferred that to be the case. However, British Governments, whether Tory or Labour—probably even Liberal, back in the dim and distant days when we had such things—will not allow figures to appear in Bills. I find that extraordinary, but it is true. The only examples of Governments being prepared to put figures in a Bill are Finance Bills, which obviously would not mean much without them. In reality, those targets are the principle aim of everybody involved and will inform the targets set by the Secretary of State to achieve that aim.

Amendment No. 11 makes provision for setting targets as necessary, according to the local authority. Some authorities have done outstandingly well in energy conservation, and that is not necessarily correlated directly to their political complexion. There are good Conservative-controlled authorities, good Labour-controlled authorities and, probably, good Liberal-controlled authorities. There are also bad examples of authorities of all three political colours. It depends on how the local authorities set their political priorities.

Mr. Bryant: I accept the broad thrust of my hon. Friend's remarks. However, some local authorities, including mine, face a further challenge. If 86 per cent. of the population are home owners living in properties that do not meet any of the necessary criteria, it is difficult for local authorities to make significant headway.

Dr. Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention because it enables me to point out how local authorities in that position can make progress towards the targets. HECA officers, in good authorities, have an excellent record of effectiveness. They lever in funds for the purpose that amount to 10 times more than their employers need to put into the operation, because funds—not only from Government schemes, but from the energy industry—are available.

Those funds can be directed at owner-occupiers of limited means. They are not excluded from the Government's energy-saving, energy-efficient schemes. That is an important point. Private home owners who are poor can receive substantial grant assistance. Enthusiastic HECA officers have proved themselves good, adept and successful in co-ordinating and directing such funds to where they can do the most good. I submit to my hon. Friend that his constituency has precisely the sort of local authority where these measures can make a difference.

My main point is that the really significant provision to be included in the Bill is not the national overall target, because that is so clearly understood, but the fact that it sets in place the mechanism for giving the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995, which we all applaud, a statutory responsibility for implementation of those targets at a local level on local energy authorities. That provision does not exist at present. If it were not for the Bill, the Government would, sooner or later, have to do something similar. Otherwise, my supporters and I are certain that we will not achieve either the HECA or the PIU target. We estimate that we will fall short of them by about a quarter. That represents a hell of a lot of tonnes of CO_2 that should not be omitted and a lot of homes using and wasting a lot more energy than they should. By dint of these provisions, we will be able to plug that gap. I count that as a truly significant gain—pretty reasonable for a private Member's Bill, if the House accepts it.

The amendment also brings into the scope of legislation the energy conservation activities of registered social landlords, a point that has been made by colleagues, people outside the House and private landlords. Registered social landlords would be brought into the net under the amendment.

I have said all that I intend to say in support of the amendment. Let me say to the Members who have put their names to amendment (a) that I totally empathise with its intentions. In the greater interest of ensuring that the Bill becomes law, I respectfully ask them not to press their amendment to the vote. However, the point in the amendment is very well made. I hope that the House will accept amendment No. 11 and that it will not have to make a decision about amendment (a).

Mr. Meacher: Amendment No. 11 is the heart of the Bill—the key issue—and I am glad to support it. It effectively replaces clause 1, as agreed in Committee, with the exception of clause 1(7). It sets out the Bill's key provisions in relation to improving domestic energy efficiency. It amends the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995, making it more effective and giving it more teeth. That is something that we all want, and I am pleased that we can use the Bill to do it.

10.45 am

Before I consider each of the amendment's proposals in detail, I shall explain why, in the Government's view, it is necessary to amend the Bill in this way. It would be an understatement to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) and I have considered this amendment at great length. I sometimes felt as though I had been in continuous session. The amendment is the outcome of many hours of discussion, deliberation and hard work.

Hon. Members will recall that the Committee agreed an amendment that put targets into the Bill. At the time, I made it clear that I could not support it. It went further than I was able to go without knowing fully what the financial implications of such a duty would be for local authorities.

Amendment No. 11 would introduce, in effect, a new HECA regime. Authorities would be required to prepare and implement new, more rigorous reports so as to achieve statutory targets. These targets would be set by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in England and the National Assembly for Wales, following consultation with local authority representatives. However, because the Government would not place a new burden on authorities without offering the funding to meet it in full, targets would not be set until the necessary funding could be made available. Until such time as targets were set, no new duties would be imposed on authorities.

Mr. Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell): On the financial cost of targets, I was very grateful to my right hon. Friend for writing to me in March about the possibility of including targets in the Bill. He referred to the 600,000 home insulation grants that the Government were funding, at a possible cost of £2,000 each. Has any assessment been made of the impact of those grants over the next three years on possible targets under an HECA regime?

Mr. Meacher: As I indicated in my remarks on new clause 1, that is, in effect, an essential part of the Government's commitment to the fuel strategy target of eliminating fuel poverty by 2010. Because, under the warm front team, it is a response to demand—in other words, it is for householders, social workers, doctors or others in the locality to make an application for the work to be undertaken—it is impossible to make a precise calculation of the overall effect, particularly over a 10-year period. However, there is no doubt that the majority of what remains to be done in meeting the fuel poverty strategy and improving home energy efficiency will be achieved by the warm front team and the energy efficiency commitment, as well as by upgrading local authority stock. I cannot give the exact figure, but it is certainly a major part of the cost.

The potential cost of the Bill to authorities is critical. There is an accepted principle in Government that local authorities must be fully funded for any new burdens imposed on them. A new burden on local authorities is defined as any policy or initiative that increases the cost of providing local authority services. So, for example, when new legislation creates extra responsibilities on councils, the Government fund those responsibilities.

Under this procedure, an overall policy objective can usually be met by securing appropriate funding within the spending review process. Crucially, however, when a new burden is introduced between reviews—as in this case—a transfer of funds needs to be made within existing totals to ensure that local authorities are properly funded.

For each initiative, an identifiable Department is in the lead. Where an initiative emanates solely from one Department, that will be the lead Department. In this case, my Department is responsible for any new burdens that will be imposed on local authorities as a result of new domestic energy efficiency and fuel poverty duties.

I wholly understand that some Members may take the view that the reasons for implementing the Bill are so important that local authorities should implement its

[Mr. Meacher]

provisions within existing resources. That argument was played out in Committee. In other words, the matter should be prioritised. However, we must not consider general efficiency savings—however desirable they may be—within local authorities as an available source of funding for new burdens. Nor should we assume that authorities can absorb the cost of a new burden through reduced expenditure on existing functions.

In the context of the Bill, unless action is taken that clearly reduces local authority costs in other matters concerned with energy efficiency targets, I am responsible for finding the budget to reimburse all their costs. Without that funding, local authorities will have to secure provision from other budget hits. Many of them will simply say that that is not acceptable.

Mr. Sayeed: It has been suggested that the extra burden on local authorities will be about £29 million. Does the Minister confirm that figure? Does he agree that it is about right? Is he saying that he does not have access to that amount to reimburse local authorities?

Mr. Meacher: I do not confirm the figure of £29 million. Several rough and ready estimates have been produced, for example by the Local Government Association and the Association for the Conservation of Energy, for which we are grateful: the possible costs range between £29 million and £1 billion. That is an enormous range, so one can hardly give credence to £29 million. Even if the figure were £29 million, however, everything that I have said continues to apply. I should have to find a way of reducing expenditure for local authorities by that amount, especially in the energy efficiency field. I repeat that no one has suggested how that can be done fairly or properly, or, indeed, that it would be right to do it.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I am a little confused. The Government set a target of 30 per cent. by 2010. My right hon. Friend has made the criticism that local authorities have not been meeting that target. Is he saying that the Government have not made available the money to meet that target?

Mr. Meacher: I am saying that the Government did not set the target of achieving a 30 per cent. improvement in energy efficiency in domestic housing stock. That target was set by the last Conservative Government as an aim, not a statutory requirement, and they provided no money with which to achieve it. That is the situation that we inherited and we have to confront it. Are we serious about the issue? I do not think that the last Government were serious. We are trying to confront the situation. We believe that there needs to be an improvement in energy efficiency, especially among the laggard local authorities—those who have achieved hardly anything. Some have obtained good results, but many have not. If we are to make those improvements, we have to find the extra money. That is the problem.

The Government provide money through the spending review. We are currently in the third year of the 2000 spending review, and there will soon be an announcement—presumably in the summer—about the 2002 spending review. Those reviews are carefully prepared and a private Member's Bill, such as this one, would insert a requirement for an unspecified sum, perhaps between £29 million and £1 billion. That is where the problem lies.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): The House understands that on money matters, the Minister can say only what the Treasury authorises him to say, so if we argue with him we are really arguing with the Treasury and we are actually on his side. We hope that he will be successful. Can he tell us, in plain language, whether the Government have that aim, or not?

Mr. Meacher: If the hon. Gentleman is referring to the aim of a 30 per cent. improvement in home energy efficiency, I repeat that that aim was set by the previous— *[Interruption.]* Let me answer in my own way. That aim was set by the previous Government, but they did not provide the money for it. If I am to take over that aim, I have to explain to local authorities where the money is to come from. It is an aspiration. I should love to have an improvement of 30 per cent., but I cannot simply declare it with a wave of the wand, and say that the Government accept the target unless I can say where the money will come from. The proposition in the amendment is that we shall make the best endeavours to achieve that aim, but only when I have the money available for the improvement. That is the only possible way forward.

I am not resiling in any way from an improvement of something in the order of 30 per cent. but there is no point in pretending that one can pluck a figure from the air unless one can say where the money will come from. It is not a quarrel with the Treasury: the Government are united in the view that if we commit to something, we have to say how it will be achieved and where the money will come from.

Peter Bottomley *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I am being extremely generous to the hon. Gentleman, as I hope he realises.

Peter Bottomley: I accept that.

As I made plain, I am not making a personal attack on the Minister, but are the Government saying that the aim of the previous Conservative Government is not currently their aim?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman has heard me say in words of one syllable that that is not the case. I am saying that no responsible Government—and I think that the previous Government were irresponsible on this point—*[Interruption.]* It is not right for the Government to set a target, and to give guidance to local authorities drawing up their energy efficiency reports by mentioning a figure of 30 per cent., without saying where the money is to come from. That is not responsible. All I am saying is that this Government are not going to do that.

I want a big improvement in energy efficiency. We are already massively committed to that, through the home energy efficiency scheme, the energy efficiency commitment and the upgrading of local authority housing stock. That will have a massive effect, so any suggestion that we need to be prompted to accept a 30 per cent. target is beside the point. We are going far in that direction, but if I am to give a commitment that by a certain date we

shall have achieved exactly that target, I repeat—for the last time—that I have to say where the money will come from, and when we are between spending reviews, I am not in a position to do that.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Sayeed: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: I warn hon. Members that my speech is very long, so this must be the last intervention. I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Sayeed: What the right hon. Gentleman has just said leaves me, as well as some of my hon. Friends and others, perplexed. In paragraph 3 of a letter of 18 September 2001 to the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths), the Minister said that the Government

"asked authorities to prepare strategies for making at least substantial progress towards a 30 per cent. improvement in 10 years from 1 April 1996".

That sounds a bit like a target. In the penultimate paragraph of the same letter, the right hon. Gentleman talks about making the 30 per cent. target more robust. Clearly, for some months, the right hon. Gentleman has been asking local authorities not only to set themselves targets but to fulfil them. So what has changed?

11 am

Mr. Meacher: That is exactly what the HECA was designed to do. It asked, not required, local authorities to make substantial improvements in energy efficiency. The previous Conservative Government set a 30 per cent. target, but did not provide the funding to implement it. That letter of September 2001 is exactly within the parameters of the HECA. This Bill goes further than that and requires the achievement of particular targets, which I am all in favour of if I can fund it.

Since taking office, we have provided good grant increases. In the main, councils have used that money to improve services in our priority areas of education and social services, but any unfunded new burdens will result in local authorities looking to other areas of their services. The environmental protection and cultural services block of the revenue support grant, which covers many of the areas for which my Department is responsible, such as waste management, is often viewed as a source of provision which is raided to pay for pressures that councils face.

When I put on another hat and debate waste management legislation, many hon. Members rightly complain about our low recycling achievement. Local authorities say that we require them to achieve a doubling or trebling of recycling targets—as I do—and they in turn expect us to fund that, and that is exactly what we did do. In the third year of the spending review 2000, the current year, the increase in the EPCS block is £1.1 billion, which is large. It deals with much more than environmental issues and waste management. But if one suggests taking money from that in order to achieve the Bill's target, there will be complaints that local authorities are not adequately funded for waste management. We cannot have it both ways. If hon. Members want this as devoutly as I want it, they must explain where the money will come from.

In order to establish the likely costs that the Bill, agreed in Committee, would impose, my Department commissioned an independent study. As I have already said, that produced wildly different results—somewhere between £29 million and £1 billion—so it is difficult to put much reliance on any figure.

If the Bill had been part of the Government's programme—a key point—its funding would have been an integral part of policy development and included in the spending review process, but that is not the case for a private Member's Bill. The Bill's essence is that a private Member, with the best motives, which I strongly support and for which I respect my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown, seeks to insert a demand for a significant stream of Government expenditure, of an unspecified total, in between what the Government have already planned for in their spending review. That is the problem.

If DEFRA had to find the money for the Bill, it could be done only by reducing expenditure on other energy efficiency programmes. I do not believe that any hon. Member would think that that was the right way to proceed. There would then be no resultant gain in energy efficiency because other programmes would have to be reduced so that this one could grow. That is not the way to proceed.

In accordance with the local government White Paper, our priorities and the policy areas where we want to set targets for local government will be brokered through the spending review and the national public service agreement for local government, not locked in through legislation. That is the central point. The approach set out in the amendment achieves that aim. Once full funding is available, we will set statutory targets for local authorities, which they will have to meet by given deadlines. That is the significance of this Bill over the HECA. Local authorities will be given the funding and support that they need to undertake the new task, and that is what my hon. Friend, I and other supporters of the Bill hoped that it would achieve from the outset. It will achieve that. I undertake to start discussions with the Local Government Association as soon as resources are available. I can also say that targets will help to ensure that every authority makes a contribution to conserving natural resources and reducing greenhouse gases and fuel poverty.

Once a target had been set for an authority, that authority would be under a new duty to prepare an energy efficiency report. That would set out measures that the authority considers practicable, cost-effective and likely to result in the target being met. That differs from the energy conservation reports prepared under the old HECA, which did not require the achievement of any given target. That is the crucial point. Instead, they had to set out measures likely to result in significant improvement in energy efficiency, hence my letter of September 2001. The Bill would move away from that imprecise requirement to a much stronger statutory duty to have a report that will achieve a given percentage improvement in domestic energy efficiency by a given date.

Most of the improvement will in fact be made, as I keep on saying, through non-local authority programmes, such as the energy efficiency commitment and warm front, as well as action by millions of individual householders. The role of authorities is to facilitate and encourage take-up of those programmes and activities as

[Mr. Meacher]

far as they can, and to take action with regard to their own stock. They do not have to achieve the whole target on their own. I fully realise that, but it is difficult to establish the residual amount that will be needed to achieve a 30 per cent. target, if that is what we would like to achieve, after warm front, the energy efficiency commitment and the upgrading of local authority stock have been fully implemented. That is why the requirement would be to achieve the target as far as is reasonably practicable.

The amendment requires the Secretary of State in England and the National Assembly for Wales to consult the Local Government Association in England and in Wales when setting domestic energy efficiency targets for energy conservation authorities. Those targets would include a date by which the given improvements were to be made and could be varied. That means requiring a bigger improvement from those authorities that have done the least up to now.

We all know of authorities that have decided that improving domestic efficiency should be a priority in their area. In that respect, they are good local authorities. They recognise that that can bring about social, economic and environmental benefits for their community. The Bill is not aimed primarily at those authorities. Nor is it aimed at those authorities that have tried hard to make improvements but, because of local conditions, have not been as successful as they hoped. No; it is aimed primarily at authorities that have not even prepared an energy conservation report, and there are some of those. It is aimed at those authorities that have not set a target. There are more of those. It is also aimed at those authorities that have set targets without doing anything to achieve them. It is certainly aimed at them.

Strictly speaking, all those things were allowed under the HECA. That was not the wish of the Act's promoter, but the way in which it was drafted allowed local authorities that gave low priority to such measures to do so with impunity. That was one of the faults of the Act. However, I recognise that it is not in the spirit of the Act, nor does it provide communities with the leadership and the services that one would expect from local authorities.

I do not want anyone to think that the Bill is an excuse to stop doing anything until the targets are set. That is an important point. We shall be pursuing local authorities, as we already are, under the HECA. This Bill is not a laggard's charter. Authorities should continue to work towards their existing targets until new targets are agreed, and we shall be chasing them to ensure that that happens. This Bill sends clear signals to authorities currently not taking their responsibilities seriously that this is not acceptable. Authorities that have made little progress to date will have considerably more to do in the future.

I do not accept the argument that authorities do not have the resources to improve energy efficiency now. Some authorities have been able to make considerable improvements through proactive and imaginative use of existing financial provision. It is important to remember that authorities will not have to meet the full cost of improvements—far from it. The gas and electricity suppliers and warm front will maximise the improvement of energy efficiency in their area.

A further important element of the proposed approach to target setting is that the targets should be established in consultation with representatives of local government. There are a number of reasons for that. The first is that merely imposing targets on local authorities from above is not compatible with the Government's view of the desirable relationship between central and local government. It is crucial that local authorities take ownership of the targets. The active participation of local authority representatives in developing them will help to achieve that aim, and to ensure that we get robust and stretching targets that deliver the improvements that we all want.

Variation is another important aspect. Targets can be varied as necessary. The need to improve domestic energy efficiency will not suddenly stop in 2010. Authorities should not rest on their laurels once they have met their targets. Some authorities have attained 20 per cent. improvements, so they are already well on their way. The amendment will allow the targets to be revised as necessary, following the same consultative approach. That will make the HECA a more flexible tool to help to deliver national objectives. For example, under the climate change programme we will systematically have to move from the Kyoto protocol target of 5 per cent. or the United Kingdom's commitment to 12.5 per cent. towards 40, 50, 60 or 70 per cent. over the next few decades, and energy efficiency is a key part of achieving that.

In addition to introducing a new HECA regime once targets are set, the amendment also makes changes to two provisions agreed in Committee.

Dr. Iddon: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: I shall finish this rather technical little section, and then I shall give way to my hon. Friend.

Clause 1(6) requires authorities to keep a copy of any report available for inspection by the public. Clause 1(4) deals with the duty on registered social landlords to provide information to local authorities to help with their HECA reporting. It was agreed in Committee that it would be good practice for authorities to keep a copy of any HECA report available for inspection by the public free of charge. Under the 1995 Act, authorities are already obliged to publish their reports, but that is not to say that they are always readily accessible to interested members of the public. That point was made in Committee, and I agree with it. It would be in the interests of local accountability and access to information for those documents to be open to public inspection.

On further reflection, we agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown that it would be good practice for authorities to allow members of the public to make copies of reports. They can be quite lengthy and detailed, and it is not always possible for the public to find all they want from the reports at one sitting. They may also want to compare different authorities' reports, and that can be done only if they can take away copies of the reports. Rather than allowing them to be taken away, which runs the risk of their not being returned, it seems sensible for the authority to provide copies if required.

It is important to balance these interests against the potential additional burden on authorities of meeting this new requirement. No one would want authorities to be faced with demands for high numbers of copies at their

own expense. It is only right for authorities to be able to make a reasonable charge to cover the cost of providing copying facilities. I stress the word "reasonable", because this should not turn into an important source of income. It is meant merely to cover their costs, and no more. It would be for authorities to determine their own arrangements.

I am sorry that it has taken so long to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon).

11.15 am

Dr. Iddon: I am concerned about paragraph (5) of the amendment. Listening to my right hon. Friend, I get the impression that each local authority will be allowed to negotiate its own target. Is that the case, or will the Local Government Association, in liaison with its local authority members, set a national target that all local authorities will be expected to meet? If they do not meet the target, what sanctions can the Government apply?

Mr. Meacher: I know that there has been concern that, by inserting a requirement that there should be consultation with the LGA in England and Wales, individual local authorities or the LGA might have a veto. I do not for one second believe that that would be the case. Under the amendment, the proposal is to provide an income stream so that local authorities are able to achieve this improvement in energy efficiency, which will reduce the cost of keeping their housing stock warm. I do not think that there is any question of a veto.

The target will be set not by the LGA, but by the Secretary of State in consultation with the LGA. The key point is that the measure will be funded, so it will be a statutory requirement. Like every statutory requirement, local authorities will be obliged to achieve it. So long as funding is available, I see no reason why they should not achieve it.

Mr. Challen: Is it conceivable that a local authority or the LGA could set a target higher than 30 per cent. by 2010 and expect the funding for it?

Mr. Meacher: The target will be set by the Secretary of State, whose primary concern will be to achieve an improvement in the energy efficiency of local authorities that up till now have had a poor record—anything from 0 to 5 per cent. is a poor record, given that the Act came into force six years ago.

I think I can say without fear of refutation that the Secretary of State will not, at this stage, set targets beyond 30 per cent. However, as we begin to move in that direction across the country, targets can be varied. If it is the intention after 2010 to go significantly further—I can well believe that it will be—a target may well be set beyond 30 per cent., but we are a long way from achieving that. Achievement towards the 30 per cent. target after six years is about 6 per cent. on average, with some local authorities achieving 20 per cent. If they get up to 30 per cent., there is no reason why they should not, for their own good reasons, go beyond that, but that is different from the Government setting that as a target.

The amendment would enable the appropriate Minister to require registered social landlords—which is the phrase used to describe housing associations—to copy to the local authority information relating to the energy efficiency of their housing stock in the area. The proposed amendment achieves the objectives of clause 1(4) as agreed in Committee, but more simply and straightforwardly.

As currently drafted, clause 1(4) links the duty of registered social landlords to provide information to local authorities with section 35 of the Housing Act 1996 and the information provided to the Housing Corporation under that section on a number of aspects of performance, including energy efficiency. More specifically, as currently drafted, clause 1(4) links the duty of registered social landlords to provide information to local authorities with the power in section 35(2) for the corporation to issue a direction to registered social landlords to provide information. Local authorities need this to assist with their duty under the HECA to draw up progress reports in relation to the residential accommodation in their areas. By providing for local authorities to receive copies of information already provided by registered social landlords to the Housing Corporation, we believe the burden on registered social landlords will be lessened.

Some registered social landlords work across a number of local authority boundaries and will be required to disaggregate the information about their stock at local authority level. However, we aim to mitigate the burden of this as far as possible by providing for the appropriate Minister to prescribe in secondary legislation the information to be provided by registered social landlords, in what form, the timing and so on. We will be consulting representatives of local authorities and registered social landlords on all of these details.

After that lengthy comment on amendment No. 11, I shall now respond to amendment (a) to amendment No. 11. This amendment would have the effect of including a statement in the Bill that it is a "principal aim" of Government to achieve an improvement in domestic energy efficiency of at least 30 per cent. by the end of 2010. The persistent interventions by the hon. Member for Woolwich—

Peter Bottomley: Worthing.

Mr. Meacher: I am going back several elections. His interventions may be the answer. I cannot accept the amendment. My first reason is that it would lead to odd legislation. It is not appropriate to make general statements about aims or principles in legislation. I recognise that that is not without precedent, but a principal aim is not binding on the Secretary of State or the National Assembly for Wales. The whole point of the Bill is to have binding commitments. The measure would be simply presentational; there is nothing wrong with that, but that is all it would be. Nor do the Secretary of State or the National Assembly need powers to make statements of general principle. I wonder what useful purpose that would serve, other than a presentational one.

There are also difficulties in terms of policy. It would be premature for the Government to make a statement of principle about the target we hope to achieve in relation to improving domestic energy efficiency at this stage. My Department is currently preparing our domestic energy efficiency strategy. This is in response to the performance and innovation unit's energy review, which recommended that the Government should develop a long-term framework. I am sure that that is right.

[Mr. Meacher]

The PIU has suggested that the framework include an aspirational target, not a binding target. It is also a report to, and not by, Government. The aspirational target is for a 20 per cent. improvement by 2010 and a further 20 per cent. improvement by 2020. That is desirable, if we can achieve it. However, before the Government respond, we have to decide how that will be funded. For those reasons, I do not support the amendment.

Another reason is the impact the amendment would have on the consultative process. As I have said, the Government will have to consult the LGA on the targets, which will also have to be commensurate with the funding available. It would be odd to dictate, as the amendment suggests, by an overarching statement in this way, prior to the funding being available. That might undermine the consultative approach to target setting.

I wish to speak finally to Government amendment No. 12, which deals with a relatively technical matter. The purpose of this amendment is to delete lines 19 to 22 of clause 1. These define various terms used in the Bill, as agreed in Committee. The definitions are not necessary, since the Bill would amend the original HECA legislation and these terms are already defined there.

Government amendment No. 8 is a technical amendment to the long title of the Bill. It is more appropriate to use the broader term "residential accommodation", as defined in the HECA. This reflects the fact that the Bill also covers houses in multiple occupation, caravans and houseboats.

That is not exactly a ringing declaration on which to end a speech on what I genuinely think is an important part of the Bill, which I hope has widespread support. It will provide for the first time the basis for the setting of statutory targets that local authorities will be obliged to achieve in terms of improving energy efficiency within a given guideline. As soon as the Government have the finance to do that—I am very keen that we have that finance—we will implement this important part of the Bill.

Mr. Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle): I rise to support amendment (a) to amendment No. 11, tabled in my name and supported by numerous colleagues. I also wish to make a number of direct points about amendment No. 11, tabled in the Minister's name.

I hope that amendment (a) will win widespread support; it deserves to. Its origins lie not with me, but with the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner), the promoter of the Bill. I pay full and warm tribute to the hon. Gentleman for all he has done to bring the Bill through the House, but I cannot agree with his sad conclusions about this crucial clause.

There has been a very large degree of cross-party consensus on this Bill. Its aims have found vocal support right across the Chamber; indeed, among its earliest supporters was the Minister. But if the Government will not accept my amendment, all the hard work that has gone into the Bill, and all the hopes and aspirations invested in it, will have been totally and utterly wasted.

We all want a step change in Britain's energy efficiency, and we all want to end fuel poverty, but it is simply no good to will the end if you refuse to will the means. Mouthing the mantra is simply not good enough. Without amendment (a), the Bill is a toothless sham and the Minister knows it. The difference between amendment No. 11, in the Minister's name, and amendment (a) in mine is like the difference between black and white: it could not be starker.

If passed, amendment No. 11 will gut this Bill. It will allow the Secretary of State to set targets for local authorities entirely at his or her discretion. It does not require him or her to set any specific target; we are all left just hoping the Minister will set one. Amendment No. 11 allows the Minister to set any target or none. There is no mandatory benchmark or statutory commitment.

The Government amendment dilutes this Bill into wishy-washy good intentions, totally reliant on ministerial discretion. Amendment (a) by contrast, would set a statutory requirement for the Secretary of State to set meaningful targets. He would still have the freedom to set different targets for different authorities, but the amendment would require him to have a "principal aim" of a 30 per cent. improvement between 1996 and 2010; exactly what the Government guidance already calls for.

11.30 am

The drafting of amendment (a) also allows the Secretary of State to increase the scale of central programmes, perhaps under the warm homes strategy, and reflect that in the targets that he sets, over which, under amendment (a), he would still have huge flexibility and discretion. Without amendment (a), I would have grave doubts over whether amendment No. 11 will in any way improve local authorities' performance under the 1995 Act.

The Minister's amendment effectively rewrites part 1, and does so in such a way that if the Secretary of State does nothing at all, he or she will not be in breach of the legislation. That is the Government's wrecking amendment in a nutshell: the Minister may do nothing—absolutely nothing at all—and still not be in breach of the Bill. Is that truly what Members on both sides of the House have worked so hard for?

I know that the Minister will want to assure us that he will not take that route, that he intends to act and that arch sceptics who doubt him are simply being unfair. I fully accept that he is personally committed to environmental protection, including energy efficiency, yet when the House passes a law, we should not, in my view, leave so much discretion to the Executive, whatever their political complexion. A law that says, "You can do this or not do it—it's entirely up to you," is not much of a law. In fact, its passage through the House would be a complete waste of time.

Mr. Challen: As a fellow member of the Environmental Audit Committee, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman shares my healthy scepticism about the meaning of targets. Our meeting on Wednesday went into that point in great depth. If he is asking the House to agree to his amendment, he should give some idea of its financial cost. It would also help me, as one who is genuinely torn on the subject, to hear his assessment of how much progress has been made in the seven years since the 1995 Act was passed.

Mr. Barker: I shall certainly come to the progress, but I cannot give any further indications, other than the

£29 million to which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) referred. As colleagues on the Environmental Audit Committee, we saw how the Minister shies away from meaningful targets when we quizzed him on the meaning of life indicators. On that, I believe, the House should hold him to account.

In the Standing Committee, the Minister began by recognising the flaws in the HECA, which the Bill is intended to address:

"The Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 is groundbreaking. As all hon. Members recognise, it is flawed in important respects, especially in terms of targets, enforcements and time scales."

He continued by offering his support in solving these flaws:

"I enter unreservedly into the spirit of trying to achieve worthwhile targets and the enforcement mechanisms to ensure that they are met . . . it is important to ensure that the target that we set has a target date and that there are mechanisms in place to give plausibility to the belief that the target will be met in time. I accept that."

Terrific words, Minister, yet amendment No. 11 sets no statutory target and no statutory target date, and includes no statutory mechanism whatever to ensure that targets are met.

The Minister told the Committee he would

"much prefer to set a target and just fail to reach it, yet make a serious attempt, than to avoid setting a target and produce a wet and feeble response."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee C*, 24 January 2002; c. 16–18.]

What on earth has happened? If this is not a "wet and feeble" legislative response, then I do not know what is. If the Government crush amendment (a) and in so doing completely fillet the Bill, it will look to the entire outside world as though the Government's greenest Minister has been nobbled.

Of course, the House needs to be certain that the principal aim of a 30 per cent. improvement is realistic and achievable. It is, but let me remind the House of several points. First, the 30 per cent. target that I recommend has been in Government guidance since the HECA was passed and implemented. Although local authorities have set slightly varying targets, 30 per cent. is the average in their strategies. Plainly, central Government think the target achievable, or they would not have guided councils to meet it. Equally plainly, the vast majority of local authorities have plans to meet the target—it must be achievable.

Furthermore, the recent performance and innovation unit report, which the Minister referred to, calls for a 20 per cent. improvement in energy efficiency by 2010 from current levels. While at first glance that appears to be a smaller target, the PIU is calling for it to be achieved in just eight years, as it expects an improvement from current levels. The 30 per cent. target required by amendment (a) and in HECA guidance is based on a 1996 baseline, giving 14 years for it to be reached. With some progress already made, effectively the two targets are identical.

There are controversial points in the PIU report, but the energy efficiency targets have not been regarded as controversial. The Environmental Audit Committee thought those targets pretty tame. By supporting amendment (a) the Government would show that they were taking the energy report seriously; opposing ambitious statutory targets would suggest that the report was a waste of time.

Since 14 April, 211 hon. Members have signed early-day motion 1136, which was tabled by the promoter of the Bill. Indeed, 146 Labour MPs have signed up to a motion that welcomes the 30 per cent. target and calls for the Bill to

"make the targets statutory thus ensuring that they are met".

That is the crux of my amendment—giving the Bill the teeth it was always intended to have. I hope and trust that all colleagues right across the House will make good their public support, and support amendment (a).

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I begin with praise and some thank-yous. Despite all the areas that we need to address and which may be contentious, we ought to recognise how much has gone into bringing before the House a Bill that it is important to pass. In recognising how we have reached this point, we must pay tribute to the work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner), who has sweated blood to get the legislation here in any form. The whole House owes him great praise and credit for that.

I also put on record my praise for the Minister. All the way through, he has been a stalwart campaigner on our objectives of eradicating fuel poverty and addressing the climate change targets which the Government have already set for themselves. It would be wrong to dress this up in any way as an act of last-minute betrayal by, I think, probably the best Environment Minister that the House has ever had.

While I am singing praises, it would be remiss not to recognise the contributions made by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, during proceedings in Committee and work done in the all-party warm homes group, which I have the genuine privilege to chair, towards building a huge cross-party consensus on supporting our shared objective of ending fuel poverty in Britain. It has not been an issue where we have fallen out on party lines.

The question that we have sought to deal with over the 10 years that I have been in Parliament, moving it on year by year, stage by stage, has been whether we can set the objective of eradicating fuel poverty and, now that we have, trying to be clear about the mechanisms for doing so.

Every part of the political process in the House has played a constructive part, as have many organisations outside, which have given us amazing backing. The Local Government Association, the National Federation of Housing Associations, environmental groups, poverty groups and responsible landlords have, in bringing this Bill back before the House, played constructive parts. With or without the shortcomings of amendment No. 11, it is important to recognise that there are massive gains in passing a Bill that specifically refers to fuel poverty and that does something specific about what is arguably the hardest sector of housing for fuel poverty: houses in multiple occupation. I do not intend to speak on those proposals, but I wanted to say how important they are as benchmarks of achievement.

The central issue is about targets and time scale. Last night my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown thanked Members who had helped him to bring the Bill this far. I am sure that he will not mind me telling the House that he thanked them for the individual parts that they had played in giving him what he described

[Alan Simpson]

as a genuinely life-shortening experience. The life-shortening part has been the frustration of negotiations about the adequacy and accuracy of clauses that were to be included in the Bill. It has been a mind-bogglingly frustrating experience, but it is still possible for us to improve what is a worthwhile Bill to make it a genuine tribute to the whole House.

Whether they are dealt with in the Bill or not, the issues surrounding targets and time scale will be the ones that dog us in the debate about the elimination of fuel poverty. They will dog us in every constituency, in every debate and in every Government policy. Unless and until we deal with them, we will not be perceived as credibly committed to delivering what we say we are committed to on paper and within our legal framework.

The original intention of the Bill was to try to fill a gap. At one stage, when my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown was looking at the gaps that the Bill was trying to fill, he told us that we were currently committed to the eradication of fuel poverty in Britain within 15 years. Thanks to the case that Friends of the Earth brought before the High Court, we now know that that is the eradication of all fuel poverty—not some, a lot or the majority, but all. We have a legal duty to deliver on that target.

We also know the Government have made commitments on climate change obligations and the Kyoto targets, and that part of the legacy of the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 was the ministerial guidance notes that said clearly that we were committed to 30 per cent. improvements in energy efficiency by 2010. Those guidance notes remain in place and continue to be the ones that local authorities across the land attempt to work to. The Minister is right that many of those local authorities have not only taken those guidelines seriously, but attempted to deliver on them. We should not malign local authorities by saying that they treat the guidance as disposable. Many of the best local authorities have given a lead that the House should pay tribute to and feel proud of.

11.45 am

In the course of pulling those points together and putting targets in the Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown once said to me in the midst of negotiations that appeared to be going nowhere, "Listen. I am only trying to be helpful, damn it." He has been damnably helpful throughout the process in trying to put those targets in the Bill. So why should we impale ourselves on proposals that fail to refer to targets or time scale?

As the Minister said, in part, the argument is about money. It is also about whether the particular Ministry concerned has the power to set that target in its Bill. However, there is great confusion in the arguments that have been presented to the Minister. Whether or not he or his Cabinet colleagues will be convinced of them when they have had greater time to scrutinise them is another matter.

Sue Doughty: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that, during the passage of the Bill, the Minister and his Ministry seemed to query how much the proposal would cost and then pick out of the air the figure that they liked best—up to £1 billion? Had we behaved like that in previous lives and adopted such weak management techniques in trying to establish the cost of a programme, we would have been out of the door fairly quickly. I am curious to know how the Department did not know the cost of implementation during the passage of the Bill.

Alan Simpson: That is a fair question. It is important to recognise that the figures have often been used in a somewhat vicarious fashion. If it suits to have a low figure, a low figure has been proposed. If it suits to have an exorbitantly high figure, that has been thrown in to block the idea that it is a meetable target. We may be frightened by the wildest target of £1 billion, but it will not be too long before we have a duty as a House to reflect on who will meet the £80 billion residual costs of public liability that we propose to relieve British Nuclear Fuels of. Whose budget will that come from, or does the Minister have it in his? I am not sure whether he has the answer tucked in his pocket somewhere, but my point shows that we can make commitments in principle, even though we do not know entirely where the costs will be met from. However, it is right to do so.

My worry about new clause 1 is that it probably takes us further back from, and weakens, HECA. New section 2A(1) of amendment No. 11 states:

"Where a target applies for the time being"

it should be the duty of—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that we are discussing amendment (a) and amendment No. 11, not new clause 1.

Alan Simpson: I am grateful for that, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wanted the House to be aware of the gaps that the amendment will seek to cover.

We have signed up to a change of wording that no longer requires authorities by law to produce a report. We have now said to them, "Where you do produce a report, for the time being, you shall have a duty." So authorities that no longer produce reports do not have a duty. Only measures that are likely to result in the target being met are then required.

What if an authority sets a target of zero? It will not fall foul of the new requirements. It will not be possible to write guidance that says, "Where are you in respect of the 30 per cent. targets?" What if they set the Maldon target? Maldon is often cited as an authority that has done very little to meet the targets set out in the guidance notes. What would happen if Maldon said that its target was to deliver not very much and that its progress report would say only that it was doing so not very quickly? That approach would be compliant with the Bill as amended.

The saving grace was always the provision that allows the Minister or Secretary of State the power to intervene. If it stated that this particular Minister for the Environment had power to intervene, I would be happy, as I have inordinate confidence in his inclination to intervene in entirely beneficial and laudable ways, but the Bill leaves things much more open and the amendment seeks to narrow that provision in important ways. It does not narrow it as much as I would like, but I shall deal with that point in a moment.

I am worried that the Minister appears to have been told that he needed to change the Bill that has returned to the Floor of the House because of the provision in clause 1 stating that energy conservation authorities

"shall take all . . . steps as are reasonably practicable to implement the measures set out in any energy conservation report prepared by the authority."

That was the position under HECA and the provision was intended simply to make it statutory. I think that the Minister was told that he could not introduce such provision, however, as he would fall foul of the "new burdens obligations" that have mysteriously entered into the language of governance.

The suggestion about telling authorities that they will not be required to do what they are supposed to be doing and about the risk of incurring extra costs is a strange notion. My question is: why are they not already doing what they are supposed to be doing? It seems bizarre to talk about an existing responsibility not being incorporated in the framework of all the programmes that the Government have presented to the energy conservation authorities and on which many of them have indeed delivered. I find bizarre the reinterpretation of that requirement as a new burden.

Sir Sydney Chapman: The hon. Gentleman's knowledge about energy efficiency and all the matters under discussion is instanced by the fact that he is chairman of the all-party group on warm homes. Will he confirm that of about 360 relevant authorities, some 350 have agreed targets? Only about 10 or a dozen do not have such targets. If the amendment were accepted, the 350 with targets would be completely let off the hook and there would be no possibility of requiring the recalcitrant 10 or a dozen authorities to set targets.

Alan Simpson: I am not certain about that. Worryingly, it appears that a new loophole might be introduced by including in the Bill the phrase

"where a target applies for the time being".

The provision leaves it open to the 350 energy conservation authorities that already have targets to say that they will stop their work to achieve them. What action can be taken if there are no targets for the time being? There is great confusion about the meaning of the wording that has been presented to the Minister to be tabled in his name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown at half-past the eleventh hour.

That is one of my great complaints about the overall process. By and large, although Ministers may not be the last to see the amendments that are tabled in their names, they may see them only just before the rest of us get to do so and are asked to approve them. That is a very poor way of exercising a parliamentary duty of scrutiny in delivering good legislation. I am deeply worried about the quality of the advice that is being given to Ministers and which the House is being asked to endorse. My concern is based not only on the technical quality of the advice, but on whether there is a sub-agenda about which the House should be even more concerned. We are told about the problem of obligations that introduce new burdens, but I think that we are caught between a misunderstanding of responsibilities and an uncomfortable reality—a misunderstanding of what the new burdens obligation might mean and the stronger reality of the no-burdens inclination of those who advise the Government.

When the original HECA reports were scrutinised by Ministers and other hon. Members, a huge discrepancy was clearly evident; many authorities had failed to deliver very much at all. In response, the Minister for the Environment said in opening the consultation that he would be looking for a more robust set of targets, which reflected the fact that the worst had to be required to catch up with the rest.

It was in that context that the Minister was subsequently advised that he could not take such action because of the new burdens obligation. The consultations with local authorities and other organisations overwhelmingly favoured the introduction of tougher targets. Local government, communities and those campaigning on fuel poverty all wanted such targets. However, it was suggested by civil servants in his Department that, rather than strengthen the targets, we should do away with them altogether. It was argued that targets got in the way, which flew in the face of the remit that he had set for the consultation process.

It is sad that the same civil service rewording of that inclination has returned to the House in the form of amendment No. 11. What has happened may be the result of a bizarre sense of self-protection, on the basis that the departmental record of implementing the 1995 Act shows that very little has been done to monitor the reporting that should have taken place. The requirement was one of those reluctant obligations that have only latterly been taken on board. When the Minister began to see just how wide the disparities in performance were, he was the one who said that the regime had to be toughened up. Institutionally, however, if he had not driven the requirement, it would not have gone anywhere.

As I said, the consultations related more to ways in which targets could be avoided than to how they could be delivered. Furthermore, I think that they were underpinned by a bizarre presumption that civil servants can best protect Ministers by giving them the fewest possible obligations. It is presumed that that approach will protect Ministers' backs against criticism; how can one be criticised for not delivering something to which one was not committed? That is an interesting notion of survival, but a poor way of giving the answers that the public want from us in terms of delivering an end to fuel poverty.

Peter Bottomley: The hon. Gentleman has talked about commitment. The Minister for Industry and Energy told the Environmental Audit Committee last week that, with commitment, the 30 per cent. target could be achieved. The argument of the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) leaves us wondering whether the Treasury has lost the will to realise the Government's commitment. The point about whether it should be specified in the Bill is underpinned by the question whether the Government have the commitment that, according to the Minister for Industry and Energy last week, is needed to achieve the target. Without the commitment, how can the target be achieved?

Alan Simpson: I do not believe that the Treasury has lost the will or that the Minister has lost a battle with the Treasury. I do not believe that a battle has taken place. There is a different, legitimate problem of confusion about how modernised government works. I shall consider that shortly because it is an important obstacle that we must tackle, not only in the Home Energy Conservation Bill but in others.

[Alan Simpson]

I am worried that the use of parliamentary counsel and the drafting and timing of amendments has worked to the serious disadvantage and disempowerment of Parliament and Ministers. That is why I speak in favour of amendment (a), which is a good amendment. I know that because my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown drafted it. Apart from a change of wording to provide for the original HECA targets rather than those set out by the performance and innovation unit—they are pretty indistinguishable—amendment (a) is almost exactly the same as the amendment that my hon. Friend drafted through parliamentary counsel.

The amendment was not dreamt up on the back of a cigarette packet. My hon. Friend had the wit and wisdom to assume the right to go to parliamentary counsel to get amendments drafted to ensure that they were good. We were fortunate in having someone who had been a parliamentary counsel for more than 20 years and drafted Treasury Bills to produce the wording that we are considering. It is therefore not fly-by-night wording; it was produced by parliamentary counsel in good time, circulated for consultation, and not rushed at the last minute. That is the opposite of using parliamentary counsel to undertake a last-minute hijack of Ministers and Members of Parliament.

However, if we are considering overcoming the problem of not being able to tackle targets because they are connected to budgets, let us do a reality check with other Government commitments. We are committed to ending child poverty in the decade, we have a legal commitment to end fuel poverty in 15 years and it is Government policy to meet the Kyoto targets. None of the moneys for those commitments is currently in the budget of the Minister for the Environment or that of anyone else, but that does not stop us making them. They are commitments in principle to deliver an outcome. The timetable will be measured against the outcome.

The most important reason for accepting the amendment is that it is wrong to say that a commitment cannot be made in principle because the money is not in a single Department's budget or because we would fall foul of the new burdens obligation if we did otherwise. There are many ways in which the costs can be met. Proposals in part 3 to introduce a national licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation will, through regulation, make massive contributions towards the 30 per cent. improvement in energy efficiency. The money will not have to come out of the Minister's budget but be found as a result of Government legislation.

Stock transfers have already taken place. The Minister spoke about requiring the Housing Corporation to account to local authorities. The same duties will be placed on housing associations and the Housing Corporation. They welcome that because the money will come from their finances and commitments.

Most important, we know from the consultations of the warm homes group that the private sector is desperately keen for us to set targets and time scales. Through its energy efficiency contributions, it is an active and willing partner of local authorities in the energy partnerships that it is constructing. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant) asked how, in areas where 80 per cent. of the worst properties are privately owned, we persuade or put an arm lock on people from the private or public sector to do something that they have no legal duty to do. The answer is probably to use the same methods as under the Clean Air Act 1956, which provided for statutory duties.

The energy industry has said that if we provide the targets and timetable, it will not have to cajole people into being more energy conscious; it can offer solutions. Unless we offer targets and timetables, the industry is perceived as bullying to sell its products. That is hopeless. The industry has asked for the targets so that it can help to foot the bill.

I should like the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Barker) to be right that amendment (a) will put an arm lock on the Government and teeth into otherwise toothless legislation.

12 noon

In truth, however, the amendment being proposed is much more modest and limited than I would wish it to be. It talks only about a "principal aim", not about a statutory duty. The idea of putting a principal aim on the face of the Bill was, in fact, undertaken by the Government in 1995—the same year the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 was passed—in the Environment Act 1995. Section 4(1) of the Environment Act states:

"It shall be the principal aim of the Agency . . . "—

the Environment Agency—

"so to protect or enhance the environment . . . as to make the contribution towards attaining the objective of achieving sustainable development".

A principal aim is set out in that Act, and that is all that this amendment would achieve. It would not compel a Minister to say or do anything at any particular time. It would simply make a requirement that, when the Secretary of State chose to say anything about energy efficiency targets, it would be against the benchmark measure of meeting

"an improvement in energy efficiency in residential accommodation of at least 30 per cent. by the end of 2010, taking 1st January 1996 as the base line date."

That is not a draconian power. It simply asks the Minister to accept the duty to say something useful, when he chooses to say something. It suggests, to echo a phrase from the Clinton campaign, that we put on our ministerial or parliamentary wall a plaque that says, "It's targets and time scales, stupid." That is what the public expect us to do, it is what the amendment asks us to do, and I hope that the House will have the sense to do it.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I rise to support amendment (a), which puts back into the Bill a measure that reflected the prime purpose of the Bill in the first place. While I understand the Minister saying that he has good intentions, and that if he could find the money, he would want to meet the targets—I think that we all agree that he, personally, means that—we would need a piece of legislation to achieve that, as the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Barker) has pointed out.

Indeed, it is often ministerial practice to resist amendments by saying, "I give you my assurance that the Government are committed to this." The purpose of legislation is to commit every Government—and, of

course, local authorities—to achieving objectives, and we need legislation to be specific. As has been said, the Minister for Industry and Energy has suggested that the target that is, for all practical purposes, contained in this amendment is achievable in the time scale, "with commitment". Obviously, the matter for concern here is whether that commitment exists in the Government to deliver on that target.

I can understand the reticence of Ministers in relation to targets. I can specifically understand the reticence of this Minister in that respect. He is probably responsible for more targets than anyone else, many of them imposed from the EU and elsewhere, and he is finding it difficult to produce answers to demonstrate that those targets are being met. I say that in good faith. Targets being missed, however, are not the same as targets being irrelevant. Targets are there to be hit, but, sometimes, underachieving does not mean that we are not making progress. So long as there is a genuine drive to achieve the targets and a policy to ensure real movement towards them, a substantial percentage of what we are trying to achieve will be delivered. Not having targets, however, leaves us wondering why we are all here.

This is another issue on which the Minister is unable to provide any useful figures. The hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) has suggested that, in any case, even at the global top end of the figures quoted, they would not all be from central Government. There would also be private sector figures, and figures from local authorities with different budgets. So, even at the top end, the figure is not terrifying. The data are also spread over a substantial period of time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) has suggested, there never seems to be any constraint when we need to go to war. The Government like to talk about a war on poverty. Indeed, the Minister's Department has spent billions of pounds dealing with BSE and foot and mouth disease; that was not budgeted for.

Mr. Meacher: And fridges.

Malcolm Bruce: Fridges have not yet cost billions, although millions have certainly had to be found to deal with the problem.

There is a serious point here. I am entirely unconvinced that the money constraint is legitimate. I believe that the amount we are discussing is achievable, and would enable us to give the authorities responsible for reducing fuel poverty the further momentum that they need, while also inspiring those suffering from fuel poverty with the hope that there is a real will to end it.

I represent a Scottish constituency. The Bill applies only to England and Wales, but for that very reason I consider the amendment exceptionally helpful. If legislation for England and Wales sets a target, Scotland and Northern Ireland can hardly ignore the implications of that signal. I am not suggesting that they do not want to deal with fuel poverty.

This is a United Kingdom problem. Scotland and Northern Ireland are experiencing some of the worst climatic conditions in the UK, and have some of the worst-insulated houses. They have a real stake in the momentum behind the campaign. I do not think that the Bill is relevant only to England and Wales.

As I said on Second Reading, I am depressed to note that, after the more than 20 years that I have been involved in, and campaigning on, energy and fuel-poverty issues, we seem to be just as engaged with the severity of a problem that we should have solved years ago. It appears to be a peculiarly British problem. Other countries with climates just as severe as ours seem to have managed, partly through good building design and partly by taking measures to insulate homes, to provide the necessary protection against wasteful, inefficient and expensive forms of heating that poor people cannot afford. It is deeply disappointing that, having gone this far down the road with a Minister who we all agree has a genuine dedication to the cause, the Government seem unable to accept a commitment that would make the Bill meaningful.

As the hon. Member for Nottingham, South said, there is a real danger that if the amendment is not passed, it will be assumed that we can ease up on the pressure we are already applying. Nothing could be worse than our passing legislation that put us into reverse. Let me tell the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) that, of course I want the Bill, of course I want the declarations of good intent, and of course I note the Minister's assurance that he will come up with targets and will find the money. I am sure that the Minister means that, but—I mean no disrespect to him—he may not be the Minister this time next year. He may well have been replaced by someone who does not have his commitment.

I do not want to be too sensitive about this, but the difficulties that we sometimes experience with the Minister are caused not by him, but by his inability to translate his will into practical action because of those around and above him. He is not well served by his Department or by his ministerial colleagues—I name no names. That has resulted in the present position.

The hon. Member for Nottingham, South almost provoked me into saying that the creation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has taken us less than 12 months, while the campaign to abolish the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food took many years. The campaign to abolish DEFRA is already in full cry. The Department should never have been created: it does not work, it is a shambles, and it needs to be abolished as soon as possible.

The environment, and the commitment to deliver policies that will make a real difference to people's lives, require a Minister of the standard of the Minister we have, with a Department behind him that is willing to make that happen. If the House is serious about what it is trying to do, it will support amendment (a).

12.15 pm

Dr. Iddon: Like the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce), for several decades I have been surprised by the slowness with which successive Governments have addressed the difficult subject of fuel poverty and energy efficiency. They appear to have been dragged kicking and screaming into the new century. Most of the progress in these matters has been made by the introduction of private Member's Bills in 1995 and 2000 and now in 2002. I endorse everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) said about my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, for whom I have a great deal of respect.

[Dr. Iddon]

I always find it surprising that Governments have not grasped this issue and published a Government Bill dealing with all energy policy, including the branch that we are addressing today. We should bear in mind the fact that the Bill has the support of more than 100 local authorities, including my own. Not one of those local authorities has expressed the view that the targets that were originally set out in the Bill are unachievable.

I am concerned by what my right hon. Friend the Minister said this morning, as it will send the wrong signals to people out there who are involved in this policy area. The figure of 30 per cent. by 2010 was set by the Conservative Government in 1996. Earlier in the debate, my right hon. Friend said that the Conservatives did nothing about that target and made no money available. However they had just one year—1996–97. We have had a Labour Government for the past five years, so my right hon. Friend's criticism of the Conservative Government went a bit over the top and was an implicit criticism of our own Government, who have not made sufficient progress. My right hon. Friend has admitted that by his criticism of the targets.

Throughout the process, the 30 per cent. figure has been highlighted. It has been in the headlines and the literature; it has been pushed to local authorities and mentioned in debates in the House. I was not a member of the Standing Committee, although I understand that there was some backing off there, but this is the first time on the Floor of the House that the Government have backed off from the 30 per cent. target, which I still think is achievable.

I am torn between the two amendments. My heart tells me to support amendment (a) to amendment No. 11. I signed early-day motion 1136, which referred to the target of 30 per cent. as achievable. I am firmly behind the target and I thought that the Government were too.

We have been reminded today that it is not a target, but an aim. I certainly saw it as an achievable target, but now the word "aim" is being used. I am concerned that today's debate is sending the wrong signal to all the people who have been struggling to achieve the 30 per cent. target, whether or not we are now behind in terms of achieving it.

I have to ask my right hon. Friend where the money has gone. He will no doubt remind us that for two years we continued to operate the Conservative budget; but we have had our own budget for three years now. The comprehensive spending review is currently under discussion and the results will be published this summer. If we are behind the target, I must ask my right hon. Friend—I am sure that he has done this—whether he has put up a vigorous argument to the effect that we must put money behind our political will to deliver the target of 30 per cent. by 2010.

Like others, I am concerned that if we accept amendment No. 11 the figure of 30 per cent. will no longer be in the Bill. What does my right hon. Friend propose to do to avoid sending out the wrong signals today? Is he going to campaign vigorously for a figure of at least 30 per cent., or do I detect a change of policy? Are the Government backing off from that figure? The Minister must be categorical about the matter, otherwise many outside the House will be very disappointed with his comments. That said, I genuinely believe that he is committed to delivering on the environment, and I have a great deal of respect for him.

In conclusion, there is one thought that might persuade me to vote for amendment (a): if we have a Conservative Government by 2010, it is they who will be stuck with the 30 per cent. figure.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I should point out to the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) that it was a Conservative Government who introduced the target. However, I agree that, if that Government were still in power today and had not made financial provisions to promote the target, the Minister's criticism would be correct. The reality is, however, that the Minister was being a little unfair.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Barker), who introduced amendment (a)—of which I am a sponsor—has virtually said it all, and the hon. Members for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson), for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce), and for Bolton, South-East have said the rest. I shall sum up by making three points. First, the amendment would reintroduce a provision that was included in the original Bill. Secondly, although we could have watered down the phrase to "an aim", the correct phrase is "principal aim", given that the aim is indeed principal to the Bill. Having said that, I would have preferred the phrase "statutory duty". Thirdly, Government policies are littered with targets—from the promotion of health care to the Kyoto commitment—and I see no reason why Government policy should require them to resist amendment (a).

The Minister has rightly been praised for his record on matters environmental, but if he cannot accept this modest amendment, I am afraid that just a small blot will appear on his otherwise luminous green escutcheon.

Mr. Sayeed: I begin with a little consensus. Her Majesty's loyal Opposition are happy to accept Government amendments Nos. 12 and 8. Here endeth the consensus.

The Minister's reaction to any form of justified criticism is outraged bombast. I must warn him that my remarks will raise his blood pressure, so I hope that he has his tablets with him. First, I offer particular congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Barker), who has done this House a considerable service by speaking extremely cogently to amendment (a) to amendment No. 11, and by persuading Members on both sides of the House of the merits of his case.

One person whom my hon. Friend did not have to persuade, however, was the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson). He has been an extraordinarily doughty fighter in the warm homes group, which owes him a considerable debt of gratitude. He has generously praised my party for doing its level best to support the Bill in every way through all its stages, and in doing so to improve it, and I thank him for that.

The Bill was first published on 18 July 2001. It received its Second Reading on 30 November 2001. Despite the fact that it was published some eight months ago, it was only some 26 hours ago, on Thursday morning—at the last moment possible—that substantial amendments to the Bill, tabled by the Government, were published. The hon. Member for Nottingham, South touched on the question of why it has taken so long for the Department to produce substantial amendments.

I know that discussion has to take place between interested parties, but it is a disgrace that the amendments have been tabled in a way that makes it almost impossible to ensure proper understanding of them or to table subsequent amendments. It is a shabby abuse and misuse of parliamentary procedure. It is designed to stifle dissent, inhibit comment and curtail debate. The Minister should have dealt robustly with those civil servants and other Ministers who have brought him to this pass.

The Government have acted in that way because they do not dare to be seen to kill a Bill that seeks to promote energy conservation, to eradicate fuel poverty and to drive out bad landlords. The Minister has permitted the Bill to be gutted of much of its meaning. I am deeply disappointed by the Minister. He knows that in Committee—on which the Labour party had a substantial majority—the Government's proposals were defeated by 12 votes to two. So on Report the Government have tabled amendments that strip out much of the meaning of the Bill.

The evidence is clear. We rightly wanted the Bill to contain statutory, enforceable targets with stipulated time scales. Indeed, we were led to believe that that is what the Minister wanted. After all, it was the Minister who tabled a new clause that said:

"Every energy conservation authority shall take all such steps as are reasonably practicable to implement the measures set out in any energy conservation report prepared by the authority."

In speaking to that amendment in Committee, the Minister said:

"There is a good reason for tabling such an amendment. The original Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 did not contain targets. In setting targets, we need to take into account the fact that the performance of local authorities across the country varies enormously."

I agree. Some have announced that they have achieved a 15 per cent. reduction, but others have improved energy conservation by only 0.003 per cent. Others have not even bothered to report at all, so the Minister was right.

The right hon. Gentleman also said that the amendment

"represents a considerable step forward from the current HECA requirements. As hon. Members will know, the 1995 Act places a duty on authorities only to prepare energy conservation reports and then report progress. It does not provide a clear legal duty to implement any measures in their reports, which means, paradoxically, that they can make virtually no improvements yet still comply with the legislation. That is clearly nonsense and the amendment is designed to put that right."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee C*, 5 February 2002; c. 25-26.]

Those were the Minister's words. He inserted that provision because he thought that without it, the Bill was clearly nonsense. The fact is that he is now stripping out that provision by this amendment.

12.30 pm

I could go on: I could give many other examples of occasions when the Minister demanded that targets be used. He talks about targets being the "linchpin of the Bill". He said:

"I would much prefer to set a target and just fail to reach it, yet make a serious attempt, than to avoid setting a target and produce a wet and feeble response."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee C*, 24 January 2002; c. 18.]

There were many other occasions on which the Minister assured us that targets were fundamental and deeply important. Yet, under the Bill, they will be meaningless unless amendment (a) is accepted.

Why has the Minister changed his mind? I am not sure that he has. I think that his environmental heart is in the right place. I think that he has, however, been overruled by his civil servants and by the Minister for Local Government. So the Minister may huff and puff about the environment, but, as the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) said, other Departments always seem to blow him down. The Minister has become an environmental fig leaf for the Government because, by their actions, they have shown that they do not give a fig for the environment.

Finally, I should like to read out a letter sent to the Minister on 4 February 2002 by HECA Partnership for 30 Per Cent. It says:

"Dear Michael . . . We are writing to you as the organisations that form this Partnership to promote the achievement of HECA targets. This is an aim that we all believe you subscribe to—indeed we were heartened to note your comments to Nigel Griffiths MP last September that although local authorities performance under HECA was 'wholly inadequate' you were interested not simply in condemnation but also in seeing that targets were made 'more robust' and also, importantly, in giving local authorities the tools with which to deliver them.

This is a view we share—and it is for this reason that we support the Home Energy Conservation Bill, which makes the targets a duty rather than a discretion . . . Your amendments remove all of these provisions. We are deeply saddened by them—all the more so because we know you to be a friend and an ally."

That letter was signed by Andrew Warren, the director of the Association for the Conservation of Energy, William Gillis, the director of National Energy Action, Charles Secrett, the director of Friends of the Earth, Michael King, the chairman of the National Right to Fuel Campaign, Mervyn Kohler, head of public affairs for Help the Aged, Andrew Cooper, the UK HECA forum representative, Baroness Maddock, the promoter of HECA 1995, Dick Barry of Unison, Stephen Hale of the Socialist Environmental Resources Association, Penny Kemp, the chair of the executive of the Green party, Duncan Borrowman of the Green Liberal Democrats and Nick Wood-Dow, chairman of the Tory Green Initiative.

If these able and knowledgeable people were deeply saddened by what the Minister proposed then, they would be furious at what the Government are doing now. They would be right to be furious, because the Government are gutting the Bill.

Mr. Meacher: I have not heard so much arrant nonsense for a long time—even from the hon. Gentleman. To suggest that the Government are gutting the Bill is not only parliamentary exaggeration; it is utterly ridiculous. The Government have got behind the Bill; we are putting in a statutory requirement for local authorities to meet a significant improvement in the HECA record on energy efficiency, and supplying the money—when it is available—to do so. That is the only responsible action for any Government and we are taking it.

Under the Conservative Government, there was a complete dereliction of such action during 18 years. They did nothing of the kind, and fuel poverty increased. There is no point in Conservative Members shaking their heads—we all know their record.

We heard some colourful language from the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Barker), who described the Bill as wishy-washy, toothless and a waste of time. That is utter rubbish. For the purposes of his

[Mr. Meacher]

speech, the hon. Gentleman used language for which there is not the slightest justification. Anyone who has considered the Bill or who listened to my lengthy speech introducing amendment No. 11 will know that.

The hon. Gentleman's point is that if amendment (a) is accepted, we would not be gutting the Bill; it would no longer be wishy-washy, toothless and a waste of time. What utter baiderdash! There is no logic in that at all. The amendment would provide no statutory requirement whatever. In my opening remarks, I pointed out that the amendment was purely presentational—and it is.

The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. He cannot say that the Government are gutting the Bill and that the insertion of amendment (a) would change that. It would do nothing of the kind. We are not gutting the Bill. As a result of the Government's support, the Bill is substantive. There is no profound objection to the amendment but, for the reasons that I gave earlier, it is not appropriate. It certainly would not provide a statutory requirement; it would not add force to the Bill.

I have listened to the comments of hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. No one—with the possible exception of the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce)—has addressed the question of finance. There is no difference between us as to what we should like to do—we all want a substantial improvement on the gradual improvements that have been made under the HECA. However, the only certain way to secure that improvement is through statutory means, and that has to be funded. That is the central question. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle did not mention that.

In opposition, it is easy to make great claims, to set fantasy objectives and to throw confetti goals around the Chamber and tell the Government that they are not going for them. Everyone knows that it is different in government. In government, the buck stops here. If we make a commitment, it has to be responsible and we must be able to justify it with the income stream necessary to deliver it. That is the difference. It is utterly irresponsible to come to the House and make grandiose and grandiloquent gestures without backing them up with the one thing that matters—the money to achieve them.

Mr. Barker: I am sorry to hear the Minister go on so intemperately. Is he aware of the newly published independent research carried out by the Association for the Conservation of Energy which shows that the cost would be £29 million, but that if the Government spent that amount it would be ratcheted up more than 10 times by other moneys from the private sector? Has the Minister actually seen that research? Has he spent any time examining it?

Mr. Meacher: Of course I have seen it. I cannot remember whether the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber when I made my opening speech, but I referred to it at some length. I said two things about it. One was that that estimate is at the bottom end of the range of estimates that has been produced. It is, as the authors will recognise, a fairly rough and ready estimate for the second reason that I am about to come on to. The top figure of the range is £1 billion. It may well be that the real figure is towards the lower rather than the higher end—I suspect that it is—but if the accurate figure is of the order of £100 million to £200 million, which is perfectly plausible, the question is where that money will come from.

My second point was this, and it is important. The hon. Member for Guildford (Sue Doughty) asked why the Government could not come up with a figure that they were sure about. The answer is, to use a phrase sometimes heard in universities, that the figure is a residual variable; it is the cost that will remain when all the other costed programmes have been carried through.

Until we have seen the results of the home energy efficiency scheme over a period of 10 years and the effect of the energy efficiency commitment between 2002–05, which will probably be extended although the Government have yet to take that decision, and until we have seen the results of the upgrading of local authority stock, which obviously improves energy efficiency within those buildings, it is impossible to be clear, beyond a fairly wide margin of error, how much will still remain to be done to meet a given target of, say, 30 per cent. We cannot know for certain how much will remain undone, and to be done under the Bill. I certainly believe that the cost will be significant, but I cannot put a figure on it. However, whatever the figure, even if it is only £29 million—I believe it would be more than that—where will that money come from?

The hon. Member for Gordon rightly drew attention to the fact that the Government can, under pressure, produce money rapidly when they have to. For example, in the event of unpredicted disasters, such as the outbreaks of BSE and foot and mouth, of course the Government must provide funding, but that is completely different from funding a desirable objective. All Departments and Ministers have their shopping list of desirables, but the Treasury and the Chancellor would rightly say that there must be firm prioritisation in terms of the Government's overall accounting.

There is pressure from my Department to ensure that we have more money for energy efficiency, and that is why I am in no way foreclosing on the possibility that we can make some progress, possibly fairly quickly, although I do not know. We certainly want to. However, what I cannot do is tell the House today that I have the money in my back pocket so that I can, with assurance and certainty, back a Bill that will cost at least £29 million and possibly £100 million or £200 million. I simply cannot do that. I appeal to all hon. Members to recognise the constraints under which Ministers act.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): If an aspirational target were included in the Bill, would that help or hinder the Minister in his arguments about funding?

Mr. Meacher: To put an aspiration in the Bill does not alter the position one way or the other, as I have already said. An aspiration is not a statutory requirement. It could be construed as constraining the fixing of targets over the period. It is not a requirement; it merely sets the backdrop against which those targets might be measured and assessed. It does no more, but I suppose no less, than that.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle made the fair point that, if the Secretary of State were to do nothing, absolutely nothing would happen and there would be no advance under the Bill. In a technical, legal sense that is

perfectly true. However, Governments do not responsibly commit themselves to such a Bill—as I have on behalf of this Government—and make it clear that they will move as soon as they have the money, but then completely neglect to do so. Governments do not do that, and we will not do that.

12.45 pm

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) made a fair and balanced speech, and I am grateful as always for the generous things he said about me. He raised the issue of new burdens, as if this is a new doctrine that has come down from the heavens and descended on Government and we are beholden to it. I do not think that it is all that new, although it has been sharpened under the Government. The view taken by previous Tory Governments was that they could place extra obligations on certain bodies, such as local authorities, but did not need to provide extra funds as the necessary measures would be funded by efficiency savings. There is some truth in that, but to continue to impose such obligations, as they did repeatedly, was nonsense, and was recognised as such. We have tried to correct that. Local authorities have pressed us to accept that if we want them to do something, they are prepared to do it but we must provide the funding. That is a perfectly fair doctrine.

We could continue with the HECA as it is, under which improvements have been made. Some authorities have done extremely well, and have achieved improvements of up to 20 per cent. They have done so voluntarily, because they have made that their priority. I am sure that we will continue with that, and that there will be further improvements whatever the Government do and whether or not this Bill goes through.

The hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) referred to authorities that have achieved only a 0.003 per cent. improvement. Some have not even produced a report; some have produced a report but have done nothing about it; and some have produced a report with a tiny target and that is all they have achieved. Those are the authorities that we should aim at, which is why we need a statutory requirement, and I fully accept that. If it is a statutory requirement, it is also an obligation, which is not currently the case. If we are to require local authorities to do something over and above what they are already doing, which is the purpose of the Bill, they must be funded. It is as simple as that.

The hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir Sydney Chapman) asked whether we were letting 350 of the 360-odd local authorities off the hook. No, we are not. We are concerned about the large proportion of them—a quarter to a half—that have done miserably. But it is not just those that have hardly done anything or have not produced a report: we are concerned about laggard local authorities that are nowhere near the level of the best and are not performing adequately to achieve the target set by the Tory Government in their 1996 guidance.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South unfairly drew attention to the quality of advice that I have received. He said that the drafting of amendment No. 11 was therefore very late. The reason that it was produced so late was that there was endless negotiation with the promoters of the Bill over changes. At least three times I thought that agreement had been reached, but then there were further discussions and more changes. It was only when the Bill came into play that instructions to parliamentary counsel were finally drawn up, and as a result amendment No. 11 was produced. I am sorry that it was late, but that was because of the constant pressures and demands for further changes to the Bill.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So far in this small debate, the Minister has spoken for 58 minutes. We know that the Government do not like the Pensions Annuities (Amendment) Bill, but for the Minister to talk for so long is unfair to all those pensioners and others who are relying on that Bill making progress.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): That is not a point of order.

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman is concerned purely with reaching another Bill. I will say nothing about its merits or otherwise. He is uninterested in this Bill and sees it as something he has to step over to get to his preferred alternative. That is contemptible. His Front-Bench colleagues have repeatedly told the House how incredibly important this Bill is and how the Government are failing to carry out important objectives. We now see the other face of the Tory party, which wants to get rid of the Bill and move on to the real business of the Pensions Annuities (Amendment) Bill. That is despicable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South said that the advice I get is simply to minimise my commitments so that I will be held to the least account. That is not fair. My civil servants know extremely well that I am keen to advance the environmental agenda and, where necessary, to set targets and commitments. They know that perfectly well, and I believe that the advice I get is proper and balanced in order to enable me to reach the right conclusions, not to minimise my commitments.

On funding, I appreciate the point made by the hon. Member for Gordon. The money is being found to deal with child poverty, fuel poverty, climate change and the Kyoto targets precisely because they are Government targets that are part of our policy development process. They have been planned over years and years and written into spending reviews to meet policy programmes and objectives.

The difference here, as I have tried to explain, is that this is a private Member's Bill—it is meritorious and worthy, and has entirely proper objectives—that is being inserted between spending reviews when there has been no planning for it within Government at all. It could be financed only by reducing other commitments—presumably in energy efficiency but maybe in other areas—by the same amount as the measure costs. That is not a proper or desirable way to legislate.

Malcolm Bruce: Does the Minister accept that the Bill is one of a series that have come to the House over many years with all-party support? All sides of the House are telling him that there is an overwhelming demand that the Government have that target. By accepting the Bill, they would have.

Mr. Meacher: I accept the Bill; I make that clear. I am seeking support from across the House for putting it

[Mr. Meacher]

through today. What has emerged clearly today is that there is support from both sides of the House for a marked and substantial improvement in energy efficiency. I say to all Members that the way to achieve that is to support the Bill as it stands, so that what all Members want is achieved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South–East (Dr. Iddon) asked if I was backing off the 30 per cent. target. The 30 per cent. figure was never a statutory target. It was set by the previous Government in the guidance that they gave to local authorities in terms of drawing up reports about how local authorities should improve energy efficiency in their areas. It has never been a statutory requirement. I am keen to have the highest targets that I can fund and that I can therefore justify. I repeat that I do not have the funding at this point to justify setting a target at 30 per cent. That does not mean that I would not like to reach it or that the Government do not want to achieve it, but I must have the funding before I can commit to a particular target.

The hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire rightly said—I think we agree—that we want enforceable targets and time scales. However, all I would say to him, if he is responsible and if he aspires to government, is that it is also necessary to have the funding that will deliver the agreed objective—a statutory requirement in a certain time scale. He must accept that.

The hon. Gentleman also referred, very generously, to my being overruled. That is absolutely not the case. I repeat: the problem is not other Ministers, who want the Bill as much as I do—there is no doubt that all Ministers want it, including those at the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions—but the funding, which he never speaks about and gratuitously avoided. It has nothing to do with being overruled.

The hon. Gentleman also made generous comments about my being an environmental fig leaf. Well, this pretty good environmental fig leaf has produced the climate change programme, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, the home energy efficiency scheme, the energy efficiency commitment and a commitment to end fuel poverty within 10 years. Those are enormously powerful objectives and if that is being a fig leaf, I am extremely happy so to be.

On that basis, I commend amendment No. 11 and ask for support from across the House, as I believe that it is the heart of the Bill and that it will deliver exactly what all Members on both sides want.

Dr. Desmond Turner: On some Friday mornings, it is a pity that we cannot keep the Front Benchers quiet, because they cannot resist shooting at each other and that obscures what we are trying to achieve through a private Member's Bill.

I fear that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Barker) is wrong to suggest that amendment (a) would give the Bill teeth—it would do no such thing. I should know because, as he rightly said, he cribbed the words from an amendment that I did not pursue. He changed the PIU target of 20 per cent. between now and 2010 to the HECA target of 30 per cent. between 1996 and 2010. That is the only change.

Hon. Members also pointed out that that is window dressing. They are absolutely right, and I should know that too, because I was responsible for it. The proposal was intended as window dressing—constructive window dressing, but window dressing none the less. It has no statutory meaning whatever. I have just taken advice from a learned Queen's counsel colleague, who confirms that that is the case. It is also the opinion of the independent parliamentary counsel who drew up the words.

I appeal to all Members of all parties on both sides who want the Bill, and I say to the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) that accepting amendment No. 11 would constitute not a reversal, but a massive step forward. It is the means by which we shall reach the targets that we all want and achieve energy conservation and safety standards in houses in multiple occupation, which is a long-standing, treasured ambition of all in the House. It is the means by which we will make further inroads into fuel poverty. In all earnestness, I ask the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle and his supporters not to press amendment (a) to amendment No. 11. If they do, I ask all hon. Members who really want what this Bill has got—and it has got a hell of a lot—not to vote for that amendment. If they do, they will be walking into a trap. That is my appeal to hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Amendment proposed to the proposed amendment: (a), in line 1, at beginning insert—

'(A1) The appropriate Minister shall in exercising any functions under this section or under the principal Act, and in considering whether or not to exercise those functions, have as a principal aim the achievement of an improvement in energy efficiency in residential accommodation of at least 30 per cent. by the end of 2010, taking 1st January 1996 as the base line date.'.—*[Mr. Barker.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 87, Noes 62.

Division No. 234] **[1 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Curry, Rt Hon David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Doughty, Sue
Austin, John	Drown, Ms Julia
Barker, Gregory	Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Barnes, Harry	Edwards, Huw
Best, Harold	Efford, Clive
Blunt, Crispin	Fabricant, Michael
Boswell, Tim	Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*	Flight, Howard
Brazier, Julian	Flook, Adrian
Bruce, Malcolm	Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Burns, Simon	Garnier, Edward
Burstow, Paul	Gray, James
Cable, Dr Vincent	Grayling, Chris
Calton, Mrs Patsy	Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Clappison, James	Grieve, Dominic
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey	Hammond, Philip
Clwyd, Ann	Hayes, John
Corbyn, Jeremy	Heald, Oliver
Cousins, Jim	Heath, David

Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Kidney, David
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Tony
Luff, Peter
McDonnell, John
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Maples, John
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Murrison, Dr Andrew
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prisk, Mark
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spring, Richard
Swayne, Desmond
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Wilshire, David

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Sydney Chapman and Alan Simpson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atkins, Charlotte
Bailey, Adrian
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Challen, Colin
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Cranston, Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Follett, Barbara
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Heppell, John
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Kelly, Ruth
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McIsaac, Shona
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Mole, Chris
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Pond, Chris
Purnell, James
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Shaw, Jonathan
Soley, Clive
Squire, Rachel
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi

Tellers for the Noes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and Angela Smith.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment No. 11, as amended, agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 12, in page 2, leave out lines 19 to 22.—*[Mr. Meacher.]*

Clause 2

GUIDANCE ON ERADICATION OF FUEL POVERTY

Amendment made: No. 5, in page 2, line 26, leave out Clause 2.—*[Mr. Meacher.]*

Clause 3

MEANING OF "HOUSE IN MULTIPLE OCCUPATION"

1.15 pm

Dr. Desmond Turner: I beg to move amendment No. 9, in page 3, line 31, leave out from "provision;" to end of line 34 and insert—

'(c) shall be made by statutory instrument; and

(d) shall not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.".'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 4, in page 4, leave out lines 8 to 10 and insert—

'(3) But a registration scheme must apply to every house in multiple occupation in the authority's district, which

(a) consists of more than two storeys, for which purpose an attic or basement shall be considered a storey unless used solely for purposes other than accommodation, or

(b) is occupied by more than four adults.'. In addition, I must advise the House that, following representations by the Member in charge of the Bill and the Members who have tabled the amendments, Mr. Speaker has agreed that the following starred amendments should also be taken with this group: No. 17, in clause 4, page 4, leave out lines 21 to 23 and insert—

'(6) Regulations under this section shall be made by statutory instrument and shall not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament'.

No. 18, in clause 5, page 5, leave out lines 26 to 28 and insert—

'(9) Regulations under this section shall be made by statutory instrument and shall not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament'.

No. 19, in clause 6, page 6, leave out lines 4 to 6 and insert—

'(1D) Regulations under this section shall be made by statutory instrument and shall not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament'.

Dr. Turner: It has always been our intention in dealing with the section of the Bill relating to houses in multiple occupation to be as transparent as possible. To that end, the Second Reading version of the Bill referred to regulations needing to be made by positive resolution. That was changed by Government amendments in Committee to resolution by annulment, which we felt did not give adequate opportunity for scrutiny, given that serious issues were involved. After all, I am sure that we have all sat on enough statutory instrument Committees and participated in attempts to break the four-minute meeting barrier to know that the normal method of resolution by annulment results in very little scrutiny indeed, whereas if it is done by positive resolution, it is open to inspection and proper scrutiny by the whole House.

Given the weight of legislation that these regulations will cover, we felt that this proposal was fair to landlords, to tenants who live in houses in multiple occupation and to Parliament. I am happy to say that, when I asked in Committee whether the Government would consider implementing the regulations by positive resolution, the response was sympathetic. Indeed, amendment No. 9

[Dr. Turner]

already provides for the regulations concerning clause 3, which deals with the definition of houses in multiple occupation, to be dealt with by affirmative resolution.

I had anticipated that there would be similar amendments to go with clauses 4, 5 and 6. Clause 4, in particular, concerns the level at which mandatory registration starts to bite. Amendment No. 4 replicates the words in our Second Reading draft defining the level at which, and above which, registration is mandatory—three [illegible] more floors in occupation, and five or more tenants. That will now be subject to regulation rather than being dealt with in the Bill, but, along with many of my colleagues, I think that it should be subject to affirmative resolution, and open to scrutiny by the whole House.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Barker) has tabled starred amendments to replace amendments to clauses 4, 5 and 6 that I had expected to be tabled but which unfortunately were not. I do not think it was a conspiracy—I always prefer the cock-up to the conspiracy theory. It was just one of those things, probably due to a genuine error or misunderstanding. Mr. Speaker has graciously allowed the starred amendments to be discussed, and I am happy to support them—as, I expect, will many other Members. I understand that the Department is content to follow the will of the House.

I urge the House to accept amendment No. 9, and amendments Nos. 17, 18 and 19. I ask the hon. Member for Guildford (Sue Doughty) not to press her amendments. I expect the issue to be taken up very firmly now that, hopefully, affirmative resolutions will apply to the regulations—and it is still my clear understanding that the level I have mentioned is the level at which mandatory registration starts to bite.

Sue Doughty: We pressed for the content of amendment No. 4 in Committee. We are very concerned about houses that are built vertically, and present a greater fire risk. However, we accept what we have been told about further consideration, and I intend to withdraw the amendment.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Amendments Nos. 17, 18 and 19 are intended to rectify an accidental omission. Their wording is identical to some of the wording of amendment No. 9, which refers to clause 3. My amendments refer to clauses 4, 5 and 6.

The regulations will affect the interests of thousands of landlords and tenants. We think they should be subject to affirmative resolution, so that the House will have a chance to debate key matters—as opposed to matters of detail, which should be subject to negative resolution.

If I understand the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) correctly, I fully support his amendment, as he appears to be supporting mine.

Mr. Meacher: Once again I am glad to support the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown.

On amendment No. 9, the Government propose that regulations under clause 3 should be made by affirmative rather than by negative resolution. I shall deal later in my speech with the point made by the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir Sydney Chapman) about regulations under clauses 4 to 6.

The effect of the change proposed in amendment No. 9 will be that both Houses would need to debate and vote on regulations prescribing the following definitions: what an HMO is in terms of the type of properties covered or excluded; what an HMO is in terms of those who occupy it—the number of households or family or other relationships involved; what is meant by "occupy" and such other matters as may need to be prescribed.

A power to make regulations is needed to define HMOs according to the types of properties to be included or excluded and the number of occupants and their relationships. We debated that extensively in Committee. The power in clause 3(3) is one of the means of ensuring consistency across registration schemes. At present there is not only uncertainty as to how the current definition based on households works, but—and we intend to address this—there is no flexibility in the law to ensure that adjustments can be made to achieve a legal definition that works. So in prescribing what an HMO is and what it is not, we need to define which types of property are judged to be HMOs and which are specifically excluded. The definition also has to have regard to those who occupy the properties. Definitions based on the concept of household and family relationships have been used in primary legislation, but they have not been without their critics. There is therefore a need for the flexibility in establishing definitions that secondary legislation provides.

A power such as that in clause 3 for the Secretary of State to say which HMOs must be included in any registration scheme is crucial to the operation of the registration scheme. It is not unreasonable that after public consultation on what is proposed by way of regulation Parliament should have its say.

Following representations in Committee, where there were extensive discussions, the Government decided to table an amendment that would make regulations under clause 3 subject to affirmative resolution. However it is not intended that regulations under clauses 4, 5 and 6 should be subject to affirmative resolution and, in answer to the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet, I shall make clear why.

Affirmative resolution procedure is rarely used. It is a special provision for a special case. The regulations to be made under section 345 of the Housing Act 1985 are of fundamental importance because they determine the scope of the legislation in order to avoid undue complexity. They allow a substantial amount of discretion to the Secretary of State in determining what an HMO is as well as in conferring exemptions. In our view, other regulation-making powers in part 3 of the Bill are not comparable as they relate to matters which are not subject to any such procedure in the current legislation. For instance, the drawing of the line between properties that can be made subject to registration—with and without confirmation by the Secretary of State—is not, under section 346B of the 1985 Act, currently a matter for parliamentary scrutiny in any form. In fact, the Bill extends the scope of parliamentary scrutiny by making the drawing of that line subject to the negative resolution procedure. Regulations will be put before both Houses, and if prayed against, a debate can take place.

I hope that the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir Sydney Chapman) is satisfied with that explanation. The Government have to strike a balance between the correct use of parliamentary time, and ensuring adequate

and proper parliamentary accountability. The Government are concerned that an undue amount of parliamentary time should not be expended debating highly detailed regulations that prescribe the regime for the registration of HMOs. The amendments would bring within parliamentary scrutiny matters not currently considered by Parliament. The negative resolution procedure allows regulations to be prayed against by the Opposition or by any hon. Member, and then debated, and we believe that to be adequate.

Following representations made in Committee, the Government have decided to propose in new clause 2, which we have already debated, that regulations under clause 3 be subject to affirmative resolution. We do not believe that a good case exists for regulations under clauses 4, 5 and 6 being so subject, but as was rightly pointed out, I am prepared to listen to the view of the House on this matter, and to other representations. It is a question not of defeating the Government, but of Parliament deciding in a mature and sensible way how much detail it wants to go into in insisting that a parliamentary debate take place.

On amendment No. 4, the Government are most concerned about HMOs that constitute a clear risk to the health and safety of their occupants. As I said in Committee, properties with three or more storeys, and which are occupied by more than four adults, present the greatest risks, particularly in terms of fire and overcrowding. Past Government-commissioned research found that multiple occupancy of two-storey properties involved no greater risk of fire than did occupancy by a single family. As I also said in Committee, the Government intend that local authorities will be responsible for ensuring that the most vulnerable HMOs in their district meet basic health, safety and management standards. We will prescribe those HMOs to which that duty will apply, but we also intend that local authorities will have discretionary powers to register HMOs in their district that do not fall within the scope of this mandatory scheme.

The matter was raised in Committee and debated thoroughly, and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable)—he is not here today—withdrew his amendment. If accepted, it would have had the same effect as Government amendment No. 9, which is why we are debating that amendment today. The English house condition survey and the Entec report, commissioned in 1998, clearly showed that houses occupied by more than four people, and which consist of three or more storeys, are at greatest risk from poor standards, overcrowding and fire. Smaller, two-storey houses in multiple occupation tend not to be in any worse a condition than those in single occupation. We intend to allow local authorities to extend registration to smaller HMOs if they see fit, but we do not believe that a pressing need exists for mandatory registration of such properties. For those reasons, I hope that the House will reject the relevant amendments.

Mr. Sayeed: I intend to be brief, because the next Bill is the Copyright (Visually Impaired Persons) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Dunfermline, West (Rachel Squire). I am anxious to make progress on that valuable Bill, so I shall write to the Minister on some of the points that I had intended to raise on the operation of HMOs and the effect on private landlords.

We need the positive resolution procedure for the powers in clauses 4, 5 and 6, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) proposed. I hope that, given all the voices that have supported that aim, the Minister will eventually feel able also to support it. I understand from my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir Sydney Chapman) that he does not intend to press the matter to a Division, so that we can make progress.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): My right hon. Friend the Minister has his approach to affirmative and negative resolutions back to front. I object to his view of the need for affirmative resolution in relation to clause 3, but not for clause 5. The meat of the Bill is not so much the definition of HMOs but the registration scheme that will police them. It is bizarre that, if my right hon. Friend gets his way, we will have an affirmative resolution to define an HMO, but not to define what should be in the scheme. In the end, the scheme could include far less than the definition. He is trying to have his cake and eat it.

A better approach would be to look at the issue the other way round. Indeed, I feel so strongly about that that I shall seek to divide the House on the point. My right hon. Friend said that the affirmative procedure is rarely used and should be used only in special cases. In this case, the special case is not the definition of an HMO but the scheme of registration, because the whole policing of the Bill will revolve around that. It is much more important to get that right than to get the global definition right. The definition in the registration scheme may be more restrictive than the overall definition under clause 3.

I shall illustrate my argument with reference to amendment No. 4, tabled by the Liberal Democrats, although I understand that they will not press that amendment. When my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) spoke on amendment No. 9, he said that the regulations would follow the lines set out in amendment No.4, which causes me some concern. Before becoming a Member of Parliament, I was a personal injury lawyer. I suppose that I still am, in that I have a practice certificate, although I am not taking any cases. For some 17 years, I was the solicitor for the Fire Brigades Union and I came across many cases involving HMOs. I am concerned that the definition proposed in amendment No. 4 is too restrictive and easily avoidable by unscrupulous landlords.

Amendment No. 4 gives a definition of an HMO that includes the words:

"unless used solely for purposes other than accommodation".

I fear that that phrase means that when an unscrupulous landlord knows that the local authority inspector is coming round, he can easily take the bed out and put a load of old furniture into the basement or loft. After the inspector goes, the furniture is brought back and the bed comes out again. Indeed, there might even be a folding bed that goes into a wardrobe and is therefore disguised.

I am also concerned about the reference to four adults in amendment No. 4. A small house with more than one storey—or more than the two storeys referred to in the amendment—could have three bedsits. If there are four adults or two couples in a house, that is fair enough, but what happens when the adults live separately in bedsits,

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

often in extremely poor accommodation? That is why we need to consider the whole issue of HMOs and not just in the context of home energy conservation.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Is the essence of my hon. Friend's argument that unless the point is clearly defined by the Secretary of State, it will be left to the discretion of local authorities and, although they will appear to be constrained by a property having two storeys, including a basement or an attic, there will be no provision for other types of accommodation? There was a recent example in Birmingham—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is embarking on a speech rather than making an intervention. *[Interruption.]* Order.

Mr. Dismore: I understand my hon. Friend's point, but I disagree with him and hope to explain why later in my remarks. It is important to preserve the discretion of local authorities, yet within an overall framework. There needs to be a degree of regulation of houses in multiple occupation, but I suspect that a Bill such as this is not the best way of protecting people living in HMOs. It is in that context that I make my remarks.

Amendment No. 4, which I understand will not be pressed to a vote, is far too restrictive. Effectively, no other registration scheme would be permissible. I very much hope that the amendment will not be pressed, because it is important for the Secretary of State to have the discretion to describe properties in regulations.

On the affirmative and negative resolution procedure, I take exception again to amendment No. 17. I am concerned that if we become too prescriptive, perhaps through the affirmative resolution procedure, we could end up removing the discretion of local authorities to make provision for the housing in their area. I imagine that the sort of scenario that I have described would be of no concern in certain areas of the country but of great concern in others. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will accept that regulations must be as flexible as possible to allow local authorities to have discretion to meet the circumstances in their area.

Of course, in some local authorities, the question of HMOs does not arise because there are very few, and those that exist are luxury accommodation. However, in parts of the inner city and, indeed, in parts of my constituency, HMOs are important in providing accommodation. Because of the large amount of work they create, they are a headache for the various enforcement authorities—the fire service, local authorities and anyone to do with the administration of housing welfare rights.

I am afraid that I am not with the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir Sydney Chapman) on amendment No. 17. I agree with my right hon. Friend that it would be far more suitable for that proposal to be dealt with through the negative resolution procedure.

1.45 pm

However, I think that the hon. Gentleman is right about clause 5 and that my right hon. Friend is wrong. The meat of the measure is in the registration scheme that will be administered by local authorities. Clause 5 deals with model schemes and their confirmation. It is important that those schemes be properly debated because they will form the template from which local authorities will work.

The local authorities will have to start from somewhere, and I suggest to my right hon. Friend that the debate should be not about trying to take away their discretion but about setting an acceptable framework that has been properly considered by Parliament. The same point applies to the confirmation of the schemes. I think that he may have his affirmatives and negatives the wrong way round.

I agree in part with the proposals of the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet—50 per cent., but 50 per cent. opposition. We should not invoke the affirmative resolution procedure for clauses 3 and 4, but there is a case for it on clause 5. That would achieve the best balance by ensuring that the basic template for local authorities is fully debated and discussed in the House, while allowing local authorities to make their own schemes without too much interference from this place. I am a great believer in allowing local authorities to get on with the job and I am concerned that the Government's approach would prevent that.

Sir Sydney Chapman: By leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I find myself in some difficulty. I genuinely did not intend to open up a disagreement between Government Front and Back Benchers, but I am persuaded by the Minister's comments. The telling point is that the issues raised by my amendments could be debated by the House on a negative resolution, so I shall not press them to a vote.

Amendment No. 18 apparently meets with the approbation of the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore). He is my near neighbour and I want to live in comfort with him, so I shall leave that spat between him and the Minister. I shall not press amendments Nos. 17, 18 and 19.

Mr. Meacher: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to some of the interesting points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore). He makes a strong argument for further consideration and it is unfortunate that there is not more time to go into the question of the registration of HMOs under part 3. Perhaps we shall be able to do so at a later stage.

Amendment No. 4 raises the issue of whether registration should apply to two or three-storey buildings with at least four occupants. Much depends on the condition of the buildings and the risks involved. As I said earlier, the English house condition survey revealed that 20 per cent. of bedsit and self-contained, flat-type HMOs failed to meet minimum standards of fitness for human habitation. Those standards require that the property should be structurally sound, free from disrepair and damp, have adequate heating, lighting and ventilation, and have satisfactory cooking, washing and toilet facilities.

Many properties failed to meet the test because they were in disrepair or lacked satisfactory heating. Those basic standards apply to all dwellings and the Government consider it unacceptable that a large proportion of the private rented sector does not even meet the minimum requirements.

Additional risks to health and safety arise from the multiple occupation of properties. One of them is, obviously, the risk from fire. The survey revealed that a staggering and worrying 80 per cent. of houses occupied as bedsits lacked adequate means of escape from fire and other fire precautions.

Following that survey, the Department commissioned Entec Ltd. to research the risk from fire in HMOs. That is relevant to the thrust of amendment No. 4 and whether registration should apply to two-storey buildings, or indeed one-storey buildings. That report was published in 1998 and it identified several factors which influenced the risk from fire in such properties. Those included the number of occupants of the building, as I have already said, and the number of storeys—HMOs of three or more pose a significantly higher risk, as do properties housing dependent and vulnerable people.

The internal design and layout of HMOs can also significantly increase the risk, such as the degree of self-containment, the units of accommodation and the number of escapes and their precise location. The quality of management standards was also found to be an important factor in determining the significance of the risk.

The Government took into account the Entec survey and the earlier 1998 survey in deciding their response to amendment No. 4.

Mr. Dismore: My right hon. Friend is going into considerable detail about the sort of buildings concerned. Is he suggesting that that level of detail is appropriate for the affirmative resolution procedure?

Mr. Meacher: The affirmative resolution procedure is another matter. I was addressing my remarks to amendment No. 4, which concerns whether registration should apply only to three and four-storey buildings that have at least four occupants or to two-storey buildings that have at least four occupants. There is no authoritative way of deciding that, except by looking at the design of HMOs, their distribution, the number of particular kinds and the number of occupants—the information that we have according to the number of storeys. I am sorry if I gave the impression of going into a lot of detail, but that is why I did so.

The risk of death or injury from fire varies significantly, as all the factors interact differently in each case. However, Entec concluded that in several types of HMOs, the risk of death or injury from fire was significantly higher than in houses of single occupation, which is probably hardly surprising. It found, for example, that an occupant in a house comprised of bedsits was six times more likely to die as a result of fire than adults living in an ordinary house. That raises the question dealt with by amendment No. 4 as to whether registration should also apply to two-storey buildings, which may well contain a number of bedsits.

I am sure that hon. Members will agree that that state of affairs is not simply unacceptable but a matter of great concern. However, other problems are associated with multi-occupation. Often those properties are overcrowded because they have inadequate facilities to meet the health and welfare of their occupants, and it is not uncommon in shared houses and bedsit-type HMOs to find up to 10 people sharing one bath, one WC and one kitchen.

The English house condition survey revealed that more than 40 per cent. of houses occupied as bedsits had inadequate facilities for the occupants. It referred to a lack of adequate cooking, bathing and toilet facilities.

Overcrowding is a major problem in some HMOs. Rooms often do not meet minimum space standards for human habitation, and in areas of high demand for housing it is not uncommon for three or more people to live, cook and sleep in a single room. I agree that we should take firm action to ensure that people are properly protected, and that the registration system is adequate for the purpose.

Mr. McCabe: I hope that my right hon. Friend will forgive my ignorance, but could he explain to me what would happen in the case of single-storey extensions where there is multiple occupation? I am thinking of a garage that has been extended and used for accommodation.

Mr. Meacher: That is the type of problem that I mean. Unfortunately, HMOs are extremely varied. There are variations in the number of storeys, the number of occupants and the design. My hon. Friend gave one example. How can we ensure adequate protection for people who live, eat and sleep in buildings such as he referred to through the registration of HMOs? My concern is about whether amendment No. 4 will be adequate for that purpose.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The right hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) have raised the important issue of enforcement. Many HMOs have transient populations, and they may be licensed for a certain level of occupation, but as soon as the local authority officer has granted a licence, the previous over-occupancy persists. How will these regulations, excellent though they are, be enforced?

Mr. Meacher: I am pleased to respond to that important point, because that is what part 3 and these amendments are about. The hon. Gentleman was not on the Committee. His hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron) was eloquent on this issue. He made it perfectly clear that he was speaking on behalf of landlords. Of course, their interests must be properly reflected.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) that the first and prime requirement must be the health and safety of occupants, and the regulations must be effectively enforceable. There is no simple answer to his question about how to deal with a transient population, and ensure that people who are there one day and leave a few nights later are adequately protected. We can only ensure that the building that they occupy falls within the registration system, and that it is regulated by the local authority, so that even if there is a transient population, any persons who occupy that building or those rooms are properly protected from fire, overcrowding and any other risks.

We believe that the pressing need for the better regulation of HMOs will be achieved by the mandatory licensing of such properties. We are committed to introducing such a scheme as soon as parliamentary time is available to produce legislation to achieve that.

[Mr. Meacher]

The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble), made it clear that the Government had in mind a much wider Bill along those lines, and that they regarded part 3 of this Bill as a useful paving measure that would lead the way towards a much more detailed licensing system for landlords and for the better registration of HMOs. We believe that the existing powers available to local authorities to register HMOs, and in what circumstance, need to be amended. There is a pressing need to review the definition of HMOs, which is what the Bill will achieve.

2 pm

Local authorities already have a wide range of powers available to them to tackle and control standards of HMOs—the exact point made by the hon. Member for Cotswold—through part 11 of the Housing Act 1985 and the regulations made under it. However—the hon. Gentleman was quite right to raise this point—experience has shown that these powers have not always been fully effective in ensuring that acceptable standards are met or maintained. Much of that is because the legislation dates back many years and reflects the conditions and technology prevailing at the time. Many of the buildings go back to Victorian times.

The legislation sets detailed and prescriptive requirements, but fails to provide the flexibility required to deal with other problems because building design and technologies have changed dramatically over the past 50 or 100 years. That has inevitably hampered local authorities in performing their duties under the legislation.

I accept that the Bill is not the correct vehicle for addressing these defects. The Government regard this as a useful paving measure for a much more dedicated and targeted measure that the DTLR intends to introduce. Obviously that will require a much more complex and detailed set of measures than can be accommodated in a private Member's Bill, and it can be covered by Government legislation. However, it is important that we get the Bill right, and that it is consistent with the Government's wider intentions along these lines.

Mr. Sayeed: So far, the Minister has spoken for 109 minutes during this debate. The only particular change taking place is the introduction of amendment (a) to amendment No. 11, which the Minister described as window dressing. Is it the Minister's intention to talk out this Bill because of what he described as only a piece of window dressing?

Mr. Meacher: That is a bit ripe coming from the hon. Gentleman, who indicated that, having succeeded in the vote, he wanted to be rid of this Bill and move on to others. He was dissimilating enough to suggest that the reason for wishing to dismiss the Bill was to provide time for my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, West (Rachel Squire), whereas it is clear from the intervention of the Opposition Whip, the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), that the Opposition's intention is to dismiss this Bill in order to have as much time as possible on the Pension Annuities (Amendment) Bill.

My concern is to ensure that the Bill is properly debated. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman, contrary to his Back-Bench colleagues, does not seem to regard the registration of houses of multiple occupation and the risks to many vulnerable and defenceless people in them to be a matter for careful consideration. If he had applied himself to this matter and asked some serious questions, it would be another matter. He has just sat there twiddling his thumbs, waiting to get on to the next Bill. That is not a worthy way to present himself.

Mr. McCabe *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Minister gives way to his hon. Friend, I ask him to concentrate on responding to the debate, rather than covering wider ground.

Mr. McCabe: I urge my hon. Friend not to stop debating the Bill and not to submit to the pressure. I want to know why he thinks that the affirmative resolution is necessary, particularly in relation to clause 3.

Mr. Meacher: On clause 3, I said that proposing the affirmative resolution procedure, which is used only rarely, is justified on a matter of sufficient importance, but not on one of a detailed or technical kind. I listened to what my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon said, but perhaps it is the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir Sydney Chapman) who has his affirmatives and negatives the wrong way round. I think that he is partly right and partly wrong.

It is justified for clause 3, which raises the more general and serious issues, to be subject to the affirmative procedure, but it is reasonable to discuss to what parliamentary scrutiny the more detailed and technical issues under clauses 4 to 6 should be subject. Currently, they are not subject to parliamentary scrutiny at all, so proposing the negative resolution procedure gives the Opposition or any Member of the House, the opportunity for a debate. That is a fair balance between the two.

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: Does my hon. Friend disagree?

Mr. Dismore: I am concerned, because the registration scheme ultimately polices the Bill. People could face sanctions if they do not comply with it properly. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr. Turner) but that issue is far more important than the vague and woolly general definitions in clause 3. We must have proper scrutiny, as people may face penalties.

Mr. Meacher: I am not disagreeing about the importance of the penalties and sanctions that may rightly be brought to bear when landlords fail to meet standards. The issue is whether the matter should take up parliamentary time, because detailed scrutiny in both Houses would be required. Is that merited? I am suggesting not that there should not be adequate penalties, but that if there is a desire to discuss these matters, the House should have the opportunity to make such a demand. However, to lay that down as a requirement seems to us to go further than is strictly necessary. I hope

that my hon. Friend accepts that, although I take his point. I am prepared, without prejudice, to have another look at the matter.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): My right hon. Friend has alluded to section 11 of the Housing Act 1985 and to the powers of local authorities under that Act in relation to HMOs. He also alluded to the inadequacy of those powers. Will he recount for the House why the powers need to be superseded and why clauses 3 and 4 may be inadequate for that, thereby requiring further wide-scale legislation?

Mr. Meacher: The answer is that section 11 does not adequately deal with several issues relating to the registration and control of HMOs. For years if not decades, that has not been properly regulated. Obviously, there are powers under previous legislation that enable local authorities to go so far, but we believe that a major legislative overhaul is required. The Government propose to introduce such legislation, but that has been pre-empted—if that is the right word—by the Bill.

After discussions with the Bill's supporters, we made an agreement on part 3 that we believe to be consistent with our wider purposes, and we are happy for it to proceed on that basis. However, section 11 is an inadequate instrument for what is a very complex and difficult area.

The Bill would make one important change in respect of standards by amending section 348 of the 1985 Act so that a condition of the registration of a house will be that it meets minimum prescribed standards, including those relating to safety, energy efficiency and standards of fixtures, fittings and furnishings. If a house does not meet those standards, a local authority will be able to refuse to register it, unless steps are taken to require it to meet those standards. Therefore, the measure gives substantial powers to local authorities.

Another difficulty with the current legislation is that the control regime is based largely on local authority discretionary powers, a matter that is raised in regard to amendment No. 4. The existing power to require HMOs to be registered is discretionary, as is the power on the categories of HMOs to which a registration scheme will apply.

As a result, enforcement and the standards applied vary significantly across the country, a point to which the hon. Member for Cotswold rightly drew our attention. The Bill will deal with those anomalies by requiring all local authorities in England and Wales to adopt a registration scheme with control provisions for those HMOs most at risk.

The Bill provides that regulations will prescribe which HMOs will be covered by the mandatory registration scheme. Should we include two-storey buildings, or should we restrict the provision to three and four-storey buildings which have at least four occupants? We will informally consult on which descriptions of HMOs will be subject to mandatory legislation, but as I indicated in Committee, HMOs that are of three or more storeys and that are occupied by more than four people exhibit the characteristics with which we are most concerned, such as fire risk and overcrowding. That is the basis for amendment No. 4. That is where the greatest risk applies. The question for the House is whether it applies to two-storey buildings with four people, or whether it is possible to draw a sensible dividing line between two and three storeys.

The Bill provides that local authorities will, at their discretion, be able to register smaller HMOs if they consider that necessary. Therefore, whatever the House may decide today, there would still be a discretion where a local authority believed that a two-storey building should be brought within the controls.

The Bill also provides that local authorities must adopt model and therefore uniform registration schemes in their districts. Again, that is important. If an authority wishes to vary the model scheme, it will only be able to do so with the approval of the Secretary of State. We believe that the use of model schemes will provide consistency across local authorities, which again is important. We do not think that there should be varying standards when one is talking about health and safety and overcrowding. That should apply in both the application of standards and their enforcement. We want to see even, balanced and proper enforcement across the country.

The measure will also reduce the amount of paperwork and ensure that fees are kept to a minimum. That is a less important issue but not a negligible one.

The existing definition of an HMO has been the subject of many debates; we had many in Committee. A number of grey areas have arisen. That has resulted in some properties that exhibit the characteristics of HMO accommodation not being within the definition. Precisely such a building configuration has been referred to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister is again straying rather wide of the amendments before the House. I would be grateful if he returned to them.

Mr. Meacher: I understand that point. I wanted to make it absolutely clear that the significance of the issue behind amendment No. 4 was understood. With your patience and kindness, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have managed to spell it out in full. I am glad to leave the case there.

Mr. Gardiner *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We have covered the amendment very fully and the Minister has responded to the debate at great length, so I do not think that it would be appropriate for the hon. Gentleman to speak at this time.

2.15 pm

Dr. Desmond Turner: The Minister outlined many of the reasons why use of the affirmative resolution procedure, as set out in the amendment, is so important. It is also extremely important to adopt starred amendments Nos. 17, 18 and 19, to which the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir Sydney Chapman) spoke, to provide for positive resolutions in respect of the issues covered in clauses 4, 5 and 6.

We all know that houses in multiple occupation are an extremely complex matter. The question of definition alone has kept lawyers fat for years. It is important to have a definition that is not only foolproof as far as lawyers are concerned, but fair to landlords and tenants, so that everybody understands where they are. The question now

[Dr. Desmond Turner]

boils down to what constitutes a household; it has changed since Second Reading, when, as hon. Members will remember, it was based on there being more than two families. Households are the basis of the current definition.

We all know that problems have arisen in the courts because of unscrupulous landlords who are prepared to claim that a disparate group of people who have no mutual relationship whatever constitutes a single household. Thus, they will pretend that a four-storey Victorian tenement occupied by 12 students is a single household. Of course, that is blatant nonsense, but that is how the matter currently stands in the courts, which is unacceptable from everybody's point of view.

It is essential to ensure proper scrutiny of associated regulations. I pointed out to the Department the weakness on definition and said, "You'll have to define households, or you'll be back in the mire again." It must prescribe the relationships that constitute a household. As we all know, that is potentially a very sensitive issue. In relation to a married couple with children, the circumstances are clear, but the relationships of unmarried couples, same-sex couples and so on in cohabitation might be less so. Those matters need to be considered very carefully. They are potentially very sensitive.

Mr. Gardiner: I hope that my hon. Friend will take on board a point that I had hoped to make at greater length about an issue that is important in constituencies such as mine. In relation to an extended family nexus of asylum seekers, disproportionate work would be required of local authorities under the proposals for registration of households. Difficulties can arise when there is a tremendous influx of asylum seekers who are included in loose family configurations and often live in multiple occupation households. The turnover and mobility of such families can be so tremendously fast that a local authority would require far greater resources than are currently available to keep pace with the situation. Will my hon. Friend comment on that issue, although I am forbidden to do so at greater length?

Dr. Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which emphasises the problem of the definition of an extended family and where to set its limits. It is only right and proper that such sensitive issues are scrutinised by the House.

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) made an important point about minority communities. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) envisage that resolutions, whether affirmative or negative, would include, for example, a requirement on local authorities to ensure that the regulations are published in languages other than English so that minority communities can understand them?

Dr. Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which underlines a point that is likely to be overlooked in an ordinary statutory instrument Committee, operating by resolution through annulment. Nine times out of 10, such Committees are trying to break the four-minute meeting record. Instead of scrutinising, Committee members assume that officials have done it all. We are considering a range of issues that are too sensitive to be left to officials to bring to a Committee that will simply rubber-stamp them so that its members can get out of the Room as quickly as possible.

We have talked about problems that are associated with definition. They could keep lawyers going for a long time, but I do not want to dwell on that. However, definition is vital; my hon. Friends' interventions have shown that admirably.

Mr. McCabe: I want to make the same point, but with specific reference to clause 3(4). I am worried about the way in which the regulations will operate. I am conscious that they may involve safety issues for local authority officers. There must be massive scope for misunderstanding, especially in the case of asylum seekers, who may be subject to pressure from unscrupulous landlords. I wonder whether my hon. Friend has given any thought to ensuring that local authority officers are safeguarded and that accurate, reliable information on which the law can operate is uncovered.

Dr. Turner: That underlines the need for positive resolution so that we have clear regulations that protect the interests of everyone involved—landlords, tenants or local authority officers, who must enforce them.

We have shown the potential sensitivity and complexity of definition. The Government have agreed that relationships will be prescribed by positive resolution. Many of the same considerations about relationships apply to the other three major HMO clauses—4, 5 and 6. Genuine questions could be asked about the registration level, which is controversial. There is fairly wide agreement in the House that three storeys or more and five or more tenants constitute a reasonable level at which to start mandatory registration.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I am the promoter of a Bill that is lower down on the list. Why is the hon. Gentleman damaging the prospects for his Bill's progress by continuing to speak now?

Hon. Members: He is talking it out.

Dr. Turner: On the contrary; that is not my intention.

I was considering the apparently reasonable definition about which many hon. Members agree. However, some hon. Members want the minimum number of tenants to be reduced. Student organisations are concerned about the condition of many student houses, which do not necessarily have three storeys, and which often consist of only four tenants—a two-storey family house might be let to students, for example. Those organisations want such houses to be covered by the Bill.

There is a considerable level of complexity involved in dealing with these regulations, and it needs the full and open scrutiny of Parliament. I therefore strongly support the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Chipping Campden—

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Chipping Barnet. Chipping Campden is in my constituency.

Dr. Turner: I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. Have I got it wrong? I often do. I hope that the House will forgive me. The hon. Gentleman knows who I mean.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) referred to the fact that the regulations would be accompanied by penalties. There will be criminal offences associated with this legislation for landlords and others who commit major transgressions of the regulations. Although we are not necessarily going to bang people up for doing wrong under the regulations, they may be subject to a considerable fine. We therefore need to be very clear about what measures they are being required to conform to, and that those measures are reasonable. The positive resolution procedure in the House is a transparent and fair way of achieving that.

Mr. McCabe: My hon. Friend has just told the House that there will be penalties for landlords "and others" who transgress. Which others would be subject to penalties, and what kind of penalties would they be?

Dr. Turner: That is slightly speculative. Clear responsibilities will be placed not only on landlords but on tenants. We all know that antisocial behaviour occurs mainly in rented accommodation but, I regret, sometimes in owner-occupied accommodation as well. That is a fact of life. We have all, unless we live in very plush suburban lands, experienced cases of it in our constituencies, and they are extremely hard to deal with.

Mr. Gardiner: Freeholders are often at arm's length in these situations, as they employ managing agents to manage the property on their behalf. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the penalties to which he has referred would apply also to the managers who have hands-on responsibility for the administration of the building and for the people living in it?

Dr. Turner: My hon. Friend's point is absolutely correct.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Turner: I will give way again in a moment.

If my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) had been privy to the original Bill that we drafted, which set out to replace de novo section 11 of the Housing Act 1985, and which covered all these points of detail, he would know that this was a real issue that had to be addressed. It is an issue that the control provisions to be laid under regulations under the Bill will have to address. This emphasises the need for clear, transparent scrutiny.

Mr. Robathan: This is a Bill which I support, and which the hon. Gentleman has promoted. Will he explain why he is talking it out? Why is he talking out his own Bill?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Dr. Turner: I am not talking out my Bill. *[Interruption.]* I am trying to preserve it, contrary to the impression that the hon. Gentleman may have. Had there not been what can only be described as a wrecking amendment from his side of the Chamber, this Bill would now have been passed and we could have started discussing the Bill that all the Conservative Members are interested in. If Conservative Members want to know—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 21 June.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

COPYRIGHT (VISUALLY IMPAIRED PERSONS) BILL

Order read for consideration as amended (in the Standing Committee).

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Friday 21 June.

PENSIONS ANNUITIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [12 April], proposed on further consideration of Bill, as amended (in the Standing Committee).

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 19 July.

RELATIONSHIPS (CIVIL REGISTRATION) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 19 July.

HEALTH (AIR TRAVELLERS) BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [25 January].

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 19 July.

ROAD SAFETY AND SPEED BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 19 July.

TRESPASSERS ON LAND (LIABILITY FOR DAMAGE AND EVICTION) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 19 July.

Mr. Blunt: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I will take points of order afterwards.

RIGHT TO SELF-EMPLOYMENT BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 19 July.

RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION AND REMEDIES BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 19 July.

PATIENTS WITHOUT LEGAL CAPACITY (SAFEGUARDS) BILL

Order read for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 21 June.

COMPULSORY VOTING BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 21 June.

PATENTS ACT 1977 (AMENDMENT) (No. 2) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 19 July.

DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION (AMENDMENT) BILL [*LORDS*]

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 21 June.

AGE DISCRIMINATION (No. 2) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 19 July.

Mr. Blunt: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it possible for the record to show that it was the Government Whips who objected to my Bill? I happen to know that the Bill has cross-party support, and it is a great pity that the issues with which it deals cannot be debated in Committee following its Second Reading. Do the procedures of the House allow it to be made plain that it was the Government Whips who prevented further progress?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The simple fact is that an objection to the Bill was made, and that is not a matter for the Chair.

Point of Order

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You may or may not be aware of breaking news that there has been a serious rail crash just outside London in Hertfordshire. It appears that there may have been serious injuries and I am sure that the House would wish to express its sympathies with the victims and their families and the hope that the crash is not as serious as is being indicated on the wires.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): If matters are as the hon. Gentleman says they are, it is a matter of seriousness and sadness for the whole House. All I can say at the moment is that we hope that things are not too bad.

Drug Rape

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

2.35 pm

Vera Baird (Redcar): It was a few days before Christmas in a local pub that Natalie aged 21 first set eyes on the man who probably raped her. She will never know for sure. She said:

"I was out with a friend . . . We'd noticed this man in a couple of pubs and later he showed up in the club. He kept offering us drinks and I said no."

When a friend gave her a vodka and coke, Natalie drank it without suspicion. Only afterwards did she learn that the drink had come from the persistent stranger. Twenty minutes later she was unconscious:

"At first it felt like I was drunk, even though I hadn't had much alcohol. I couldn't find my friends, and went outside to look for them. It was freaky. Everything was distorted. The traffic was really loud and I felt as if everyone was shouting at me. Then I remember feeling my legs go and someone was taking my arm and started walking me saying that everything would be OK. I was grateful . . . The next thing I remember I was in a filthy bedsit with the man lying on top of me. I couldn't move. Everything was unreal. Later I woke again. I had my hair pinned up . . . my head banged against the headboard and the pin pierced my skin. The pain shot through me and this gave me a surge of power."

This enabled her to push him off, pick up her clothes and flee. She felt violated, confused and uncertain, unable to remember his face, where she had been and what had happened during those lost hours. She wondered whether the attack had really taken place.

"You think you've been raped; you know something has happened to you, but you don't quite remember."

Pat, a 49-year-old secretary, comes from much nearer my constituency of Redcar. She does not remember being raped. The drug that had been used to spike her drink eventually caused her to black out. It was only the following morning when she woke up in her underwear with bruises round her waist and thighs that she realised that something terrible had happened. She believed that her boyfriend spiked her drink at the firm's Christmas party and with her boss took her upstairs and raped her.

"There are about two hours I just can't account for."

She said:

"The room went very dark. I had the most horrendous tunnel vision; people who were standing just a few feet away from me seemed like they were only five inches tall. I couldn't hear people's conversations properly. It was as if I was going deaf. Even if I'd known what was going on, I couldn't have done anything about it. I was totally powerless."

These stories are so horrible that I should say at once that the numbers to whom this happens are small, though apparently increasing.

The only comprehensive research into drug rape is the Sturman report of 2000 by Chief Inspector Peter Sturman of the Metropolitan police. That year, 1,002 people contacted the Drug Rape Trust, the support trust set up by Mr. Sturman. I should declare an interest as a patron of that trust. It is, of course, an unpaid position.

Last year, 2,016 similar people contacted the trust—twice as many as in the previous year. Although I shall describe victims as "she", I should say that 11 per cent. of complainants are men.

[Vera Baird]

The Belfast Rape Crisis Centre reported eight drug rapes in 1998 and there are now 350 each year. This is due in part to an increase in offending and in part to increased awareness.

Eighteen types of drugs have been used in the UK. The most frequently used is GHB, which is recognisable in some of the symptoms reported by the victims in my stories. Like ecstasy, it is a rave drug, and because it is dangerous rather than because of its use in rape, it is now a controlled drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, so its possession is unlawful.

The drug Rohypnol has been associated by the media with drug rape, but it has never been found in the UK. The Sturman view is that it is not a hazard.

Roche, the company that manufactures it has also asked me to make that clear. I do so in particular because with impressive responsibility since the association was made between the drug and drug rape, Roche has reconstituted the tablet so that it floats and fizzes and gives off an indigo dye as it dissolves, so it is useless for spiking a drink. I commend that excellent precedent to the Government, which they should impose on commercial manufacturers of other drugs. However, GHB is easily made domestically from simple substances, and many internet websites give recipes for it.

Only seven people have been convicted of drug rape in this country. The law is clear: rape is an offence, and section 4 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956 makes it an offence to administer a drug in order to stupefy, or to overpower, a person to enable sex. The offence incurs a two-year maximum sentence, which should perhaps be increased. I shall discuss later some possible legal changes, but the problem is not so much the law as the evidence required to prove drug rape.

The drugs pass through the system quickly—taking between two and eight hours—and leave the victim confused. She will hesitate to tell anyone, and by the time she overcomes the after-effects, the drugs are gone, leaving no evidential trace. The confusion that they cause is itself a barrier to complaining, let alone to giving evidence. What can she say? What can she be sure of? Often, she will have been drinking. She may feel guilt at having had too much, or fear that having had any amount will make the authorities judgmental. Traumatised, she may not want to be treated as if she brought this horrible experience on herself. She may just stay at home.

The perpetrators we know little about. Self-evidently, this is an evil, premeditated, predatory offence that is recklessly dangerous. It can be the utter ruin of the victim, for presumably transient pleasure. However, according to the Rape Crisis Federation, in the main the offence is perpetrated by professional gangs, and the things done to the victims are filmed, to be sold on as pornography.

This is not a new issue; *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *The Observer*, and—nearer home, in Redcar—*The Northern Echo*, have all run recent features on it, but it has not attracted sufficient Government attention. Given that only seven convictions have been secured, the problem must look tiny, but numerically it is far bigger than that. The potentially catastrophic damage to individuals makes the offence important beyond the numbers affected, as does the fear that it casts over the lives of sociable people.

I have seen a letter from the Government suggesting that the incidence of drug rape is exaggerated, and by implication that, because information about it is available on websites and it is against the law, nothing else needs to be done. I hope that the Minister is not of that point of view. What kind of Government attention should drug rape attract? The Government should fund wider publicity. Of course, it is completely inappropriate to generate panic—I repeat that the numbers involved are small—but that is not a reason to avoid publicising the risk. That would allow the risk to continue, and add to the isolation of drug rape victims. It is for professional public relations experts to plan how best to make the message clear without frightening people.

The same awareness-raising campaign ought to set out simple preventive or protective steps that people can take without spoiling their pleasure. The task is to incorporate them into people's ordinary behaviour—just as people lock their car and switch on the alarm. Such behaviour does not mean that people live in fear of car theft; it is a simple and obvious precaution, and a fairly successful crime prevention measure that is simply part of what people now do.

The Drug Rape Trust has launched a campaign—"Be aware and take care"—that features a pocket-sized plastic card, containing tips such as "Don't leave your drink unattended." The theme is that it could happen to anyone, and that we must all watch out for each other. That is rather clever, as it does not put the onus wholly on to the potential victim, who might otherwise feel oppressed. However, a small charity cannot propagate its campaign widely enough, and the Government ought to take the lead.

The Drug Rape Trust has been working with the Department of Trade and Industry and Government chemists for two years to develop a swizzle stick that indicates when a rape drug is in a drink, and a prototype has been tested. The plan is that a swizzle stick will automatically be put into any drink served by bar staff. Soliciting the support of breweries, pub owners and club owners will obviously require Government help. The plan does contain elements of using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, but given the grave consequences of drug rape, it would be a simple step to take. It is not possible simply to issue swizzle sticks to people. There is nothing funny about this issue, but accepting a drink from an amiable companion, only to test it for drugs with a swizzle stick, is hardly the way to progress a new relationship. That is simply not practical.

I should emphasise that no such product is available yet. Certain products claim to be able to test comprehensively for such drugs, which is another reason why the Government must get involved. They must exclude the inevitable profit-chasing charlatans by taking responsibility themselves for verifying preventive products.

The offence is of course one of rape. The publication on 10 April of the thematic report by the inspectorates of constabulary and of the Crown Prosecution Service on how rape is investigated and prosecuted shows that standards are very low. One criticism raised there and brought into sharper focus by drug rape is the need for specialist medical facilities for the care of rape complainants. Often they are examined in the police station doctor's room, which is used for a range of other purposes. The doctor will be a forensic medical examiner

unconnected with the complainant. Such doctors vary in sympathy. As the inspectors found out, both men and women rape complainants prefer to be examined by a female. Although 35 per cent. of GPs are women, only 18 per cent. of forensic medical examiners are women, making the prospect of getting what one wants a poor one.

Not everybody wants to make a complaint to the police but they might want to be treated and to give samples to keep their options open. It is important, therefore, that facilities be at hospitals and not at police stations. There are centres of excellence, notably the St. Mary's centre in Manchester, which has existed for 14 years and was praised by the inspectors. The doctors there have specific expertise. They have dealt with hundreds of thousands of upset and traumatised men and women at all times of the day and night. They are sympathetic and detached, and knowledgeable enough often to be able to give expert evidence that is capable of being supporting evidence. As the inspectors found, complainants who are supported and given good care from the start are more likely to find the resources to sustain a complaint through the criminal justice system. In order to try to improve the all-time low 7.3 per cent conviction rate for rape, such facilities are urgently needed.

In July 2000, the Home Office sex offences review recommended changes to the law, in particular the legal redefinition of rape as having sex without free agreement rather than having sex without consent. The review also suggested a non-exhaustive list of examples of when a person does not give free agreement. One item on the list was if a person was too affected by drink or drugs to give free agreement. As with most rape in which the parties are known to each other, however fleetingly, the defence of a drug rape perpetrator, if prosecuted, will be consent. If there is evidence of drug use, a consent defence will have to be accompanied by an assertion that she took the drug herself. In that case, having excess drugs or drink on a list of factors that vitiate consent could be helpful.

Drug rape is rape. The defence of consent is almost invariably coupled with the defence that if the woman did not consent, the perpetrator thought she had. Rape is having sex knowing, or being reckless as to whether, a woman consented. So if a man genuinely thinks the woman consented, even if in fact she did not, he will not be guilty. I say briefly now what I said at greater length a week ago—because I have been fortunate enough to have two Adjournment debates on aspects of rape in the last fortnight. The defence that the man believed that the woman was consenting is usually accompanied by an application to cross-examine her about her sexual conduct in the past—her previous sexual history. Its relevance is often difficult to see. It is highly prejudicial. It is also cross-examination so intimate that it can undermine a witness's confidence. It plays a well known and massive role in discouraging women from making and sustaining complaints.

The Government legislated in 1999 to prevent the use of previous sexual history to support a defence of consent. However, that did not exclude the use of previous sexual history for the defence that the man believed that the woman was consenting. Because the defences are run together in the same trial, when previous sexual history is admitted for that defence it has those undesirable effects on the defence of consent as well, despite the Government's intentions. There are contentious issues around how the law should be recast to deal with that issue, and I do not raise them now. However, I ask the Minister when we may discuss them. That is to say, when will the Government bring forward legislation based on the sex offences review and will it cover the two aspects to which I have referred today?

Returning to the specific offence of drug rape, I can think of no complete solution, but I hope that the Minister will take to heart the fact that drug rape engenders widespread fear and has profound consequences for its victims. Will my hon. Friend take action now to raise awareness and to prescribe measures of self-protection so that women and men can be as safe as possible when enjoying their social lives? The two examples that I gave at the beginning of my speech have both happened since the Sturman report made those recommendations two years ago.

2.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) on securing a second debate on this general issue so soon after the first.

Rape in all its forms is a serious and abhorrent crime. The enormity of the effect on victims and the fear of crime that it engenders among women is very damaging. Society needs to recognise that rape is a serious crime, and that there can be no qualification or lessening of that.

As my hon. and learned Friend acknowledged, the law is clear about the use of any substance to assist in the commission of this crime by incapacitating the victim, which is a particularly sinister and repellent act. When it takes place in a social context, such as a pub or a club and when the victim knows or is acquainted with the perpetrator, the betrayal of trust that that involves further impacts upon the victim.

Owing to the relative infrequency of this type of crime and the difficulty of obtaining specific data, it is hard to assess whether it is on the increase. Current police recording methods do not routinely identify that specific sexual offence. In common with other sexual offences, it would be reasonable to assume that any count of incidents significantly underestimates the size of the problem.

I am pleased to say that the Home Office has taken steps to address the problem of insufficient data. The latest British crime survey will attempt to measure the involvement of drugs in serious sexual offences. The results will be known when the next survey is published later in the year. However, as with all rape and sexual offences, we need more incidents to be reported to the police.

As my hon. and learned Friend knows, we have taken steps in the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 to ensure that victims of rape can be provided with protection if cases reach court. Section 41 of the Act was the subject of an Adjournment debate on 24 April. The provisions of the section limit the questions that rape victims can be asked under cross-examination about their previous sexual history so that they do not have to go through that distressing and unnecessary ordeal. I have taken on board what my hon. and learned Friend says about the way in which that is effectively being circumvented, and will come back to her as soon as I can with further thoughts on whether we can protect against that happening.

[Mr. Bob Ainsworth]

The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Beverley Hughes), in replying to my hon. and learned Friend's previous Adjournment debate, said that we were planning a research project to evaluate the impact of section 41, particularly in the light of the recent House of Lords decision. We are also aware of the need to improve the conviction rate in rape offences generally.

A working group on rape is being established by the Home Office. It will work with the police and other Government Departments to devise a plan to implement the recommendations of the recent joint inspectorate review. These include using specialist lawyers for rape cases, ensuring that offensive and seemingly irrelevant questioning of victims is challenged and issuing guidance to prosecutors on the review and handling of cases. The report also recommends the improvement of existing training for lawyers and police officers.

Among the existing good practice identified in the report is the provision in some areas of specialist medical examination facilities and the equipping of first response staff with sample kits to prevent loss of evidence. My hon. and learned Friend commended one institution; I would like to mention the Haven in south London, which is another good example of a specialist medical resource for victims of sexual offences. It is jointly funded by the Metropolitan police and the national health service. The service deals with approximately 10 per cent. of all rape referrals in England and Wales.

There is little firm evidence to indicate how often drugs are used to facilitate rape, or which drugs are being used. The forensic science service analyses samples from victims in suspected drug rape cases and has been collating data on possible drug-facilitated rape and sexual assault. It investigates about 450 cases of alleged drug-assisted rape each year, and positive drug identifications—those where the presence of an unexplained sedative drug has been detected—are made in only 1 to 2 per cent. of such cases.

Benzodiazepine drugs are controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 as class C drugs but, until recently, were exempted from controls on their possession. Following advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, the Government have introduced additional controls on their import, export and possession. Those further controls should help to reduce the availability of the benzodiazepine drugs on the illicit drugs market and their use in cases of rape.

As my hon. and learned Friend said, there have been media reports that the drug GHB—gamma hydroxybutyrate—is often used in drug rape. We take that very seriously and have been monitoring the situation to see whether further controls are needed, based on the scientific and medical evidence. Last year, the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs decided to control GHB under the UN convention on psychotropic substances.

At its meeting last November, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs recommended that GHB should be controlled as a class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The Government have accepted that recommendation in principle, in view of the drug's misuse. Under that classification, possession of the drug would be illegal but, as my hon. and learned Friend pointed out, its precursors are easily available, so there are great difficulties in dealing with that issue and they will have to be explored further.

I think that my hon. and learned Friend is also aware that the Government are working to develop a practical device to enable the detection of a range of different drugs in drinks. Only last week, I met representatives of the drinks industry and we were given a presentation on the latest developments in that project. There is much potential, but we are still a long way off. There are public health difficulties and the research has revealed major problems.

The cost of a workable device would have to be represented as a multiple in the value of the drinks themselves. To make progress in devising an effective and suitable product the costs would have to be reduced, so that the device could be supplied with drinks on all occasions. The public health considerations would also have to be taken into account.

I was encouraged—as were the people who were undertaking the research on behalf of the Department of Trade and Industry—by the reaction of some of the trade representatives. They readily said that they were prepared to assist in the trials of the devices to try to further the research so that we could develop a usable product as quickly as possible.

It is also important that we have laws that provide clear and coherent offences to protect all victims of sexual offences, with penalties that enable the appropriate punishment of offenders. To that end, the Government set up the sex offences review in January 1999.

On drug rape, my hon. and learned Friend will be aware that the Sexual Offences Act 1956 includes an offence of administering drugs to obtain or facilitate intercourse, and the review proposes an increase in the sentence for that crime from two years to seven years. When the review's recommendations have been considered, we intend to introduce a coherent package of new and amended sexual offences as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I assure my hon. and learned Friend and the rest of the House that we are determined further to improve the support offered to victims by both the criminal justice system and the community as a whole. Since last October, we have given many victims the opportunity to make a personal statement about how the crime has affected their lives. That will ensure that they can be offered the right level of protection and support, and that their needs are taken into account at every stage in the process. Later this year, we shall announce detailed plans for a Bill of Rights for victims and for a victims commissioner, who I am sure would have a great impact in this area of criminality.

I hope that I have been able to assure my hon. and learned Friend that we are actively considering rape in its wider context and the various ways in which we can help, and that drug rape is being taken seriously. I am sure that she will continue to monitor the situation and to push for an effective framework in all the different areas necessary to deal with the problem.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes past Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 13 May 2002

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Digital Television

1. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff, West): What steps she will take to enhance consumer choice for premium channels on digital television. [53962]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): The draft Communications Bill and associated documents set out a proposed framework for the regulation of communications, which is intended to broaden choice of and access to modern communication technologies, and to make markets work better. Where there is consumer demand—for example, for premium channels—that should improve choice.

Kevin Brennan: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that, given the demise of ITV Digital, it is important to ensure that the Government are committed to retaining premium subscription programming on digital terrestrial television? In addition, did he note that the demise of ITV Digital had at least one minor benefit in that it allowed viewers to watch for free the first division play-offs yesterday at Cardiff's magnificent millennium stadium, proving once again that a new Wembley stadium is not needed?

Dr. Howells: It was a great game in a magnificent stadium—even though I am from Pontypridd and cannot stand the place.

It is not for the Government to give those assurances. Indeed, I understand that the administrator will soon be informing customers of their rights. Currently, there are rules to protect the payments made by subscribers since the beginning of administration and the subscriptions have been placed in a specific account. If the customers lose their pay services, relevant pro rata payments, per day, will be given back to them. For the time being, consumers will keep at least all the public services, which constitute 14 channels.

Nick Harvey (North Devon): What is the Government's attitude to the suggestion that there should be a free-to-air digital terrestrial platform? If that comes about, will they ensure that those who have been able to take subscription channels through ITV Digital in the past are still able to do so as an add-on to that free-to-air service? If another company takes up ITV Digital's multiplex, what confidence can it have that the Government will protect it from the sort of abuse that the Competition Commissioner appeared to consider that Sky had shown towards ITV Digital?

Dr. Howells: The Independent Television Commission is responsible for the award of the licences under the Broadcasting Act 1996. In this case, the commission has adopted an accelerated procedure. I understand that potential applicants have to submit to the ITC a confidential expression of interest by 16 May 2002 and full applications by 30 May. It is up to the ITC to give guarantees and assurances or, indeed, to decide under what terms the process will be conducted. The ITC will publish the programme proposals of the applications and will invite representations, which should be received by 6 June. The commission expects to announce the award of licences on 13 June 2002. I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts it is not useful to speculate at this stage. Speculation will be largely groundless until the ITC has made its decisions.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Does the Minister agree that in analogue we have a public sector broadcaster called the BBC, but in digital there is no public sector broadcaster—especially not the BBC? Given the demise of the digital terrestrial platform, does my hon. Friend agree that the BBC should take the senior role in delivering a public service television network on digital terrestrial?

Dr. Howells: I know that the BBC is concerned that its new digital services should have a proper platform and good coverage throughout the country, so I am sure it will be interested in determining the outcome. However, I do not intend to speculate from this Dispatch Box on what part the BBC will play.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Following the collapse of ITV Digital, does the Minister understand that there is not the remotest chance of achieving digital switchover by the Government's target date of 2010 unless Ministers start to give a stronger lead? Will he therefore publish a timetable setting out how and when the digital terrestrial television signal will be increased, and mount a public information campaign so that consumers are no longer misled into buying equipment that the Government's own plans will make obsolete in a short space of time?

Dr. Howells: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that it was his Government who privatised the transmission services. He will also understand that the decision was taken before the Labour Government came into power that the signal for digital services would be interleaved among the existing analogue services. To believe that we can turn up the power shows his ignorance of the technology. He should do as I have done and go to Croydon—[HON. MEMBERS: "Labour Croydon!"]—and talk to the transmitters—[HON. MEMBERS: "Transmitters?"] The hon. Gentleman should go to Labour Croydon and talk to the transmission companies; he would then realise that it is not easy to increase the signal in that way. The signal has already been turned up by 3 decibels, which is a

considerable amount. To turn it up further would interfere with analogue signals. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to tell his constituents how wonderful it would be if the great majority of them could not watch analogue on their television sets at home.

Terrestrial Television

2. **Mr. Jim Cousins** (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): What her policy is on ownership of terrestrial television channels by media conglomerates. [53963]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): As my hon. Friend knows, proposals for the reform of media ownership rules were published last week, alongside the draft Communications Bill. Our proposals mean that there will be at least three public service television broadcasters in separate ownership. We are clear that competition rules will be our main policy lever for influencing the ownership of media, but with specific additional rules for the ownership of terrestrial television. Those rules follow from the basic principle that the media, more than any other industry, underpin our democracy and the culture of debates in this country. They will mean that the owners of the largest newspaper groups—those with more than a 20 per cent. share of the national circulation—cannot buy an ITV licence or acquire a large stake in any ITV company. That will prevent a single owner from owning too large a share of the nation's democratic debate. ITV currently has more than a quarter of the share of television viewing, is universally available, and has substantial public service broadcasting obligations.

Mr. Cousins: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer, but she will, of course, appreciate that British terrestrial television has been financially weakened by recent events, that Rupert Murdoch is now the gatekeeper to the digital age, and that her proposals weaken ownership controls and open up British television to those whose tax is paid—if it is paid at all—and whose policy is set from outside the United Kingdom. Under those circumstances, will the power to vary licences be robust enough to protect Britain's cultural identity and the cultural identity of its nations and regions, and will that power be used robustly?

Tessa Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. It does not matter where a company is based: if it buys into British television, it will be subject to UK regulation, both in relation to the terms of licences and the regulation of content. It is important to be clear about the extent to which content regulation will accompany the great liberalisation and deregulation of the proposals that we published last week: the content board of Ofcom; the general public service remit, which will be held by Ofcom; the definition of public service broadcasting; the definition of the regional character of local services; the nominated news provider; the insistence on adequate funding of Channel 3 news; Ofcom's role in relation to overseeing the local content of local radio services; and Ofcom's role in relation to ensuring the accuracy and impartiality of news. The combination of deregulation will bring new inward investment to the British media industry, but the quintessential nature of British broadcasting will be protected by tough content regulation.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Would the Government be content to see the pornographer and part-time political party financier, Mr. Richard Desmond, own a television station?

Tessa Jowell: As I made perfectly clear a moment or two ago, our rules are proprietor-neutral.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Given the wide range of free-to-air and pay television channels now available on terrestrial television, why do we need a special regime to control ownership? Why cannot we simply leave ownership to existing competition law? Is not the maintenance of a special regime merely both confusing and a device for the Government to extract either political favours or financial donations?

Tessa Jowell: Frankly, the hon. Gentleman's final remarks demean him. I hope he will think very carefully about withdrawing them. The proposals are, under any scrutiny, proprietor-neutral. They have the single purpose of opening the British media market to much-needed investment from anywhere in the world, subject to the clear regulation that I set out to the House a few moments ago and last week.

The hon. Gentleman asks why we do not deregulate even further. We do not intend to deregulate further because—for the reasons that I set out a moment ago—the media are different from other industries. It is critical that we maintain the robustness of our democratic debate. Although competition law alone can certainly promote dispersed ownership and has lowered barriers to entry, there is no guarantee that competition law alone will deliver the degree of plurality on which our democracy depends.

Digital Television

3. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): What discussions she has had with Carlton and Granada since 26 April on digital television. [53964]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): Since 26 April, Ministers and officials in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport have continued our regular contacts with Carlton and Granada, which are members of the ITV network and digital television stakeholders through ITV's interest in the Digital 3 and 4 licence.

Mr. Amess: Is the Minister aware that a hard pressed club such as Southend United stands to face a shortfall of £238,000 over the next two years as a result of the collapse of digital television? Is he further aware that clubs such as Southend United feel that Carlton and Granada have some responsibility in the matter? Will he please clarify the situation and do everything that he can to help Southend United football club even if it means playing for it?

Dr. Howells: Did the hon. Gentleman say, "Even if it is painful"?

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Sport has been very active in trying to broker new arrangements and new talks to ensure that football clubs do not suffer overly as a result of the contracts that they signed with ITV Digital.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend recognise that even a club such as Burnley now faces a £3 million gap in its funding and has had to put all its policies for progress on hold until the position is clarified? Will he not accept that the House should clearly condemn Carlton and Granada? Even if they do not have a legal responsibility, they have a moral responsibility and they should get on and sort out the problems for the sake of football in this country.

Dr. Howells: Whatever I may think about the morality or otherwise of the contract that was entered into, it was a commercial contract between two sets of companies. We must treat it as such.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the Minister confirm that, under the terms of the draft Communications Bill, Carlton and Granada would be able to combine and form, in effect, one ITV company? Why then is the Minister happy to see a situation whereby another pornographer, Silvio Berlusconi, could be allowed to take over ITV whereas Rupert Murdoch would not be allowed to? Will the Minister not accept that the large penetration of digital television in the United Kingdom has occurred as a direct result of News Corporation and Sky and not of companies such as ITV Digital?

Dr. Howells: I do not accept that the situation is vastly different after the publication of the Bill. Silvio Berlusconi could, of course, have made a bid before now. However, the hon. Gentleman has highlighted a basic anomaly in the existing rules, and it is quite proper to remove the rules that preclude someone who is not from the European Union from owning a television station here.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): I am sure that many in football would like to thank my right hon. Friends for the considerable efforts that they have made to sort out the mess of ITV Digital, but ITV Digital has now collapsed, putting at risk the future of many Football League clubs. Does my hon. Friend agree that there must be something wrong when Carlton and Granada—companies that are, on the one hand, joint owners of ITV Digital and, on the other, making millions of pounds from the so-called digital dividend—can walk away from their obligations to 72 Football League clubs and try to pretend that they have nothing at all to do with the matter? Must we not keep the pressure on those companies and tell them that they have a moral obligation and that football generally expects something to be done?

Dr. Howells: I understand that both parties have hired expensive lawyers. No doubt the matter will become a question for the courts, and in the end the only people who will make money out of it will be very expensive QCs.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the Minister take the opportunity today to assure the House that there will continue to be a viable future for all forms of digital television—terrestrial, cable and satellite—bearing in mind the precarious position in which some of the cable companies find themselves? Will he also clarify precisely the regime that will operate under the new Ofcom, and whether the Office of Fair Trading or Ofcom will be the competition authority? Although the Secretary of State said that the regime will be proprietor-neutral, there will be a reference to the competition authority if a newspaper proprietor expresses interest in owning a share of ITV.

Dr. Howells: Sophisticated and well-tested arrangements already exist between sectoral regulators and the Director General of Fair Trading and the OFT. I hope that they can be replicated and improved under Ofcom—indeed, I have every confidence that they will be. The regulator, Ofcom, will judge competition cases in the first instance, but it will operate alongside and in conjunction with the Director General of Fair Trading, who has responsibility for implementing the terms of the Competition Act 1998.

Tourism

4. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): If she will make a statement on the prospects for the tourism industry. [53965]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): Some 2.6 million domestic tourism trips were taken in England over Easter, and visitors spent £400 million. That marks a return to pre-foot and mouth disease levels and is no doubt a cause for celebration on both sides of the House.

To support that recovery and to advance my programme of modernisation, radical change to the English Tourism Council will be necessary. A new public-private coalition focusing on domestic marketing and e-tourism is now the basis for discussion with the industry. Regional development agencies will in future play a stronger part in the strategic leadership of tourism, and regional tourist boards are the natural delivery partners for the RDAs.

That is an announcement to the House of progress so far. Further and final findings will be announced in the summer.

Mr. Waterson: Is the Secretary of State aware of the thousands of jobs in towns such as Eastbourne that depend on tourism? Will she explain why it has taken the Government so long to recognise that the English Tourism Council should have a marketing role? When will it get that marketing role? Why is England always the poor relation compared with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

Tessa Jowell: That is absolutely typical of the Opposition. An announcement of recovery in tourism, which will benefit many businesses in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and the constituencies of hon. Members on both sides of the House, is a cause for celebration. However, so that the recovery can be sustained, I am convinced that the English Tourism Council needs to be overhauled so that it can assume a marketing function on a par with the marketing functions in respect of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I have announced that decision to the House today, and work will now be started to ensure that the outcome follows.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work that she is doing to promote tourism throughout the United Kingdom? However, I ask her seriously to consider the facilities that are available for tourists on inland waterways, where there is much potential. There are many who work voluntarily to sustain our waterways. It would be in everyone's interest if my right hon. Friend would give further consideration to support the waterways in the interests of tourism throughout the United Kingdom.

Tessa Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he does to promote the interests and the role in tourism of the waterway authorities. My hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting has had two meetings with the relevant authorities in the United Kingdom, particularly in Scotland. Lottery investment is bringing some of our more neglected waterways back to life, and back to the standard that will make them the tourism attractions that they deserve to be.

David Burnside (South Antrim): I am sure that the Secretary of State, like me, is an avid reader of *The Guardian*. She will have been saddened by the newspaper's flawed editorial policy this year, which predicted that the royal family was an out-dated organisation and institution. Events—some of them extremely sad, this year—have proved that the royal family is a popular institution, nationally and internationally.

Is the right hon. Lady able to give the House a progress report from Lord Sterling's Committee? What has been done by the trendy, lefty marketing people in tourism to increase the appeal of the royal family and the jubilee events that are taking place round the United Kingdom? For example, today the Queen is in Northern Ireland. There is great potential for tourism—what is being done about it?

Tessa Jowell: The hon. Gentleman is right to underline the benefits to tourism of the jubilee year. The evidence is that throughout the country, as the Queen said recently, the modest and pragmatic British people will be celebrating the jubilee in their own way.

The target for the number of beacons committed to be lit over the central weekend was about 500. In 1997, in fact, there were slightly more than 100. This year, 1,500 beacons will be lit. That is a measure of the level of enthusiasm that there is throughout the country for celebrating the jubilee. *[Interruption.]* I hope that the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) is not, uncustomarily, talking down the efforts of all those who are involved in organising the jubilee, or talking down the celebration that will bring the country together. The jubilee will be an opportunity for people, whether republican, monarchist or nothing in particular, to celebrate in their own way.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Will my right hon. Friend's Department consider ways of giving publicity to groups of tourist attractions to promote a particular area, such as Keighley? We have the Brontë parsonage museum, which is wonderful. However, would people travel all the way from London to see only that museum? If they knew that in the same area they would find the Keighley and Worth Valley railway preservation society, a bus museum and East Riddlesden hall, which is owned by the National Trust, and trips on the Leeds-Liverpool canal, they might make it a long weekend.

Tessa Jowell: My hon. Friend has provided some real tasters for those who are planning their jubilee holidays. A further attraction this summer will be the Commonwealth games and the advertising part of the million visitor campaign, which is focused especially on reclaiming visitors from America, who have stayed away since 11 September. We wish to encourage them to join the pageantry and celebration throughout the country, including Keighley, during this jubilee year.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): The Opposition welcome the overdue recognition that the Government's removal of the marketing role of the English Tourism Council's predecessor was a complete disaster for the industry, exacerbating the damage done by the Government's gross mismanagement of the foot and mouth epidemic, the enormous burden of red tape and regulation inflicted on the industry, and the latest imposition of extra employers' national insurance contributions on many small businesses that can ill afford them. Will the Secretary of State make sure that when that marketing role is restored to the English Tourism Council, it will reflect the views of the industry itself and that, if those conflict with the Government's obsession with a regional agenda, the industry's views will prevail?

Tessa Jowell: I hope that the hon. Gentleman found his monthly rant therapeutic; he had a good one this month. On the structure of the marketing function taken on by the English Tourism Council, it will build very much on the million visitor campaign and operate as a public-private coalition. However, as hon. Members have made clear, a tremendous amount of tourism development, investment and advocacy is done regionally, so it would be ridiculous to cut the regions out of the important role that they play in marketing their regions and bringing visitors to their part of the country.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the north-east has much to offer tourism, from the beauty and history of Northumberland and Durham and the industrial heritage of Tyne and Wear and Teesside to the cultural renaissance on the banks of the Tyne? Does she agree that prospects for tourism in the north-east would be greatly and deservedly enhanced by the awarding of city of culture 2008 to the Newcastle and Gateshead partnership?

Tessa Jowell: I am greatly looking forward to visiting the north-east and meeting everyone associated with the capital of culture bid. I am assured that it is a strong bid, alongside many other strong bids. The Minister for the Arts and I intend to visit as many of the bidding cities as possible, and certainly all those that are shortlisted. However, my hon. Friend makes an important point about the role of culture in regeneration and the way it builds a sense of regional identity and pride. I pay tribute to the efforts of the north-east in doing just that.

School Sports

7. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): If she will ensure that new opportunities fund money contributes to greater community use of school's sports facilities. [53968]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): The facilities funded by the new opportunities fund through new opportunities for PE and sport will be a resource for the whole community. Funding is available through that programme to support the development and promotion of facilities for wider community use.

Mr. Kidney: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Does he agree that the scheme provides a brilliant opportunity for opening up school facilities for community use? Does he agree that the new opportunities fund is right to focus on community use as an important part of the bid criteria? Is he aware that Staffordshire's bid majors on community use of school facilities? Can he let me into a secret and confirm that Staffordshire will be a major beneficiary of the fund?

Mr. Caborn: I think that Staffordshire has received just under £6 million. However, my hon. Friend is right; the scheme is an element of the funding needed to start establishing links between schools and communities and to strengthen amateur sports clubs. Some 70 per cent. of young people who leave school and go into the world of work or further and higher education never go back into active sport. We have got to look at structural weaknesses, including facilities, so the Government are investing probably the greatest amount of money for a long time—£0.75 billion, including £580 million in England—to start addressing that problem.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Although I welcome the greater use of school sports facilities by the community, does the Minister share my concern that children spend more than twice as much time watching television or playing computer games as they spend doing sport or physical education? Has the right hon. Gentleman had any recent discussions with his counterparts in the Department for Education and Skills to try to reverse his Government's ridiculous decision to take sport out of the core curriculum for all schoolchildren?

Mr. Caborn: The hon. Gentleman might like to know that we have a monthly meeting with colleagues not just from the Department for Education and Skills, but from the Department of Health, the Home Office and the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, to encourage sport, which is a powerful tool for delivering many of the Government's policies. We discuss how we can develop within the education structure—in which there is now massive investment—sports colleges, school sports co-ordinators, sports opportunities in all primary schools, and the commitment to two hours a week of quality physical education or sport for every child throughout their school life. The investment referred to in the question shows the Government's commitment to use sport as a tool to deliver many agendas.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), will the Minister confirm that a recent report indicated an increase in the number of overweight and obese children, at a time when primary schools at least are cutting the time devoted to physical education? Is it not, therefore, of the utmost priority not only that school sports facilities should be used more by schools, but that sport should have a higher place on the agenda in the school curriculum?

Mr. Caborn: Sport should have a higher place on society's programme, if I may say so. Because of obesity, £2 billion is being lost to our economy, and the cost to the health service is £500 million. I agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments about young people, who are being affected by obesity and diabetes because of lack of physical activity. That is a worrying sign. We are addressing the problem through the new opportunities fund investment of £750 million, through the sports colleges and sports co-ordinators, and right from the primary schools, through the commitment to a minimum of two hours of PE or sport for every child each week throughout their school life.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore): Does my right hon. Friend recognise the importance of the link identified by the Sports Council for Wales and other bodies between community sports organisations and schools? The time when youngsters move away from physical activity and active sport is when they leave school. The structure of formal clubs working with the schools is vital. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that that is promoted?

Mr. Caborn: We certainly recognise the importance of that link. As my hon. Friend knows, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the charitable status of amateur sports clubs will be strengthened. If all the clubs apply, that could inject £40 million into them. My right hon. Friend also took cognisance of the representations that had been made and gave amateur clubs certain tax breaks. There is a clear commitment from the Government to strengthen the link between schools, communities and sports clubs. We must address the fundamental weakness in sport, which results in almost 70 per cent. of our young people not going back into active sport once they leave school. Wales gets £48.75 million from the new opportunities fund for facilities in Wales.

Seaside Towns (Marketing)

8. **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): What proposals she has for including seaside and coastal towns in generic marketing activity by the English Tourism Council. [53969]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): The new body that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a few minutes ago will have a remit to set the strategy for all tourism marketing in England. Seaside and coastal resorts are some of our most important tourist attractions. To communicate our determination to work with local authorities, development agencies and everyone else involved in regeneration, during the coming months I

shall visit seaside towns and resorts in the north-west, East Anglia, the north-east, Yorkshire and Humberside, Lincolnshire and the south-west.

Mr. Marsden: Notwithstanding the churlish response of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, will my hon. Friend accept that my conversations with those involved in the tourism industry in Blackpool and with others in seaside and coastal resorts show that they warmly welcome the restoration of the marketing role of the English Tourism Council? I also welcome the fact that he, in his inimitable style, intends to do some on-the-spot investigation in such resorts. As he does so, will he take on board the need for the generic marketing of seaside towns to include promoting their use as hubs so that more visitors will stay nights in our seaside towns and see the coastal and rural hinterlands as well?

Dr. Howells: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his great work on behalf of coastal towns and resorts, including Blackpool. He is right to highlight the importance of coastal towns and resorts having a working relationship with their hinterlands. There are now some very good examples of such relationships. I have been especially impressed by the north Devon partnership and by the way in which Bournemouth and the New Forest have been working together to develop new sorts of holidays. Often, these are niche holidays in which people can have a traditional break at a seaside resort, but also go cycling or engage in other activities in the hinterland. That is a good way forward for resorts and their hinterlands.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): We heard a lot of bluster from the Secretary of State today about the creation of the English Tourism Council. Will the Minister show a little humility and explain to the House the reason for the welcome re-creation of the English Tourism Council, which is that the changes made by his Government to the structure of tourism councils in England in the early part of their term in office have been an absolute disaster?

Dr. Howells: No, the changes have not been a disaster. The way in which the industry was tested in 2001 certainly showed up weaknesses in the structure of support from public funds. We have taken cognisance of that fact and tried to learn from it. I should have thought that, rather than taking such a churlish approach, the hon. Lady would welcome this development and contribute by suggesting how it could be made even better. That would avoid the yah-boo nonsense that we so often get in the Chamber and help the Government to ensure that the lessons that were learned—or that should have been learned—during 2001 mean that we will come out of what happened with a stronger tourism industry, not a weaker one.

Women's Football

9. **Mr. John Grogan** (Selby): What plans she has to encourage the development of women's football. [53970]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): I am pleased to say that women's football is now the fastest growing sport in England. The development of women's football is the responsibility of the Football Association and a major component of its five-year development strategy. My officials are working very closely with the football authorities and other sporting organisations to raise the profile of women's sports. Probably one of the greatest boosts to women's football has been given by the film "Bend It Like Beckham", which I understand is bringing hundreds of young girls and women into football.

Mr. Grogan: Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should welcome the first ever terrestrial television coverage of the women's FA cup final on BBC 1 last week—even though sadly, on this occasion, the pride of Yorkshire, the Doncaster Belles, were beaten by a London team, Fulham? Does he agree that such coverage, and indeed films such as "Bend It Like Beckham", can only encourage participation in the sport, especially among girls in their teenage years?

Mr. Caborn: Absolutely. If I may give a little advertisement, England are playing Germany in a world cup qualifier on 19 May at Selhurst Park. The match will be broadcast on Sky Television, but nevertheless, England are doing extremely well. Our concern about the lack of young people going from school into sport, which I mentioned earlier, is even more pronounced in relation to younger ladies leaving school. Anything that we can do to encourage such participation must be welcome. I hope that the FA will continue its good work and that we can capitalise on the fact that 2 million people have now seen "Bend It Like Beckham".

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): In welcoming the terrific success of women's football in this country, is it not a great pity that both the women's cup final and the international match will not be played at a national stadium in England? Is it not about time that we realised that Wembley will not work, and instead allowed the Birmingham site to proceed—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is out of order; those matters do not relate to the question.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Does my right hon. Friend accept that women's football UK-wide, London-wide, and particularly in north-west London, would benefit enormously from a new national stadium, especially one based at Wembley?

Hon. Members: Order.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is also out of order. Hon. Members on both sides are out of order.

UKOK

10. **Mr. Hugo Swire** (East Devon): If she will make a statement on the UKOK campaign. [53971]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): The British Tourist Authority's £5 million UKOK campaign was launched in January and continues to run in a number of markets. The campaign has been successful in reassuring potential visitors about

the safety of travelling to Britain. The BTA is now building on that work with the £40 million "million visitor" campaign.

Mr. Swire: Given that the Government were able quickly to find £5 million for the UKOK campaign, and given that the Minister, in a debate on south-west tourism in Westminster Hall on 1 May, admitted that abandoning the marketing role of the English tourist board had been a mistake, may I suggest that it is not okay to delay funding any further, especially for areas such as the south-west that have suffered so badly in the wake of foot and mouth? Will he give a commitment, as regards the figures that come out at the end of the summer, to do something to redress the imbalance of the £28 million and the £22 million allocated this year to the Scottish tourist board and the Wales tourist board?

Dr. Howells: I cannot answer for the Scots and the Welsh—they have their own decision-making powers and can allocate whatever funds they see fit. The hon. Gentleman clearly does not understand devolution. It has occurred, it is there and he had better realise it.

The British Tourist Authority has done a tremendous job in persuading overseas visitors to come to this country. Last year, there was a big fall-away in numbers of in-bound tourists. This year, so far, there has been a very small decrease in year-on-year terms. The south-west tourist board has done a magnificent job in getting visitors back in. It had a record autumn and has good forward bookings. At the moment everything looks extremely good, and I am very optimistic about the future of tourism.

I say to the hon. Gentleman, as I said to the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride), that this is not the place to decry the tremendous efforts made by the tourism authorities to recover from the most difficult year that the tourism industry has ever experienced. I hope that he will continue to support the south-west tourist board.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Archbishopric of Canterbury

31. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What the annual cost was of maintaining the Archbishopric of Canterbury in 2001. [53992]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): Detailed figures on the costs of running the office of Archbishop of Canterbury for 2001 are in preparation. Published figures for 2000 totalled approximately £1.2 million.

Mr. Prentice: A total of £1.2 million. Given the great wealth of the Church of England, is it not a disgrace that the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is retiring this year, will have to get by on a pension of £17,000, and that the 110 bishops in the Church of England—who are all men—will be on £15,000, and the clergy on less than £10,000, when they retire? However, my question is this. What about the vicar of Dibley? What about the women of the cloth, who are consistently discriminated against? Will they get a top-up pension, and if not, why not? Is the Archbishops Council reviewing the matter?

Mr. Bell: My hon. Friend has more time to watch television than I have, and therefore knows more about "The Vicar of Dibley" than I do.

Out of the total of £1.2 million, the main elements of the archbishop's costs are staffing costs of £800,000 and office costs of £150,000. My hon. Friend referred to the archbishop's imminent retirement, and this would be an appropriate moment for the Church Commissioners to thank him for all the work, seen and unseen, that he has done on behalf of the Church, and to wish him and his wife Eileen a very happy and long retirement.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I echo the hon. Gentleman's words about the archbishop. Does he agree that the archbishop has been incredibly good value for money and that we should look to expanding rather than reducing the budget?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's remarks. He will know of the report of Lord Hurd of Westwell, which suggested that the archbishop, as a national and international figure, has less assistance at his disposal than anyone else who serves in a similar capacity. To take up the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), it is worth considering the matter, perhaps taking inflation into account and making adjustments accordingly.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Because it is always less embarrassing to review, change and possibly increase the budget for someone such as an archbishop when the individual is not in post, are there plans for a review before the announcement of the new archbishop's appointment? Now that we know that Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss has been appointed to chair the selection panel, what is the timetable and when do we expect an announcement?

Mr. Bell: I anticipated that question and I am happy to say that the Church Commissioners have no role in choosing the archbishop. On the timetable, gossip has it that the selection will take place in late rather than early summer.

The hon. Gentleman referred to possible talks between the current archbishop and his successor. He will know of the report of Lord Hurd of Westwell, which will be discussed by the archbishop and his successor before the latter takes up his office.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

State Funding (Political Parties)

32. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff, West): What recent discussions he has had with the Electoral Commission on state funding of political parties. [53993]

Mr. A. J. Beith (representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission): Mr. Speaker, your Committee has approved the commission's corporate plan for the next five years. It includes provision for making policy development grants to political parties under section 12 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. It also includes a commitment to conduct a review of the case for a cap on political donations and the related issue of state funding of political parties.

Kevin Brennan: Given that Short money is state funding of party political activity and that it has increased by 300 per cent. since 1997, is not it time to consider extending the scope of state funding of political parties, especially to overcome the sort of smears made by the Opposition over the weekend? Is not it worth reminding the public that we do not know the source of Conservative party money when it was in office because the information is locked away in files in Smith square, unless it has had Andersen in to shred it?

Mr. Beith: The commission monitors the system whereby political donations are recorded and publicised. It continues that work. The hon. Gentleman's wider points recognise that the system has been extended to include policy development funding and incorporate the fact that the commission will look into the matter.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): When we asked the previous Government whether they would refer funding of political parties to the Committee on Standards in Public Life, they routinely refused. When we came to office, we referred the matter to the Committee and we believed that its recommendations, for which we have legislated, provided the transparency that would solve the problem. Transparency has clearly not solved it, and the funding problem remains. Will the right hon. Gentleman ensure that the Electoral Commission gets stuck in and that we have a proper, comprehensive review of funding of political parties?

Mr. Beith: Yes.

Elections (People with Disabilities)

33. **Mr. Simon Thomas** (Ceredigion): What training is being provided for electoral officers on ensuring the full participation of people with disabilities in the electoral process. [53994]

Mr. A. J. Beith (representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission): The commission will fund the development and provision of training for electoral services staff in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland before next year's elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the National Assembly for Wales. The training programme is expected to deal with methods of ensuring access for people with disabilities to the electoral process. Later this year, the commission will also publish a series a good practice handbooks, which include advice on the matter.

Mr. Thomas: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that reply and emphasise that it is welcome that the commission is taking the issue seriously and engaging in training before the elections in Wales and Scotland. What lessons have been learned from the English local elections? Did postal voting encourage more disabled people to participate? What elements of training to encourage people with disabilities to take up alternative ways of voting do the commission propose?

Mr. Beith: I hope that information on this will emerge from the evaluation that the commission is carrying out into the various experiments and pilots that were conducted at the local elections. I know that the commission is keen to work with organisations such as Scope, the Royal National Institute for the Blind and the Disability Rights Commission to develop policies in this area, and to identify the issues that need to be tackled.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Bishops

34. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement on the work of the archbishops' review group on bishops' needs and resources. [53995]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The archbishops' review group published a report last year, "Resourcing Bishops", which the archbishops commended for reflection and debate. It concluded that the range of resources made available to bishops is broadly right, but recommended changes in how they are provided.

Michael Fabricant: I have the document here, and it is interesting to note that its foreword states:

"Readers will find that the report reveals no financial scandal, no profligate waste".

That makes a pleasant change.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the burden on archbishops, and in particular of the worldwide role of the Archbishop of Canterbury. What further consideration is being given to the future of the archbishops of the United Kingdom? The hon. Gentleman will know that in the eighth century, there was a third archbishopric, based in Lichfield. There needs to be more than one archbishop based in the United Kingdom while another spends much of his time looking after the interests of the Anglican dioceses abroad. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that, if there is to be a third archbishopric, there is a precedent, and it is Lichfield?

Mr. Bell: There was a television catch phrase years ago, "Give us a job!", and that might apply to the bishopric to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I am grateful to him for pointing out that the report states that there is neither waste nor profligacy in the Church Commissioners' books or in the Church of England. He will also be aware that Lord Hurd of Westwell's report on the work of the Archbishop of Canterbury found that the archbishop had no fewer than six major national and international roles. Lord Hurd made a number of

recommendations on archbishoprics. He did not recommend a third archbishopric, but I shall be glad to add my own tuppence on that.

Ordination (Church of England)

35. **Mr. Chris Bryant** (Rhondda): How many *(a)* men and *(b)* women the Church of England has ordained in the last year. [53996]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): Two hundred and eighty two men and 214 women were ordained as deacons during 2001.

Mr. Bryant: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, last year, one third of the curates employed by the Church were women, that one in 20 vicars were women and that only one in 110 archdeacons were women? When does he think that the Church of England will manage to achieve parity between men and women in its employment practices, and when does he expect the first female Archbishop of Canterbury to be appointed?

Mr. Bell: As I have already said, the choice of the future Archbishop is not—God be praised—in the gift of the Church Commissioners. On my hon. Friend's important wider point, the gender of candidates is not an issue when they are considered for ordination. However, the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure 1993 contains provisions for those in the Church of England who have objections on the grounds of theology and conscience to accepting the priestly ministry of women.

Spending Plans

37. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement on the Church Commissioners' spending plans for 2002 to 2004. [53998]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): As a result of the commissioners' good long-term investment performance, they have been able to increase the level of their ongoing non-pension support for the Church's work to £60 million in 2002, rising to £63 million in 2004. This includes an additional one-off commitment of £10 million to parish ministry and mission over the period in question.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that proper asset management is crucial if the Church Commissioners are to meet the Church's needs? In spite of the figures that he has just given, will he confirm that the commissioners propose to allocate £160 million a year over the next three years, more than 60 per cent. of which will go to meet clergy and widows' pensions?

Mr. Bell: I confirm the points made by the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful to him for allowing me to say that the administration of the Church Commissioners is in excellent hands, and has achieved an excellent record over many years. He will be aware that the needs of today's Church are great indeed, and demand greater flexibility in the use of the commissioners' funds. We are grateful for his question. There will be flexibility in the allocation of our funds, and we also take into account the need to pay the clergy and to pay the pensions.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Public-Private Partnerships

38. **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): What assessment he has made of the resources the National Audit Office would need to enable it to conduct pre-contractual analysis of PPP proposals. [53999]

Mr. Alan Williams (Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission): In the past four years, the NAO has reported on the value for money achieved by more than 25 public-private partnership projects. The resources made available to the NAO will continue to include provision to enable it to continue its work in that important area, but the NAO does not envisage conducting pre-contractual analysis of PPP proposals. That would involve it in departmental decision-making processes and compromise its independence.

Mr. Marsden: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, but it is a pity that the NAO is not prepared to reconsider, not least in view of the welcome statement of the future head of the civil service on openness in that area. Does my right hon. Friend think that there would be value in the NAO being involved in that ongoing monitoring with the civil service? That might, on occasion, enable doors to be shut before rather than after the horse has bolted?

Mr. Williams: That view is based on a misunderstanding of the NAO's role. The NAO's independent status is guaranteed by its non-involvement in policy. If it were to be involved in policy, that would be against its remit and would deprive it of its impartiality in carrying out its audit and value for money functions. Statutorily, the NAO is not allowed to do what my hon. Friend asks.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Although the NAO will not look into bodies such as those mentioned by the hon. Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden), extra-Executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies will have to be audited by it. What further resources will the NAO have for that?

Mr. Williams: In fact, as a result of the Government accepting the Sharman committee report, which makes all quangos susceptible to NAO audit, I have invited the NAO to submit a supplementary programme to me for us to consider in June or July so that we can increase the monitoring of quangos and Government companies.

Potters Bar Derailment

3.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Stephen Byers): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the tragic rail derailment at Potters Bar on Friday 10 May, when coaches of the West Anglia Great Northern 12.45 train from London King's Cross to King's Lynn came away from the tracks immediately to the south of Potters Bar station when travelling between 80 and 90 mph.

I understand from the police that the train was carrying about 150 people. Seven were killed as a result of the derailment, and about 40 injured. Two remain on the critical list. At a time like this, our thoughts must be with the families and close friends of those who lost their lives. I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing our condolences to the bereaved and in wishing a speedy recovery to those who were injured.

Once again, the bravery, courage and professionalism demonstrated by our emergency services—fire, police, medical and health and safety staff—were outstanding. The reaction of the emergency services and the railway staff concerned was the product of constant training and planning, enabling them to perform in a way that the whole nation can be proud of.

His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales visited the injured and staff in Barnet and Chase Farm hospitals on Saturday, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is visiting the same hospitals this afternoon. I am grateful that the local Member—the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison)—was able to join me when I visited the scene on Saturday. We also visited the local fire station to thank members of the fire service who attended the crash.

Potters Bar station is in the centre of the town, and a notable feature of this appalling event is the reaction of local people who came rushing to aid those involved in the crash. In the midst of horror, their selfless behaviour, care and compassion were remarkable. The people of Potters Bar can take pride in their response. I am sure that the House will wish to join me in paying tribute to them all.

The investigation into the cause of the crash began immediately. British Transport police and Hertfordshire police are working in partnership with Her Majesty's railway inspectorate from the Health and Safety Executive. Early indications are that a set of points south of the station were the cause of the derailment.

The railways inspectorate believes that the points in question moved as the rear of the third carriage of the train passed over them, and as a result deflected the fourth and final carriage towards the left. That happened because nuts on two stretcher bars were detached. The locking bar connecting the tips of the points was then subject to forces normally shared by the stretchers, and it broke. The rear carriage derailed and slewed sideways, detaching from the rest of the train. It skidded along the track, passing over a bridge and came to rest on its side, wedged under the station canopy. The rear bogie was torn off by the collision with the bridge superstructure, and came to rest on the down slow line, causing severe damage.

The investigation is now pursuing the question of the circumstances surrounding the nuts being detached from the two stretcher bars, causing the points to fail. The nuts that were detached have now been removed for forensic investigation, and a major portion of the points is also being removed for examination by the Health and Safety Executive.

The HSE will publish its interim report in the next few days, and we must await its findings. That interim report will be made public. In addition, I can inform the House that, exercising powers under section 14(2)(a) of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, the chairman of the Health and Safety Commission will tomorrow recommend that the commission direct the Health and Safety Executive to conduct an immediate formal investigation into the circumstances of the train derailment. A report will be made public as soon as possible. The Health and Safety Executive intends to announce further details of the scope and arrangements of the investigation in due course.

Railtrack acted quickly to inspect 800 sets of points across the country and found no similar defects. Her Majesty's railway inspectorate has since examined other points in the Potters Bar area. It, too, has found no similar defects. I have been advised by the railway inspectorate that there are no indications so far of any problem that would require speed or other restrictions elsewhere on the network.

Railtrack's chief executive told me this morning that, although the company's initial investigation had led it to believe that the points in question had been replaced in December, it now knows that to be incorrect. Railtrack now confirms that the points are in fact about eight years old. It has also informed me that the normal lifespan of a set of points on this type of track is between 20 and 25 years.

Gauge corner cracking had been identified on rails in the vicinity in September 2001, and as a result a temporary speed restriction had been put in place until grinding to treat the gauge corner cracking had been completed. The speed restriction was lifted on 24 December. Neither Railtrack nor the Health and Safety Executive has any reason to believe at present that gauge corner cracking is linked to the causes of this accident.

The response to this incident by the emergency services, the industry and the railway inspectorate has been marked by the closest possible co-operation between all concerned. That co-operation continues as the focus shifts to recovery of services and investigation of the points failure. It is clearly essential that the on-site investigation be undertaken as quickly as possible, provided that it is concluded with complete thoroughness.

Clearance of the site has begun. Once the investigation of the site has been completed—it is hoped that that can be done over the next few days—it can be handed over to Railtrack for repairs to be completed. At this stage, it is impossible to say precisely when the entire site will be returned to normal use, but in the meantime the train operators are putting in place alternative services. The rest of the network is unaffected.

In this tragic incident, lives have been lost, and we must not forget those who survived but who will be mentally and physically scarred for the rest of their lives. That is why it is vital that we discover not just what happened at Potters Bar but how it happened. We owe a responsibility to all involved in the Potters Bar derailment—

a responsibility to identify exactly what took place and then to take the necessary steps in response. That is a responsibility that we will discharge.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. On behalf of the official Opposition, I join him in sending my deepest sympathy to all the relatives of those who died in the train crash at Potters Bar. We also send our best wishes for a speedy and full recovery to all those who were injured.

We are united across the House in our shock and sorrow at what has happened. Lives have been shattered by the crash, and we in the House owe people our commitment to ensure as best we can that an accident of this nature does not happen again. My hon. Friends the Members for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), whose constituency covers Potters Bar, and for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) visited the crash site on Friday hours after the accident. They have told me of the extraordinary commitment and hard work of those in the emergency services called to the site.

Yesterday, I visited the crash site myself. Among those I spoke to were two members of the crew of one of the first ambulances on the scene. They described to me what they had faced. Terrible though the scene had been, they had a job to do and they did it. Their dedication and professionalism shone through, as it did from all those in the emergency services to whom I spoke. We owe our emergency services a great debt of gratitude for all that they did and continue to do to respond to the crash. Our thanks must also go to those in the national health service who are caring for the injured; as the Secretary of State said, to the members of the local Potters Bar community, who rushed to the scene to help; and to those who are continuing to provide support locally as work on the site continues.

I was also struck yesterday by the meticulous way in which the British Transport police and the Health and Safety Executive were carrying out their investigation. It is essential that we find out exactly what caused the crash, so that any necessary lessons may be learned and action taken to ensure the safety of our rail network.

Many people who travel by train day in and day out will understandably be concerned about the safety of the network. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, despite the appalling tragedy that occurred at Potters Bar and the other rail tragedies of the past few years, compared with other forms of transport, our railways are still safe—and indeed that safety has been steadily improving?

The Secretary of State is reported as describing the accident as a one-off, isolated incident. That implies that there are no lessons to be learned from the accident, yet all the reported possible causes of the loosening of the holding nuts on the points—vandalism, sabotage or poor maintenance—would suggest that there are lessons that should be learned, and that describing the accident as a one-off event before the right hon. Gentleman was in receipt of the report from the Health and Safety Executive was premature. Will he confirm that if this proves to be more than a freak accident from which there are absolutely no lessons to be learned, a public inquiry will be set up?

In the Secretary of State's statement, he reported that 800 sets of points across the whole network had been inspected following the accident. What form of inspection was undertaken on those points? Was it the same type of inspection as took place the day before the accident on the points at Potters Bar?

Is the Secretary of State aware of local concern about security at Potters Bar station, which led to a meeting between the train operating company, the local police, British Transport police and local representatives in late April?

Finally, I do not want to pursue this line of questioning too far—I am sure the Secretary of State will appreciate why—but is it true that the cause of the accident lay not just in an act of omission, in removing holding nuts from bolts, but in an act of commission, in tightening one of the bars on the points, thus making an accident more likely? Given the record of vandalism on points across the country and their vulnerability to sabotage, does he still stand by his statement that this is a one-off, unique event from which there are no lessons to be learned? Will he assure the House that, given the possible cause of this accident, regular and additional inspection of points will be made?

This was an appalling tragedy and our thoughts and prayers remain with the bereaved and injured. I can assure the Secretary of State that the Opposition stand ready to support the Government in taking the actions necessary to ensuring the safety of our rail network.

Mr. Byers: I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) recognises that the House is united in our response to the tragedy and to the individuals involved, their families and the community of Potters Bar.

I should put the record straight right at the beginning. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, the hon. Lady has misquoted what I said. At no stage have I said that there are no lessons to be learned. I said clearly on Saturday that there is a difference between what might be a one-off incident and a generic problem with the railway network. That is an important distinction to make.

In the light of the briefing that I had before I made any public comments—this is now being confirmed publicly—I said that there were certain events and actions that had taken place in relation to the set of points that meant that we could look at the incident in isolation from the rest of the railway network. That point is important, because we know from Hatfield that sometimes there can be generic problems affecting the railway network that have to be dealt with.

For the record, at no time have I said that there are no lessons to be learned; there are lessons that can be learned from any accident. Safety is so good—whether on our railways or elsewhere—because we learn from the accidents that happen, just as I am sure we will learn from this incident.

The hon. Lady raises a number of specific points. On the question of a public inquiry, at the moment the right way forward is to consider the outcome of the investigations that are now taking place, particularly the formal investigation that will be commenced tomorrow by the Health and Safety Executive. We should await the outcome of the investigations before deciding whether or not a public inquiry is appropriate. That is the right step to take.

In terms of the checks made of the 800 points and whether they were checked in the same way as in previous inspections that may have taken place of the set of points

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in question, for reasons the House will understand it would be inappropriate for me to comment on what inspections may or may not have been made of those points. I do know that the work carried out by Railtrack on the 800 points has not identified similar defects. The railway inspectorate has audited the work carried out by Railtrack. It has not done so on all 800 points yet, but it is in the process of making sure that the procedures we used were appropriate in the circumstances.

Security at the station, and whether this was an act of omission or commission are, rightly, matters for the investigations themselves and I would not want to pre-empt their outcome. On the question of safety on our railways, it is difficult in the immediate aftermath of an incident such as the derailment at Potters Bar to say, "Our railways are safe." We get criticised in newspapers if we say that. But if one looks at the long-term trend, it is true that, per passenger-mile travelled, railway travel is getting safer. The facts bear that out and I am pleased that the hon. Lady recognises that.

One reason why railway travel is getting safer—this is an important point—is that we learn lessons from incidents—whether Hatfield, Ladbroke Grove, Southall, Clapham or Potters Bar. Lessons will be learned and the appropriate changes will be put in place. We owe that to the people involved in the incident at Potters Bar, and that is what we will do.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): While adding my deepest sympathy to the family and friends of all who died, I wish to mention in particular a young student, Jonael Schickler—a PhD student at Queen's college in my constituency—who, tragically, was one of those who died on Friday.

In endorsing my right hon. Friend's comments on the valuable work done by the emergency services, I commend the action of the train driver, Andy Gibson, who went beyond the call of duty in helping those who were trapped and injured. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, at this sensitive time, it is particularly important that we, as Members of this House, continue to support the rail industry? I travel on the line in question twice weekly, and I shall continue to do so.

Mr. Byers: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is a tragedy when anybody loses their life, particularly someone who—like the student she mentioned—had their whole future ahead of them. She is right to commend the action of the train driver, Andy Gibson, who gave immediate assistance to those injured, and to point out that we should support the rail network. Like her, I have travelled on that line many times, when visiting friends in Cambridge. A personal knowledge of the service in question brings home the difficulties that can be created. We need to acknowledge that point—I, too, travelled by train on Saturday—but we must recognise that our railway network provides one of the safest forms of travel. We must not be complacent, however, but vigilant to ensure that we retain that position.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I echo the condolences expressed by the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) to the families affected, and their supportive statements about the emergency services. The Secretary of State said that this is a one-off incident, but we need to await the Health and Safety Executive's comments. What is clear, however, is that signals were apparently not involved. I wonder whether he is considering reviewing the use of SPADs—signals passed at danger—as the key safety performance indicator.

If this incident is shown to be linked to the management of contractors—a key concern in the leaked, overdue Hatfield report, and in the Cullen report—or to contractors' ability to obtain the necessary skilled staff, or to the inconsistent safety standards that the Cullen report also highlighted, would the Secretary of State agree that the incident perhaps constitutes not a one-off, but one of several such incidents? Will the Secretary of State confirm when he intends to introduce safety legislation to deal with such issues, and will he use that as an opportunity to update the House on the progress that is being made on the different recommendations emerging from the Hatfield report, Lord Cullen's inquiry, and Professor Uff's inquiry?

Finally, does the Secretary of State now have confidence in the information provided to him by Railtrack concerning this particular set of points? He said that gauge corner cracking was present in the vicinity of the relevant section of track, but can he confirm whether it was present on that particular section?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman raises several points. In terms of judging safety, SPADs have been regarded as effective, but I am always open to suggestions on the ways in which safety might be improved. An important part of learning lessons on improving safety is always to reflect on what might offer the best performance indicator.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned concerns about contractors. Without expressing a view on what the investigation may reveal in this case, I agree with him that the Cullen report made some clear recommendations about contractors, and I am concerned that not enough progress is being made on their implementation. On 1 May, I wrote to the chairman of the Health and Safety Commission, asking him to report to me by the end of May on the progress made on Cullen's recommendations—a point that I reinforced when I met him this morning. This is a crucial issue, irrespective of what the investigations into this case might discover. Progress must be made on the Cullen report's recommendations.

We regard the safety Bill as a priority, but I cannot pre-empt what might appear in the Queen's Speech later this year. The hon. Gentleman raised specific points about whether gauge corner cracking was present on that particular site. I refer him back to my statement, because that contained the latest information that I received from Railtrack, just 40 minutes before I came into the Chamber. It said that gauge corner cracking had been identified on rails in the vicinity in September 2001. I will be more than happy to inform the hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Maidenhead and other right hon. and hon. Members about the exact location of gauge corner cracking when I receive further information, but neither Railtrack nor the railway inspectorate believes that it was a factor in the incident.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My right hon. Friend will be aware that this latest dreadful

accident has shaken the confidence of the public in what is manifestly a safe rail system. It therefore behoves the House of Commons to ensure that we take urgent action to restore that confidence. Is he prepared to call together Railtrack, the companies, the Health and Safety Executive and the railway inspectorate to ensure that the whole system of employment of contractors is looked at urgently, because there have been constant rumours about the time taken to obtain classification and qualifications, as well as about the employment of unskilled labour? If the rail system is to be returned to its proper safety level, the public demand is for clear accountability. We should no longer have to wait for reports from accident inspectors, and from those concerned with day-to-day maintenance of safety on the railways, before urgent action is taken.

Mr. Byers: I understand the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend and her Select Committee has drawn our attention to those points in relation to the maintenance of the railway network. There are real concerns about the use of contractors and, in some cases, sub-contracted labour. We do not know the particular circumstances in relation to Potters Bar, but I have just been handed a letter that has been faxed to me by the company secretary of Jarvis, a Mr. Mason, in which he says that all the inspections of those particular points

"were carried out by Jarvis employees. No sub contract labour was involved. Each of the Jarvis staff involved is fully experienced and qualified and holds all requisite training certification."

Clearly, the matter will need to be investigated, but that is a direct quotation from a letter that I have just received from the company secretary of Jarvis.

Irrespective of the outcome of the investigations and what happened in this case, Cullen identified an issue in relation to the use of contract staff. As I say, I have asked the chair of the Health and Safety Commission to report to me by the end of this month on procedures that he will put in place with the industry. I met him this morning and reinforced that point. Genuine concerns exist and must be addressed, irrespective of the outcome of the investigations of this derailment.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I thank the Secretary of State for his invitation on Saturday and for the co-operation of his office. As the Member of Parliament most directly affected, I join him in extending condolences to all those who have lost loved ones in the accident. Our thoughts must be with them at this time.

I also join the Secretary of State in the tribute he paid to the railway staff, including those stationed at Potters Bar railway station, and to the emergency services—the Hertfordshire police, ambulance and fire services, as well as other members of the services—who attended so promptly and skilfully, and so professionally. Their skill has been commended by all who witnessed the terrible sights at Potters Bar. I also join in his tribute to the members of the public who helped in the moments immediately after the accident. People in the vicinity of the station, on the platform and in local shops and businesses did everything they could to help. The emergency services were also supported and helped by members of the local voluntary services.

Will the Secretary of State bear it in mind that, in the midst of their sorrow, people in Potters Bar and other users of that extremely busy line are naturally concerned that this tragic incident took place close to the site of another tragic incident at Hatfield? They now want a high degree of reassurance. Does the Secretary of State agree that such reassurance can best be provided by the fullest possible answers to the questions how and why that tragic incident came about? It has left my constituents with the sorry spectacle of that carriage lodged in the middle of their railway station after it had travelled down the platform. My constituents never want to see such a sight again—in Potters Bar or anywhere else—and hope that every possible lesson can be learned from this incident.

Mr. Byers: Once again, may I say how grateful I was that the hon. Gentleman was able to join me in both visiting the scene on Saturday and meeting members of the local fire service who carried out such heroic work? We were both amazed at the modesty of individual firemen, who saw such work as part of their job. Having seen the scale of what happened, it is a remarkable compliment to them that they see such work as part of what they do. The hon. Gentleman is also right to point out the important role of the voluntary services in such situations.

I fully understand the concerns felt by people in Potters Bar, which is just a few miles south of Hatfield. The situation is different, however; Hatfield was a generic problem as regards the network. All the information available thus far is that that is not the case on this occasion.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that people will want answers to the question: how did this occur? It is now becoming clear how the incident occurred, but we do not know why. The investigation will now have to focus on that aspect. The hon. Gentleman is also right to point out that if we are to regain the confidence of the travelling public, they will want answers to those clear and appropriate questions.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there has been universal acclaim on both sides of the House for the efforts of those public services, in Potters Bar and elsewhere, that managed to save lives and help the families of those who lost people in that horrific accident? Is not it time—especially after this Secretary of State's action on Railtrack, which caused fury among the Opposition—that there were more people in the public services? That would be wonderful. As a start, perhaps when the inquiry has been held, the Secretary of State might consider taking over the infrastructure of Railtrack and all the rest of it—together with the maintenance—and getting rid of Jarvis and all the subcontractors, who, without doubt, probably played a part in the matter.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right to express the support shared by all Members for the way in which, once again, the emergency services and the public services more generally, discharged their responsibilities on Friday and during the weekend in relation to the accident at Potters Bar.

The whole question of the industry's infrastructure and its safety was addressed by Lord Cullen's second report. The Government have accepted all those recommendations and we are now seeing their implementation. That will mean changes in the way in which safety is dealt with in the

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industry. In my view, that will make real improvements, but it is paramount that there is speedy implementation of all those recommendations, including those about the use of contractors. The best way forward is to consider in the round the proposals that came out of Cullen two and ensure their speedy implementation.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): The Secretary of State has referred to the fact that the accident took place just outside my constituency in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) but that a number of the seriously injured were sent to Barnet general hospital, Chase Farm hospital and two other hospitals. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that after news of the accident broke, an accident and emergency unit—which had undertaken many practices—was immediately activated and that the response, not only between the emergency services but within each service, was magnificent.

The incident took place near a county boundary and I refer to the co-operation between two ambulance trusts, between the Hertfordshire police and the Metropolitan police, and between local hospitals in Barnet and the nationally renowned neurosurgical unit at the Royal Free. Will he accept that, to local people, the community response was magnificent? We are particularly grateful that the Prince of Wales visited Barnet general and Chase Farm hospitals on Saturday morning, and that the Secretary of State for Health completed a visit to those two hospitals today.

Mr. Byers: The way in which emergency procedures went into place on Friday is a real commendation to those who have been planning for the worst. We saw on Friday how effective they were at putting in place those procedures. There are always concerns, when people are working across boundaries, that bureaucratic layers will get in the way of response. What is notable about Friday, however, is that that did not happen at all. People put aside all those constraints and got on with the job, irrespective of boundaries or budgets. That is exactly how it should be.

I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking the Prince of Wales for his visit on Saturday, which was a great boost to the injured and to the staff in the two hospitals—Barnet general and Chase Farm. He is also right to say that the Royal Free, which we have not mentioned and which is my local hospital, played an important role with some of the most seriously injured people. I am sure that we are all praying that those people who are fighting for their lives are successful in doing so.

There are lessons to be learned, and part of that is the way in which emergency services can act in a co-ordinated and responsive way. They did themselves proud on Friday, and we all owe them a debt of gratitude.

Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether, in his earlier meeting with representatives from the railway inspectorate and the Health and Safety Executive, they indicated that any investigation into the tragedy at Potters Bar would include not only a review of the methodology and frequency of track inspections, which are varied and many, but a review and an audit of enforcement action that may result from such track investigations? That point will be of great interest to those who want to say that they still have full confidence in our railway industry.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend has a wealth of experience in these areas from his occupation before he was elected to the House. In my meeting with the railway inspectorate and the Health and Safety Executive, it was made clear to me that there will be a thorough and full investigation. Such an investigation will want to take into account all those relevant matters in relation to what happened at the point south of Potters Bar, and that is appropriate in the circumstances.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Will the Secretary of State accept that, in my constituency, which has five stations on the affected line and thousands of commuters, there is deep concern about this crash? May I express my and my constituents' condolences to the families of the bereaved and our best wishes to those who are seeking to recover in hospital at present? Does the Secretary of State understand that, after Hatfield, my constituents endured many months of delays on the line caused by speed restrictions and engineering works? It was thought that that was to ensure that there would not be another significant crash. Yet, months later, we face this dreadful crash. Does he understand that there is a need for great reassurance among my constituents about the safety of this line in the future? What reassurance can he give them today, based on the briefings that he has had?

Mr. Byers: I fully understand the concerns of the hon. Gentleman's constituents. It is an absolutely natural reaction to what happened on Friday. As I said in my statement, Railtrack has checked about 800 points and they have not been found to have similar defects. The railway inspectorate has specifically looked at points near to those at Potters Bar to check whether there was a particular problem with maintenance there and it has not identified any similar defects. The fact that the railway inspectorate has not imposed any speed restrictions as a result of this accident is a clear indication that it, as the independent safety expert, believes the network to be safe. I think that we are looking at a particular set of circumstances affecting a particular set of points. If the investigation shows that that is the case, we need to find out the reason for what happened. However, that is something for the investigation and we will have to await the reports and recommendations that we receive as a result of the inquiries and investigations that are now taking place.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Will my right hon. Friend secure the publication of the representations that the railway trade unions have made over the past year to Railtrack, the Health and Safety Executive, his Department and the railway inspectorate about the safety of track generally? Will he review the mechanism by which the views on safety issues of workers within the industry are heard and listened to?

Mr. Byers: The views of the trade unions and those with day-to-day experience of the network are important and need to be taken into account. Although I do not wish to draw conclusions about this incident, such people are often able to identify quickly and at first hand any

particular problems or deficiencies that might exist. A sensible procedure needs to be put in place whereby individual employees can raise concerns with their employer and with the industry. I would have thought that that would be one of the issues that will need to be considered in the light of the investigations that are taking place.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): The Secretary of State will be aware that my constituents were among those killed and injured in this terrible tragedy. I wish to take this opportunity to express on behalf of my constituents our condolences to those who suffered bereavement and our deepest sympathy to those who were injured and to their families. Along with other Members of the House, I also wish to express our appreciation to the emergency services, the hospital services and the people of Potters Bar for the support and help that they gave in tending to the injured.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) and for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) have said, there is a sense of shock among those who use this railway line regularly. They suffered lengthy delays after the Hatfield crash and they thought that they were doing so in pursuance of a safer railway. Notwithstanding the outcome of the investigation into this incident, is it not right that an account is given to them of how safety has been secured on this line and how it will be maintained in the future? There should be the fullest possible disclosure of all relevant information about the safety features of this railway.

Mr. Byers: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I fully understand the shock that must be felt by his constituents and all those who use the line regularly given that the incident took place so close to the one in Hatfield. He is right to say that people need to account for what happened. I have made it clear since Friday—over the weekend and, indeed, again today—that all the relevant parties will have to make a full disclosure of exactly what happened and about the issues for which they have responsibility. Confidence will be re-established only if people receive a proper and coherent explanation of exactly what took place. All the bodies involved recognise the importance for the industry of doing precisely that. There is now probably a greater acknowledgment in the railway industry that, if it is to secure the confidence of the travelling public, openness and transparency will be key factors.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): To revert to the line of thought of my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on contractors, is it not true that, in the time of unity of the rail industry, inquiry was really a matter of getting the truth? Now, with the fragmentation of the industry and with so many contractors involved, is my right hon. Friend at all worried that we live in a culture of blame that could obscure the truth because people might want to blame others because of legal obligations?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point, but so far in the wake of the derailment at Potters Bar we have not seen the sort of finger-pointing and blame that we saw after Hatfield and Ladbroke Grove. There is a clear difference. There is a recognition within the industry that it does the industry a disservice if people do not take responsibility for their part of the railway industry's operations. That has been a noticeable factor in events since the derailment at Potters Bar.

We need to discover the precise details of what happened, and the investigations are making good progress. I hope that the interim report, for which I asked the Health and Safety Commission on Friday, will be available in the next couple of days, because that would reassure the travelling public about what took place, even if it might not be able to tell us why it took place.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): We must all await the findings of the Health and Safety Executive's inquiry, but once again there is debate about standards of maintenance and the use of unqualified subcontractors in the fragmented privatised British Rail. Does the Secretary of State understand that that can only deepen the concern with which Londoners view the coming of the public-private partnership to London Underground—a measure that the Government appear to be committed to forcing through in the teeth of all informed opinion, including that of the Select Committee on Transport, Local Government and the Regions?

Mr. Byers: We have always said that if the modernisation of the tube is to go ahead, it will have to satisfy the safety case. The Health and Safety Executive must be sure that a proper safety regime is in place. We have established a clear condition on the proposal: if the HSE is not convinced that the safety case is made, the modernisation of the underground will not go ahead. If that condition is not met, we will not proceed. Safety will not be compromised in respect of the modernisation of the tube.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): As the Secretary of State knows, the train that derailed was on its way to my constituency. Many of my constituents are regular users of that train, as am I. In fact, I came quite close to catching that train, and would have done so had I been present for the early part of Friday's business. As it happened, I took an earlier train, but some of my constituents were on the train that derailed. One was in the fourth carriage manning the refreshment trolley, and he was fortunate to escape with his life. King's Lynn has been in a state of shock, as this is the first time in 100 years that it has been directly involved in a rail tragedy of this nature.

The Secretary of State has expressed his hope that the causes of the accident will become known in the near future, but we can conclude that it was the result of either maintenance failure or malicious interference. If the former, I agree entirely with the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) that we should carefully examine the whole nature of contracting and subcontracting, especially in the light of the fact that Railtrack's spot checks have revealed that one in 20 of the engineers who work on tracks do not have full safety certification. In that light alone, to restore public confidence in the rail network, as we all want, will require a full public inquiry.

Mr. Byers: I can understand the concerns of the hon. Gentleman's constituents in King's Lynn and North-West Norfolk. The scale of the accident is such that it must cause concern to those who travel on that line.

It is too early to jump to precise conclusions. Although we now know what happened, we simply do not know how it happened; that is a matter for the investigations. It is premature to announce a public inquiry. It is better to let the interim investigation take place. The formal investigation by the Health and Safety Executive is to commence tomorrow. When we have the HSE's conclusions, we will be able to take a decision on whether a public inquiry is the appropriate way to proceed.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): On behalf of Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party, I wish to be associated with the sympathies and condolences extended to those who have suffered in the tragedy, and with the thanks to all those who gave assistance on the day and afterwards.

The Secretary of State mentioned that Railtrack has undertaken 800 checks on points since the accident. Will he confirm that it is the self-same contractors who have carried out those safety checks? Is he totally happy with that obtuse way of monitoring the state of our track and maintaining it? Precisely why has it taken so long to implement the recommendations of the key Cullen inquiry? If it transpires that maintenance and monitoring played some part in the accident, who will take responsibility?

Mr. Byers: Shortly before I came into the House, Railtrack informed me of the 800 checks on points that had been carried out. I do not know the details of who will have done that. All I know is that the Health and Safety Executive is auditing the way in which the checks were carried out. The railway inspectorate has undertaken its own checks on the points in the Potters Bar area to ensure that there was not a problem with the way in which that section of line was being maintained. It has found no similar defects. The HSE is double checking the work that has been carried out by Railtrack.

As for responsibility, we must first find out what happened. There is the danger that we might run ahead of ourselves. We are all anxious to ascertain exactly what happened and who was responsible, and that is understandable. Let us reach conclusions after a proper investigation. We can then have the debate about what action should be taken.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the vital implementation of the recommendations of the Cullen report in respect of contractors. I may have mentioned earlier my concern that not enough progress was being made. That is why, on 1 May, I wrote to Bill Callaghan, the chair of the Health and Safety Commission, to tell him that I wanted to know by the end of this month what action was being taken to implement the recommendations speedily. I wrote that it was a vital area that must be addressed urgently.

House of Lords Reform

4.21 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the Government's proposals for taking forward reform of the House of Lords.

The Government began the process of Lords reform with the removal of the great majority of hereditary peers in 1999. We are committed to further reform of the House of Lords, to remove the remaining hereditary peers and to provide Parliament with a modern, effective second Chamber.

We have listened carefully to the wide range of views expressed in the recent debates on Lords reform in both Houses of Parliament, and to the responses to the White Paper. We have taken account of the report of the Public Administration Select Committee. We have also considered statements from all parties that this issue should be considered further by a Joint Committee of both Houses. I hope, therefore, that the way forward that I am announcing today will be welcomed and supported on both sides of the House.

On this vital constitutional issue, which concerns not only the composition of the House of Lords but also the role of Parliament as a whole and the relations between the two Houses, we have decided that it would be right to invite the two Houses to establish a Joint Committee, in the hope that we can forge the broadest possible parliamentary consensus on the way forward. We hope that the Houses will be able to proceed with the establishment of the Joint Committee as soon as possible.

We have noted the recent joint statement of the two main Opposition parties that such a Joint Committee would help reconcile differences and seek a principled consensus on the way forward. We look forward to their co-operation in setting up the Joint Committee as soon as possible and making a success of its work.

Reform of the second Chamber has implications for the future of Parliament as a whole, and in particular for the relations between the two Chambers. It is right that Parliament itself should record its views on the composition of the second Chamber. For this we believe that a Joint Committee alone is insufficient. We therefore intend to ask the Joint Committee, as the first phase of its work, to report on options for the composition and powers of the House of Lords once reform has been completed. This will define options for composition, to include a fully nominated or a fully elected House, and intermediate options. Both Houses will then be asked to record their views on these options in free votes.

In the second phase of its work, on which the Committee will report, it will define in greater detail the proposed composition, role and powers of the reformed second Chamber, taking account of the opinions expressed by the two Houses. It should also recommend the transitional strategy for transforming the existing House of Lords into its fully reformed state, which will be particularly important if the recommendation were for a significantly smaller House. The Government's intention would then be to introduce legislation in the light of the report of the Joint Committee and the opinions of both Houses expressed in those free votes. As both the

royal commission, chaired by the noble Lord Wakeham, and the Government's White Paper made clear, any proposals on the powers and composition of the House of Lords must flow from a clear understanding of its role and functions.

The issues to be considered by the Joint Committee therefore will include, first, the role and authority intended for the second Chamber within the context of Parliament as a whole. There is, we believe, a consensus that its main role should continue to be that of a revising, scrutinising and deliberative assembly, with the power to delay, but not to seek to veto, legislation.

The second issue to be considered is the impact of that role and authority on the existing supremacy of the House of Commons and relations with the Executive. There is, we believe, broad agreement that the Commons should retain its role as the pre-eminent Chamber and that the test for any Government should continue to be whether it can command a majority in the House of Commons. The third issue to be considered is the composition and powers of the second Chamber best suited to give effect to the role and authority intended for that House. That consideration should include the implications of a House composed of more than one "class" of Member and also the experience and expertise which the House of Lords in its present form brings to its function as a revising Chamber.

It will also be necessary to consider the most appropriate and effective legal and constitutional means to give effect to any new parliamentary settlement, including any mechanisms required for resolving conflicts between the two Houses. To inform the Joint Committee's deliberations, the Government are today publishing the full results of the consultation on their White Paper. We received over 1,000 responses, and the full analysis is now available in the Vote Office and on the Lord Chancellor's Department website.

The Government have a major record of constitutional reform. Since 1997, we have created a Scottish Parliament and Assemblies for Wales and Northern Ireland. We passed the first House of Lords Act 1999, the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. We have given the Bank of England independence in the setting of interest rates. Last week, the Deputy Prime Minister set out our plans to allow the creation of regional assemblies in those regions of England that vote for them. We have enhanced the role of the Select Committees, including the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that he will be the first Prime Minister ever to appear before the Liaison Committee. We are modernising the working practices of both Chambers. Taken together, that is the most substantial programme of constitutional reform for over a century and will stand as one of the Government's historic achievements.

Today's announcement is another step towards ensuring that reform of the House of Lords ranks alongside those achievements. We must not allow a repeat of history in which reform has been delayed because those who wanted it could not agree and therefore left the field to those who opposed it. Our objective is to secure a second Chamber that is broadly representative of Britain today; a Chamber that will complement the Commons by reinforcing Parliament's ability to conduct scrutiny and hold the Executive to account, thereby increasing the respect of the public for Parliament. The way forward that I have outlined puts responsibility in the hands of Parliament itself in free votes. I urge Members on both sides of the House to respond not as party politicians but as parliamentarians committed to a strong Parliament within a modern democracy.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I thank the Leader of the House for the generous notice that he gave me of his statement which, however, I can only characterise as Laurel and Hardy or perhaps Robin and Derry—"A fine mess you've got us into now". Or, if we wanted a one-word title for the statement, it would have to be "mañana". In April 1997, the Labour party published a manifesto.

It put forward a number of proposals to reform the House of Lords. Among those, it stated:

"This"—

the expulsion of all hereditary peers—

"will be the first stage in a process of reform to make the House of Lords more democratic and representative."

The 1997 manifesto went on:

"A committee of both Houses of Parliament will be appointed to undertake a wide-ranging review of possible further change and then to bring forward proposals for reform."

Things moved on, and Labour's 2001 general election manifesto announced:

"We are committed to completing House of Lords reform, including removal of the remaining hereditary peers, to make it more representative and democratic, while maintaining the House of Commons' traditional primacy. We have given our support to the report and conclusions of the Wakeham Commission, and will seek to implement them in the most effective way possible."

Then, in "Completing the Reform", the White Paper of November 2001, the Prime Minister wrote in his foreword:

"The Government is determined to proceed with this wider reform of the House of Lords. The Royal Commission offered an excellent way forward and the Government has a clear electoral mandate to undertake it. . . A reformed second chamber has an indispensable role to play, and this White Paper prepares the way for its introduction."

In other words, we have waited five years since the original Labour party manifesto pledge, one year since Labour's second manifesto pledge and six months since the Prime Minister's pledge of action. We now we have indefinite postponement.

Nevertheless, I welcome the establishment of the Joint Committee, not least because in January, in response to the consultation, my noble Friend Lord Strathclyde and I stated:

"We therefore call on the government . . . to establish a Joint Committee of both Houses to review further change, including the question of composition, and then bring forward proposals for reform."

My noble Friend said in another place in the debate on the Queen's Speech in June 2001:

"There are huge issues which need to be debated and resolved as we move to create a stronger House: for example, issues relating to the size of the House; what limits to set on that size; how long Peers should stay; how we all get here and so on."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 June 2001; Vol. 626, c. 51.]

We saw clearly some time ago that a joint parliamentary approach would be needed. We therefore welcome the statement from the Leader of the House,

[Mr. Eric Forth]

however belatedly it has been made. I pledge that we will play our full and positive part in the deliberations of the Joint Committee.

May I ask the Leader two rather obvious questions? First, he has outlined what he chooses to call phase 1, which will be a broad look at composition and powers. Will he give me some idea of the time scale for that? For example, will it go well into 2003? Then there is to be consultation of both Houses of Parliament, followed by phase 2, in which there will be detailed examination of the results of the parliamentary deliberations.

Does the Leader of the House envisage that we might run out of parliamentary time in this Parliament before anything further can be done, or can he give me an undertaking now, which will hold more water than the previous undertakings, that the Government believe that they will be in a position to bring forward proposals during this Parliament? It is important that we understand that at this stage of the process.

Secondly, speaking of the consultation of both Houses that is to be undertaken and which I welcome, and the Government's commitment to free votes on the matter, can the Leader tell me what he believes will happen if the two Houses find themselves in conflict? Supposing the House of Commons concluded that there should be a large element of elected Members in the new upper House, and that the House of Lords reached the opposite conclusion—that there should be a small element or no element at all of elected Members. How does the Leader imagine that that would be resolved? Will we go through the loop again? Will it be a "Groundhog Day" procedure, whereby we revisit the issue indefinitely for the rest of our parliamentary lifetime?

Having belatedly announced a Joint Committee, the Leader owes it to us to give a much clearer idea of what is in the Government's mind in terms of time scale and commitment, so that we are not led up yet another garden path to something that lies beyond, but we know not what. So I can only refer to what the Leader of the House said and quote his own words back to him:

> "We must not allow a repeat of history in which reform has been delayed because those who wanted it could not agree and therefore left the field to those who opposed it."

Amen to that.

Mr. Cook: The House will recall that, in the last sentence of my statement, I invited hon. Members in all parts of the House to respond as parliamentarians and not as party politicians. The right hon. Gentleman's opening observations fell some way short of that invitation and of the response of the Conservative party in the House of Lords. This afternoon, its Lords spokesman welcomed the statement as an "historic statement" that was "clearly welcome" and a "statesmanlike step". I fear that before right hon. Gentleman speaks about conflict between the two Houses, he should consider the conflict between the Conservative Front Benches in this Chamber and the other place.

The right hon. Gentleman recounted some of the history. Of course, that includes 18 years when his party was in power but never made a proposal for a single elected Member of the second Chamber. It also includes four years in which the Conservatives opposed every single proposal that we made for reform of the second Chamber. Indeed, he said at the Dispatch Box that he had no difficulty in defending the hereditary principle for the second Chamber.

Mr. Forth: Correct.

Mr. Cook: He makes that comment, but now he wants us to believe that he is committed to ensuring that 80 per cent. of Members of the second Chamber are elected—a point for which I observe he does not have unanimous support on his Back Benches.

As recently as in the past two weeks, the Conservative party announced in a joint statement made with the Liberal Democrats that a Joint Committee is clearly "the best way forward".

Mr. Forth: No.

Mr. Cook: The statement was signed by his leader in the House of Lords. I do not expect to be thanked for agreeing to what had been called for, but neither do I expect to be savaged for doing so.

The timetable will be primarily in the hands of the members of the Joint Committee, as it should be. There is nothing new to be said about composition. I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman, I and others in the House try to find something new to say about it, but the task is very challenging. I see no reason why a Joint Committee that was appointed now could not quickly move to a decision on the options on which the House should vote.

I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that I want to see legislation in this Parliament. I believe that what I have spelt out provides us with a route map to secure that objective.

On conflict between the two Houses, the first step is to try to find a way forward and to avoid such conflict. In the event of a disagreement in the vote, it will in the first instance be for the Joint Committee to consider the implications. I am inclined to tell the right hon. Gentleman that I anticipate far less conflict between the Labour Benches in this Chamber and in the House of Lords than I envisage between the Conservative Benches in the Commons and those in the Lords. I remind him that he has a long way to go before he will get Conservative peers to agree to Conservative party policy of 80 per cent. of Members of the House of Lords being elected. In the two days of debate on reform in January, more than half the Tory peers who spoke wanted no elected peers at all. In those circumstances, it is not we who should be worrying about conflict with the House of Lords, but the Conservative party.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): It would be churlish not to congratulate the Leader of the House on his victory in Cabinet against the odds, although I refuse to identify who the odds are. My hon. Friends and I genuinely congratulate him and believe that he is right in saying—he has done so on a number of occasions since the publication of the Select Committee report—that there is a centre of gravity for reform. We believe that it is possible rapidly to make progress in the Joint Committee. I remind him that the suggestion of a Joint Committee goes back to the discussions between his party and mine

before the 1997 election, to which the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) referred. The idea is not new; it is just rather late in coming.

Will the Leader of the House give us a more precise indication of what timetable the Government would like? Does he recognise that this is already the longest-running Whitehall farce in more than 90 years, and that it is time we wrote the final act? Does he accept that there should be a sunset clause? The Joint Committee should be given a limited life, then disbanded if it is not making progress.

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, once the two Houses have had a free vote on phase 1, it should be possible to put a draft Bill before the Joint Committee so as to make as much progress as possible on a consensual basis?

The right hon. Gentleman said that he intends to try to achieve the reforms in time for the next general election. Will he take this opportunity to dispel the mischievous rumour that the Government believe that it is impossible to take both legislation on House of Lords reform and an anti-hunting Bill through both Houses? That could be a major problem.

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that even if the Joint Committee is permitted to consider transitional arrangements—he says that it will be—it will be extremely important to prevent a hiatus, because otherwise Parliament's job of scrutinising the work of the Government could fall by the wayside?

Finally, there is a dilemma in having a small and manageable Joint Committee and having one that is truly representative. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that it must be of sufficient size to enable parties that are split down the middle—the Conservative party in the other place—to be fully represented?

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Hear, hear.

Mr. Tyler: And perhaps in this House, too. A minimum of 18 members will be necessary to encompass all those differing views.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his more generous welcome for our proposals, and look forward to his co-operation in taking forward our strategy.

On a timetable, it would be wrong for us to predetermine a specified date by which the Joint Committee has to respond. However, this is plainly not an open-ended commitment, and we will watch and work with the Joint Committee to enable it to come to a speedy conclusion. Part of that co-operation may well include presenting it with a draft Bill. We have by no means ruled out that possibility, and look forward with interest to hearing what its members may wish to say about it during the first stage of their work.

I assure the House that the decision that I announced has nothing whatsoever to do with the Hunting Bill. If we should find it necessary to introduce both the Hunting Bill and the House of Lords reform Bill in the same Session, so be it—we will seek as business managers to see what we can do to ensure that we secure both those objectives.

On the size of the Committee, the hon. Gentleman touches on an issue that is, as he knows, difficult for the House. By definition, any Joint Committee has to be divided equally between the two Chambers, and only half the membership comes from here. When we set up the Joint Committee on the Communications Bill, we discovered that that left us with such a small group that it was difficult fairly to reflect the political balance in this Chamber. I therefore said at the time that any future Joint Committee was likely to be larger, and I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I anticipate that its size will be of the order that he suggested.

Joyce Quin (Gateshead, East and Washington, West): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. It shows, especially in the light of last week's statement on regional government, that the Government's appetite for constitutional reform remains keen and has not become jaded. I hope that progress can be made as quickly as possible.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the results of the consultation on the White Paper. Will he confirm that it showed that a majority of people favoured either a wholly or substantially elected upper House?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's comments on the Government's programme of constitutional reform. It is within that context of a programme of measures to modernise our democracy that we should view this commitment to seek a parliamentary solution to ensuring that we have a second Chamber that can work as our ally, thereby enhancing respect for Parliament.

I share my right hon. Friend's wish to make progress as rapidly as possible. Indeed, in my statement I committed the Government to setting up the Joint Committee as soon as possible.

The consultation paper is available to hon. Members in the Vote Office. As I have said before in answer to oral questions, it showed that a substantial majority support a substantially elected second Chamber. I can confirm that of those commenting on composition, 89 per cent. favoured a majority elected second Chamber.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the announcement. Does he agree that, in constitutional matters, festina lente is not a bad motto? Will he say something about the composition of the Committee? Will it be chosen through the usual channels by the usual channels? Will there be a proper opportunity for Members with a robust view, such as my friend the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) and me, to serve? Will he assure the House that he will not be the Chairman, and might he consider inviting the hon. Member for Bolsover or me to chair the Committee?

Mr. Cook: To do justice to the last point, I would have to reflect on it rather than give an off-the-cuff answer. However, I can confirm that I have no wish to chair the Committee, and I think that it would be wrong for any Minister to chair it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Such self-sacrifice!

Mr. Cook: I can bear to live with such a sacrifice.

I am grateful for the congratulations of the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack) on what I have announced. His Latin tag, make haste slowly,

[Mr. Cook]

can be applied in several circumstances, but I must depart from him on this occasion. We have waited long enough for reform. In the debate in January, I read to the House the preamble to the Parliament Act 1911, which said that the arrangement was only a holding operation until provision could be made for a more representative and democratic Chamber. I have no intention that we should wait another 90 years or 90 months but hope that we can make progress in 90 days.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on his extremely positive statement, which clears the blockages in the way of the reform process. I direct him to annexe A to the report on House of Lords reform that the Public Administration Committee issued in February, in which it gave a detailed month-by-month and year-by-year timetable for the way in which reform might proceed. Under "May 2002", it said:

"Negotiations begin for establishment of Joint Parliamentary Committee."

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the chronology that we have outlined, which leads, eventually, to the first elections in June 2005 for a predominantly elected second Chamber, is the chronology that he is working to, and that from today the blockage to reform comes not from the Government but the House of Commons? From today, it is up to the House to decide whether it really wants to reform the second Chamber.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments. He speaks with authority as the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee, which issued a valuable report and showed that it was possible for people who wanted reform of the House of Lords but who came to the task with different perspectives to find a consensus. The task now is to ensure that we find that centre of gravity among the wider Parliament. My hon. Friend is absolutely correct that the matter is now in the hands of Parliament. The speed and radicalism with which we move is very much down to the way in which Members of Parliament proceed and subsequently vote.

I cannot promise that we will keep to the timetable outlined in the report at all intermediate stages, but I share my hon. Friend's view that reform should be implemented in time for a general election in 2005, should there be one, so that elections can take place in the same year.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Before I call the next hon. Member, may I ask for brief, single questions, in order that I may call as many Members as possible?

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): This is very long grass indeed. The right hon. Gentleman's comments confirm what many of us have always feared—that the Government were not serious about reform of the second Chamber but instead wanted to abolish the hereditary peers and replace them with the Prime Minister's cronies. They have achieved their objective.

Mr. Cook: I am not sure how I can do justice to the right hon. Gentleman's question without going back and reading my statement from the top. I am not sure that he has listened to anything that has happened in the House since he came in. I have said that it will be the decision of the House—it can vote on the options. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to vote for an all-appointed second Chamber, he will be free to do so, but I doubt that many people will be in his Lobby.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): I should like to draw to my right hon. Friend's attention early-day motions 1275 and 1276, which appear on the Order Paper for the first time today.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's assurance that the Joint Committee will be able to consider a fully nominated second Chamber. Does he agree that the revising, scrutinising and deliberative Chamber that he has described would be able to carry out its duties most efficiently if it was made up of people who were experienced and well qualified to do so? Does he also agree that direct elections would not necessarily result in such an outcome?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his endorsement. It will not only be for the Joint Committee to consider the option of a fully appointed second Chamber; my hon. Friend and all his colleagues will also be able to argue and vote for that option when we debate the options in this Chamber. I have only one reservation about what he said. While he is perfectly right to say that any legislature must comprise well-qualified and experienced people who can bring judgment and integrity to their decisions, as Leader of the House I must say that we can find those qualities among elected Members of the House of Commons as well as among those who are appointed to the other place.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Will the right hon. Gentleman accept that his statement this afternoon is a most eloquent admission that the Government did not have a clue where they were going when they started reforming the House of Lords, and that, even now, after a further general election, they still have no clue about how they want to go forward? Does he also accept that their handling of this matter has been characterised by vandalism against the constitution and by vacillation in completely failing to come forward with any set plan for the future, and that he is not modernising but trying to muddle through, causing further delay without any resolution?

Mr. Cook: I congratulate the right hon. Lady on having responded to this matter not as a parliamentarian but as a single-minded party politician. I was not necessarily persuaded that my last sentence would convince her to respond to this as a parliamentarian. It is perfectly plain that she is unwilling to consider reform; she is still fighting a rearguard action against the abolition of the hereditary principle. For the avoidance of doubt, I should point out that no Labour Member believes that the hereditary principle has any place in a modern democracy.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My right hon. Friend deserves a medal. He is a great reforming parliamentarian. May I ask him how one gets on to this Joint Committee? I think that I may have something to contribute to it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] My hon. Friends agree with me.

I want to return to the question posed by the shadow Leader of the House and other colleagues about the possibility of gridlock between the two Houses. The consultation document shows that all those who responded were in favour—to one extent or another—of an elected second Chamber, except the peers. They were the only group who preferred a House with a less than 50 per cent. elected membership. The issue of gridlock is one that must be addressed.

Mr. Cook: I shall, of course, take note of my hon. Friend's bid for membership of the Joint Committee. I expect that I shall get a number of competing approaches from other hon. Members. I am not sure quite how big the Committee will be, and I cannot, therefore, guarantee that all who wish to be on it will be able to be on it.

It will not necessarily be a disaster or a surprise if the two Chambers vote in different ways. After all, this is a democracy, and we pride ourselves on the fact that the two Chambers can come to independent conclusions. We should not regard it with dismay if they did so. I would suggest that the best thing that we can all do in the next two months is to ensure that we find a way forward that establishes a centre of gravity that can be supported in both Chambers. If we find that there is a difference in the other Chamber, the Joint Committee can consider the implications. We can also consider it ourselves if we wish to do so when we consider the measure to bring these measures into being, which will start in this Chamber.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): We are all used to Secretaries of State coming to the House and kicking for touch, but this one has gone right out of the stadium. Presumably the Leader of the House is hoping that nobody will find it and throw it back before the next election.

After five years of a Labour Government, they are clearly showing their inability to agree on what they want to do. The Prime Minister wants a minimal number of elected peers, while all his Back Benchers want the maximum number, so forgive me if I cannot take this Joint Committee very seriously. The idea that the Government have suddenly woken up to the idea of consulting this House on important issues is a novelty to which it is difficult to give any degree of credibility; it is all part of their playing for time.

We all know what the conclusions of the Joint Committee will be. A large number of people will want a high number of elected Members—like most of the Labour party—whereas others will want none or only a minimal number, and the ball is going to end up back in the Government's court. Would it not be better if the Government decided now what they wanted to do, and put that proposal to Parliament?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman condemns us for having committed the issue to the long grass, but the statement made less than two weeks ago by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat leaders in the House of Lords says:

> "An early move to establish a Joint Committee . . . would be the best way forward."

There is no point in senior Conservative party figures inviting us to take a course as the best way forward, only for the Conservative party to denounce it when we agree with their advice. Far from committing this to the long grass, I have just said to the House that I want to make progress in this Parliament, and I want to make progress for implementation by the next general election. Frankly, it is not credible for anyone to expect a timetable clearer or shorter than that, but of course, if we had had the Conservative party's 18 years in government we might not be having this argument five years later.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Has my right hon. Friend warned the Conservative peers in particular that if they vote against the abolition of foxhunting there will be scores if not hundreds of Labour MPs in this Chamber who will vote for the third way—namely, to abolish the House of Lords altogether? Will he bear it in mind that if we are not able to achieve that, the important thing to remember in respect of gridlock is that we have to cut the teeth of that second Chamber? They should not be allowed to filibuster ad nauseam. We should make sure that they have a guillotine, as we have in this House, and that this House reigns supreme over any policy issue.

Mr. Cook: The White Paper and my statement today make it perfectly plain that the Government are firmly committed to the principle that the House of Commons must remain the pre-eminent Chamber, and I have not heard anybody in the Chamber argue with what I believe is a universal point of consensus here. I did not become Leader of the House of Commons to give away the standing of the House of Commons relative to the other Chamber.

My hon. Friend suggests a definition of the third way that I am not sure will command that same universal consensus, but I note his interest in abolition. Whether the motions can be tabled in such a way that he can make such an amendment is, of course, a matter for consideration.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Could we not make progress on this very complex issue if the Government and Opposition Front Benchers accepted that having elected peers might undermine our democracy, and more so than at present? Will the Leader of the House bear in mind the fact that the public are fed up with the number of elections, and they are going on strike? Is h not aware that only a quarter voted in the European elections? Even in Rochford, where we had the highest swing to the Conservative party in England, only 29 per cent. voted? Is he not aware of the danger that having even more elections will make the public fed up to the back teeth and undermine democracy further?

Mr. Cook: Although I fully understand the immense trauma undergone by the Conservatives at the last two general elections, I urge them, but not on the basis of that, not to give up supporting elections. If they go to the nation saying that they have lost all faith in elections, they will get a very loud raspberry from the electorate, who will be inclined to give them another landslide defeat third time round.

David Hamilton (Midlothian): May I try to help the Leader of the House? I appreciate that there is to be a free vote, but it may be best not to have a Committee, and the best way to do that is not to have a second Chamber. I am one who believes that we should vote against any second

[David Hamilton]

Chamber. That is the right way forward. He asks us to put our point of view as individuals. The vast majority of people out there do not agree that we should have two Chambers, and they think that there is an issue of over-governance. When the Committee goes ahead, as I suppose it will, will it consider regional government as proposed for England? When England gets that, it will find, as we find in Scotland, that a second Chamber is not needed.

Mr. Skinner: I have two tellers.

Mr. Cook: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the advance that he is making from a minimalist base.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton) that I fully understand that some people hold the view that we do not require a second Chamber, but I would not want that to be confused with the concept of over-governance. The second Chamber is not in itself part of the Government. It is a mechanism—a forum—by which the Government can be held to account.

The powers and role that we set out for the second Chamber in the White Paper included the scrutiny and revision of Government legislation, the ability to hold the Executive to account, and the opportunity to float novel ideas and new policy initiatives that the Executive can take on board. It is not a question of Government, but accountability of Government, and for that we need a modern second Chamber that has the legitimacy of being appointed or elected on a basis that commands consensus support.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the Joint Committee be nominated by the Committee of Nomination?

Mr. Cook: To be frank, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an answer until I know how the House votes tomorrow. I will commend the Committee of Nomination to the House to ensure that we have fair and appropriate appointments to the Select Committees. The Committee of Nomination is primarily designed for the Select Committees of this House, but I believe that it will be possible for us to find a way forward in which we can ensure that those appointed from this Chamber to the Joint Committee are representative of this House and command the confidence of their parties. That is why we will have to have a rather larger Joint Committee.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will not future generations find it difficult to understand how hereditary peers lasted throughout the 20th century, and would have lasted even longer had we not been returned to office? Does my right hon. Friend accept that many Labour Members have reservations about a fully elected second Chamber? Opinion seems to be going towards a second Chamber with nominated and elected peers, which would safeguard this House to a large extent. A fully elected second Chamber, which may not be popular among Labour Members at the moment, would in many respects pose a danger to the supremacy of the House of Commons.

Mr. Cook: I have much sympathy with my hon. Friend's point. He may recall that, when we debated this matter in January, much of my speech was taken up with spelling out the risks to the Commons of a fully elected second Chamber. I urge him not to be too defeatist about the degree of support for our perspective. If he looks at the table in the report of the Select Committee on Public Administration, he will see that the largest body of opinion among MPs is for a mainly elected second Chamber. That number was greater than the number of those who support a wholly elected second Chamber.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): Unfortunately, the prospect of abolition does not seem to be on the table. In trying to find a role for a revised House of Lords, will the right hon. Gentleman give us a guarantee that any revising function in relation to Scotland and Wales will relate to matters reserved to this House only, and no attempt will be made to extend the powers of the House of Lords to revise Acts of the Scottish Parliament or the National Assembly for Wales?

Mr. Cook: I have no difficulty whatever giving the hon. Gentleman that assurance. Indeed, it would be ultra vires and illegal for either House to attempt to revise legislation on which we have devolved administration to the Scottish Parliament. We are talking only about reserved matters, and those are the only matters that either House is competent to consider.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Can the Leader of the House please assure us that he will shortly announce the membership of the Select Committee? When does he think that may happen? That may reassure those people who are unfairly denigrating this proposal as a kick into the long grass. Will he also assure us that, if the Joint Committee comes up with a timely analysis of the options on composition, which as he said have been extensively rehearsed and do not need a great deal of thinking about, he will make time for this House to reach a decision about its view on composition before the summer recess?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for wishing us to make all possible speed. It is important that we maintain the momentum for reform that we have established in the past two years. A number of decisions must be reached before we can appoint the Joint Committee. We must reach agreement on the size of the Committee and on whether the Chair should come from this Chamber or from the other Chamber, and we must identify those who should be appointed to it. That cannot be done overnight, but I assure my hon. Friend that I want to make all possible speed, which is why I said in my statement that the Committee should be established as soon as possible. A vote before the summer recess is certainly possible if the Joint Committee gets down to work quickly, and presents us with the options in good time. It is difficult to see what new matter needs to be examined, and I hope that the Joint Committee will co-operate with us in making that speed.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield): I broadly welcome the right hon. Gentleman's statement, not least because it gives us a chance to reflect further on what is currently proposed by the vast majority in the Chamber. Is it not the case that this is the elected Chamber and that we do not need yet more elected politicians, especially following the announcement about regional government

last Thursday? Is it not the case that, if the Lords becomes an elected House, that will drive out those who are not attracted to the hustings but who have genuine extensive experience to add to our legislative processes?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman identifies one of the strengths of the present House of Lords: there is a route of entry to it through the process of independent appointment for people who are distinguished in science, the arts, business and community life. For that reason, we propose to have an independent statutory body to choose the independent peers, without any political interference. The case for a mixed solution, in which there is room for that means of entry to the second Chamber, does not preclude others in that Chamber from being elected. If those who are appointed to that Chamber are to be Members of a Chamber with authority, it is important that the Chamber have legitimacy. In the modern world, it is very difficult to identify a more legitimate approach than the democratic ballot in order to provide elected Members of the second Chamber. Whether all hon. Members wish to live in that modern world is something I cannot help them with, but if we want to be legitimate we have to accept democracy.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the statement, which will enable us to make a decision before the next general election. Can he confirm that, given the primacy of this House and the view already expressed that a substantial number of those in the upper House should be elected, if a mediaeval minority seek to block the proposal, the modernising majority of the House of Commons will prevail?

Mr. Cook: I am always in favour of the modern age triumphing over the mediaeval age.

David Burnside (South Antrim): Historically, the only criteria any Ulster Unionist uses in judging constitutional reform are: does it strengthen or weaken the Union, and does it make Government more or less accountable? On the make-up of the Joint Committee, although the Labour party has considerable representation in England, Scotland and Wales, it has none in Northern Ireland, and the Conservative party is almost non-existent in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in terms of Members of the House. Can he ensure that the minority parties, including the Ulster Unionists and Welsh and Scots nationalists, have some representation on the Joint Committee because it will affect the future of the Union?

Mr. Cook: I understand what the hon. Gentleman says. He will be aware that we have sought to be as helpful as we can to the minority parties to ensure that there is fair representation. I think that the new arrangements are working rather better in that respect. A Committee that drew so large a membership from the Commons that it provided for a pro rata place for the minority parties would result in a very large Joint Committee indeed. One would be looking at a membership of more than 30 when one aggregated those nominated from the House of Lords. I cannot promise a Committee that large. With a smaller Committee, some painful and difficult choices will have to be made.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I welcome my right hon. Friend's efforts to find a way forward but seek an assurance that in balancing the membership of the Joint Committee, he will find space for the sceptical views on the Labour Benches as well—those people who are sceptical about a directly elected second Chamber and the need for more elections.

Mr. Cook: I have no difficulty in giving my hon. Friend that assurance. It is important that the representation from this Chamber is balanced, and that the minority view that he describes should be represented both from the Labour Benches and no doubt from other Benches. At the same time, we must ensure that the majority view is also well represented on a proportional basis.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and commend him for his bravery in allowing the House to come to a conclusion on this very important issue, but some valuable work has been done already by my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee in locating a centre of gravity of the opinions of the House. Does my right hon. Friend not consider that that presents an ideal opportunity for the Joint Committee, when appointed, to move forward with some speed?

Mr. Cook: I have already said that I welcome the report of the Public Administration Committee as a valuable contribution to the debate. I very much hope that the Joint Committee will take account of its recommendations when it comes to its decisions. I also hope that some of those on the Select Committee may themselves be members of the Joint Committee. I would not want to pre-empt the options that may be recommended by the Joint Committee but, plainly, the consensus that was established in the Select Committee at around 60 per cent. is an issue that will have to weigh with it.

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that even a substantially elected component of the House of Lords would place considerable pressure on the primacy of this House? That is precisely the reason for the damascene conversion of the Conservative party, which knows that it will not hold the reins of power in Parliament for many years to come.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend may be right about the motivation of Conservative Front Benchers, although I note that, as yet, they have not achieved the same conversion among many of their Back Benchers. However, I do not agree with his premise: we cannot hope to maintain the supremacy of this Chamber on the basis of keeping the second Chamber illegitimate. If we are serious about maintaining our own pre-eminence, we must do so with confidence. We must not be afraid of providing for a legitimate second Chamber, which cannot act as a rival to us but can act as an ally in making sure that we have modern and effective means of scrutiny.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly his decision to have a Joint Committee of both Houses and a free vote in both Houses. Surely the constitution is a matter on which we, as parliamentarians, ought to try to transcend our partisanship and seek consensus. If there turns out to be disagreement between this House and the

[Mr. Malcolm Savidge]

other House, will my right hon. Friend recall the point that he made earlier; that, in both Houses, there seems near unanimity that this House ought to have primacy? If there is a disagreement, logically we ought to have primacy in finding a decision.

Mr. Cook: It is certainly the case that there is broad agreement across a range of issues and the debates on composition—understandable, necessary and central—should not divert us from the fact that there is broad agreement outside that one narrow case. My hon. Friend referred to some of the party political responses and urged colleagues, as I have done, to respond as parliamentarians. I have been in this House long enough to know that it loves a cockpit of debate and rough and frank exchanges. It was necessary for us to go through the catharsis of this statement and the response to it. I hope that, having got that off their chest, the Opposition will now get down to work with us to find a way forward, because it is in the interests of this place and the whole of Parliament that we find the best consensus on that way forward.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): Given that all that the Joint Committee has to consider is the option of an appointed House, a fully elected House or the intermediate version, does my right hon. Friend agree that if it were meeting right now, it could have the options ready for consideration by about seven o'clock this evening and the House could be ready to vote on them? In other words, there is no need for the delay. There could be one meeting and we could have a vote before the summer. There should be no problem with that whatsoever.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend has spoken with great wisdom and authority. Were I to be locked in my room for five minutes, I could probably produce the options rather more quickly than by seven o'clock tonight. But it is the nature of democracy that we have to take other people with us and fully explore other perspectives. The Joint Committee will need to do that. I agree with my hon. Friend that even while doing that, there is no need for undue delay in coming back to the House with the options.

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): As one of the 304 Back-Bench Members of this House who supports a wholly or substantially elected second Chamber, I wholeheartedly welcome everything that the Leader of the House has said, particularly the idea that we shall hold a free vote. It is strange; one waits for a free vote for months, and then three come in a row.

Mr. Win Griffiths: Like the number 24 bus.

Mr. Bryant: Indeed. It is very exciting.

I urge my right hon. Friend not to allow any bishops to sit on the Joint Committee. There should not be any bishops in the House of Lords and there should not be any on the Joint Committee either.

Mr. Cook: Because of my hon. Friend's previous profession, he speaks with unusual authority about bishops, and when we have discussions with them, I think that I shall recommend that he speak on behalf of Labour Members.

This is a classic case in which it is right to proceed by a free vote. Different views exist on both sides of the Chamber, so it would be wrong to try to proceed on a party political basis, with the Whip applied. It is right that both sides be able to cast their votes freely, so that we can establish where the centre of gravity lies.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I, too, would like to offer a warm welcome to my right hon. Friend's statement, which constitutes a great step forward. I particularly welcome the free vote, given that the matter is one for Parliament. I also ask what some of my hon. Friends have asked: is there any reason why the Joint Committee should not be set up immediately, and why the options—we already know what they are likely to be—cannot be reported to the House immediately, so that we can get this part of the process over before the summer recess?

Mr. Cook: I agree that we need to proceed with the Joint Committee with all possible speed. As I have pointed out, specific questions need to be addressed and we need first to reach agreement on them, but I hope that they will not become obstacles to progress. Hon. Members have taken the opportunity in the past hour to air their own prejudices on the matter of composition, and it is already clear that the battle lines are well-established. The cases for and against a substantially elected second House have been well argued and aired, and I agree with my hon. Friend that the Joint Committee need not spend too long on the first phase of its work, although there will be much to be addressed in the second phase.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Will my right hon. Friend forgive the almost universally sour response from Opposition Members? The Conservatives find it difficult to cope with two features of his statement that are entirely alien to them: its precise response to the consultation process, and his offering a free vote in this House on an issue of substance—something that never happened in 18 years of Conservative Government. When consideration is given to who will chair the Joint Committee, will my right hon. Friend look to my hon. Friends the Members for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), and for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), who live in the 21st century, rather than the self-nominated Members of the Opposition, whose spiritual home is the 17th century? Is it not right that this generation of parliamentarians anticipates with relish the undertaking of reforms during this Parliament which are centuries overdue?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his observations, and it is certainly true that I do not recall a response to consultation during 18 years of Conservative Government that accepted the need for a fresh approach. Indeed, I do not recall much consultation at all during those years. If there had been, we might have been spared the poll tax, for a start.

My hon. Friend mentions the fact that I have not commanded universal support from those on the Conservative Benches. I fear that I have had to carry that burden through most of my years in this House, and doubtless I will have to continue to do so. However, I am

comforted by the warm and unanimous support that my statement has received from those on the Government Benches.

Orders of the Day

National Insurance Contributions Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I should point out that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment standing in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

5.18 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

There is a simple reason for supporting the Bill: it supports an NHS that is collectively funded, comprehensively available and free at the point of need, and which is the best insurance policy in the world. We are building on the Beveridge principles by raising resources to help fund the cost of the national health service through national insurance contributions. The Bill will raise resources to enable record extra investment to be made in a reformed NHS.

The question is not whether we need increased investment, but how to raise the money for that investment, and the Bill points the way forward. We have examined alternative health care systems and found them wanting. The Wanless report identified the flaws in alternative models. Social insurance schemes are complex; the tax base is narrower and administration costs escalate. In France the typical employer pays £60 a week per employee.

Charging for clinical services means patients paying rising bills for individual operations and treatments. Basing our health care system on medical charges would mean that those who are ill would have to pay more for being ill. Private funding mechanisms tend to be inequitable and regressive, they have weak incentives for cost control, they have high administration costs, and they can deter appropriate use. In the United States, family premiums average about £100 per week and are set to rise next year by £13 a week.

An independent study of health care systems in eight countries, prepared by the European Observatory of Health Care Systems, was published alongside the Budget. We are open to new ideas. Where there are lessons to be learned we will learn them. We have examined the alternatives, but the principle remains: funding through national insurance and general taxation is simply the most equitable, stable and efficient means of raising money for the national health service.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): The Chief Secretary says that national insurance contributions are the most equitable method of funding, but how does he square that with the pre-Budget report of 1999, in which the Government said, in relation to the climate change levy and the reduction in employers' NI contributions:

"This is consistent with the Government's policy of switching the burden of taxation from 'goods' like labour"?

Mr. Smith: That is perfectly consistent, on the basis that I have already explained. We are acting in conformity with the Beveridge principles and the well established

[Mr. Smith]

practice whereby contributions made through national insurance by people when they are in work, and by their employers, are used to provide cover for when they are unable to work. A contribution is also made from general taxation. Moreover, the way in which we are introducing the changes in the Bill is equitable and fair. It is also supported by the people of this country.

Phil Hope (Corby): My right hon. Friend is right. I have spoken to employers from businesses in my community and they are well aware that many people are off work ill and waiting for hospital treatment. Those employers are more than prepared to contribute to the NHS through the NI system, as employers have done for decades, because they recognise the benefits it brings to their businesses to have shorter waiting times or for people to see their general practitioner sooner. Employers want to see investment in the NHS and they know the benefits that this Bill will bring to their businesses.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. That has been my experience, too, when meeting business groups in my constituency and elsewhere. It was, after all, the Confederation of British Industry that pointed out that the cost of ill health to business was some £10 billion a year. Employers as well as employees will benefit from the investment that we are making in the NHS. Anthony Goldstone, the president of the British Chambers of Commerce, said:

"Any of us in business know that we get what we pay for. If we want a world-class health service in the UK we need to pay more."

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon) *rose—*

Mr. Smith: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he will tell us how he would pay more.

Mr. Maples: I wish to take the Chief Secretary up on a point that he made earlier. The NHS system may be the best way to fund health care, but when he talked about social insurance and what happens in the United States, he set up a couple of men of straw. Much of the funding in the US comes through health maintenance organisations—and even if the premium is £100 a week, that is less than a family of four will pay when the Government have increased spending on health to £100 billion a year. A family of four will then pay some £7,500 a year for health care. The fact is that if we did not finance the health care system through taxation but in some other way, people's taxes would be lower. In this instance, that would more than compensate for the charges.

Mr. Smith: I take it from the hon. Gentleman's intervention that he advocates abandoning the NHS—

Mr. Maples *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Smith: Yes, from what the hon. Gentleman has said, it seems that he would cut taxation to make health care dependent on charges through insurance or individual charges for treatment. We should not forget that people in the US often have to pay supplements, on top of the insurance premiums that they have already paid, to get the operations that they need.

An NHS free to all at the point of need has been the consensus in this country for 50 years. It was our hope that we could renew that national consensus on NHS funding, and we believe that the Bill is the vehicle for that. Before the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), left the Chamber, I wanted to remind him—perhaps he saw it coming—that until the last general election, that was Conservative policy, too.

I also remind Conservative Members of the promise that the right hon. and learned Gentleman made in his election leaflet. He said:

"There will be no charges. Do not believe the lies which are being spread by our opponents. Conservatives will retain a free and comprehensive National Health Service."

That is what the shadow Chancellor said in his general election communication last year—but of course he and his right hon. and hon. Friends refuse to give that commitment at present.

While the Opposition are abandoning their promise and their commitment to the NHS, we are delivering on ours.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): Before my right hon. Friend leaves the US examples, let us not forget that in the US, people on low incomes have to rely on other types of health care, because there is in essence a two-tier system. Did he see a recent television programme in which pharmaceutical companies were providing routine health checks for poorer people in the US? There was an interview with a lady in late middle age who said that that was the first time in her life that she had received a routine health check. Is that the sort of health care that the Opposition are promoting?

Mr. Smith: That is precisely the sort of system that the Opposition would head us towards. My hon. Friend gives a telling example.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): When the right hon. Gentleman referred to the CBI, he mentioned the savings to business if fewer people were off sick, and we would probably all agree about that. However, does he agree that there is a difference between companies that have the trade-off of lower corporation tax, and unincorporated businesses that receive no such trade-off? Even at this late stage, will he consider a mechanism for helping small unincorporated businesses?

Mr. Smith: We are already acting to help those businesses. Of course I understand the differences between their position and that of incorporated companies. However, the Budget proposals for VAT simplification will benefit those businesses—as will our measures concerning capital allowances and our creation of a general environment in which business can prosper. That is why there are now so many more small businesses than when we came into office. I think that 345,000 started up last year alone. We really are delivering for small business.

I have yet to hear from any representative of such a business that they are against extra resources for the national health service, or that they believe that our proposals are not an equitable way to provide those resources. We do not pretend that we can get something for nothing. It is right and proper that we set out transparently how we shall raise those resources.

Employees and the self-employed will pay an extra 1 per cent. in national insurance on all their earnings above £89 a week. For example, a single person on the median income of £410 a week will pay £3.70 more in real terms as a result of the income tax and national insurance changes. Those on higher incomes will pay more, while those on lower incomes will pay less. That is only fair.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I should be grateful if the right hon. Gentleman would give us some clarification of the position of people in Scotland who pay national insurance contributions. Will their extra 1 per cent. eventually find its way back to the Scottish Parliament, which will not be obliged to spend that money on the health service? Can people in Scotland be sure that every penny of their national insurance contribution will go to the health service—or is there no guarantee of that under devolution?

Mr. Smith: The national insurance system is UK-wide. Scotland benefits enormously from that through the Barnett consequentials. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this is a matter for the Scottish Executive. I understand that the Executive have given a commitment that the extra money will be invested in the health service in Scotland—*[Interruption.]*—as indeed has the Welsh Assembly. That point that I was coming to was that half of all families with children will pay less overall because of the interaction of these changes with the introduction of the child tax credit and the working tax credit.

As we know, both the British Chambers of Commerce and the Confederation of British Industry recognise that employers have a strong interest in a healthy and productive work force. They recognise that there is an economic rationale as well as a social and moral imperative underpinning our proposals. It is clear to me that the British people already draw a sharp contrast between the clarity, fairness and dynamism of our proposals, and the vacuous evasive manoeuvring of the shadow Chancellor and his colleagues. In public they say that they do not know what their policy is, while in private they say that charges—or, in the shadow Health Secretary's words, a "self-pay" system—are the way forward.

Clause 1 proposes how primary class 1 contributions are to be calculated. From April next year, the new employee contribution will consist of two elements: the main primary rate of 11 per cent., instead of the current 10 per cent., on earnings between the primary threshold and the upper earnings limit, and an additional primary rate of 1 per cent. on all earnings that exceed the upper earnings limit. In response to concerns raised by the Select Committee on the Treasury and others, I can confirm that the Bill does not provide any power for the new 1 per cent. rate to be changed by secondary legislation.

Clause 2 amends the current secondary class 1 contribution from 11.8 per cent. to 12.8 per cent. for employers so that they, too, will make an equivalent additional contribution. The rates paid by employers on benefits in kind and pay-as-you-earn settlement agreements—classes 1A and 1B—are also increased to 12.8 per cent.

Clause 3 proposes how class 4 contributions from the self-employed are to be calculated. Through this Bill they will pay an extra 1 per cent. on their profits or gains above £4,615 a year. From April next year, the new Class 4 contribution will also consist of two elements: the main class 4 rate of 8 per cent. on earnings between the lower and upper profits limits, and an additional class 4 rate of 1 per cent. on all earnings that exceed the upper profits limit. That new additional class 4 rate will not be amendable by secondary legislation, either.

As I have said, the measures in the Bill, and what we are doing overall to match investment in the national health service with reform, are the fairest and most efficient means of raising money for the national health service. It is interesting that, according to *The Sunday Telegraph* poll, more Conservative voters agree with us on this matter than agree with Conservative Front-Bench Members and their colleagues. I think that 54 per cent. of Conservative supporters backed our proposals for raising money to fund the NHS.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The right hon. Gentleman says that this is the fairest way, but would he concede that some forms of taxation, particularly some forms of income taxation, would be even fairer, to use his terms, than the rise in national insurance contributions, which does not, for example, tax very wealthy people who have unearned income and are not in work?

Mr. Smith: It is perhaps a consequence of debating these matters four times in two weeks that no points have so far been raised that have not already been exhaustively explored. The answer to that question is that because we are raising the money through national insurance contributions, many pensioners on fixed incomes will not have to make the additional contribution. Equally, raising the money through income tax would have hit and penalised savers. The hon. Gentleman points to rich people, and a very complex system might have exempted the other groups, but we decided that this measure was a fair, efficient, widely and appropriately based means of raising the money. My experience, my hon. Friends' experience in their constituencies and the evidence of the polls show that the public overwhelmingly understand and support what we are doing.

These measures, along with the Budget, have enabled the Government to announce the largest ever increase in investment in the NHS, raising spending on average by 7.4 per cent. in real terms each year. That is an annual cash increase of 10 per cent, and it is not just for three years but for five years, creating the stable platform necessary for long-term investment. With the year-on-year rises, UK health spending will grow from £65.4 billion this year to £105.6 billion in 2007–08. Even allowing for inflation, that is a rise of 43 per cent. over five years. Since 1997 there has been a real-terms doubling in health service investment. UK health spending will rise from 6.7 per cent. of national income in 1997, and 7.7 per cent. of national income this year, to 9.4 per cent. by 2007-08, and that investment is being matched by reform.

First, on accountability, there will be independent audit, inspection and scrutiny of patient complaints, with a duty to account for money spent and standards achieved, and report to the public. In future, an annual report to Parliament will be prepared by the new independent auditor, accounting for the money allocated to the NHS, where it has been spent and the results that have been achieved. That will be matched by a local report from

[Mr. Smith]

every primary care trust that will spell out to each household in its locality the services available and the value for money that is being achieved.

The second principle of reform is devolution. As the Secretary of State for Health has already announced, there will be vital new reforms. They will include new financial incentives for hospital performance, greater freedoms for high-performing hospitals and trusts, powers and resources that are devolved to front-line staff and primary care trusts, reform of social services care for the elderly, and a series of measures increasing choice for patients.

Patient choice will help to drive the reformed system. Money will follow the patient, so resources will be tied to performance. The NHS will treat more patients more quickly and to a higher standard.

Let me give some examples of what the extra investment will mean in constituencies throughout the country. There will be 35,000 more nurses, midwives and health visitors, 15,000 more doctors and consultants, and 42 major hospital schemes. That is the difference: more nurses, more doctors, more hospitals, more care centres and better treatment. That is what the Bill is about—investment in the nation's health and investment in the future.

Throughout the whole debate, the dividing line has not just been between those who support raising national insurance and those who do not. It is between those who support an NHS comprehensively available and free at the point of need and those who would abandon it. There is a very clear choice before us all. Do we want a high quality national health service to meet the needs of the British people and funded through general taxation, or a system in which families are forced to take out private insurance and have to pay more for their treatment through charges? That is the real choice. We choose the NHS, whereas the Conservative party chooses charges.

We are providing record new investment combined with reform. Money and change together will deliver results as we reaffirm the basic principle of the NHS—that health care should be available on the basis of need, not of ability to pay. To vote for the Bill is to back the NHS that the British people want and deserve. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.38 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I beg to move, To leave out from 'That' to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the National Insurance Contributions Bill because its provisions fail to reflect the need for change and improvement in the NHS to match additional resources, will hamper job creation and further increase the burdens on business, and will impose additional taxes on employees, including those on whom the public services rely."

I begin by drawing the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Interests—specifically, that I do occasional work on staff communication skills with employees of J. P. Morgan and Deutsche Bank.

If Ministers' statements were to be believed—a mighty if, it has to be acknowledged—this is the Bill that was never to be. During the election campaign, the Prime Minister told the *Daily Express*—I quote for the delectation of the House—

"We are not going to clobber people on higher incomes. We are not going back to 1992 and the shadow Budget. We have not the slightest intention of hammering people on £30,000 and £35,000 and the higher income brackets."

Not to be outdone, the Chancellor, on 23 May 2001, described suggestions that he would raise the national insurance ceiling as a Tory smear, which, he said, "I utterly repudiate." Speaking on the "Powerhouse" programme on 29 May last year, the current Secretary of State for Trade and Industry insisted:

"We've got no plans to raise the ceiling on national insurance contributions",

adding unwisely:

"It is not going to happen."

Less than 72 hours before polling day, the hon. Member for Streatham (Keith Hill) declared:

"Gordon Brown has made it perfectly clear that we have absolutely no plans to raise the ceiling on national insurance".

The hon. Gentleman got his reward: no longer a junior underling at the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, he is now the Government's Deputy Chief Whip.

"To Byers" could be the new verb that describes the contagious disease of misinformation that rampages through the Government.

Phil Hope: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: In a moment. I will not accuse Ministers of lying. Suffice it to say that they are in a class of their own in giving credence to untruths.

The changes outlined in the Bill that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has commended to the House today will help to raise £8.6 billion in 2003–04 and similar sums in years thereafter. It is notable, although the right hon. Gentleman did not mention it, that the 1 per cent. increase in the rate of primary class 1 national insurance contributions represents a proportionately bigger increase to those married women who took up the option—prior to its withdrawal—to pay national insurance contributions at a reduced rate, earning no entitlement to contributory national insurance benefits as a result of those contributions. That reduced rate is currently 3.85 per cent; it will rise to 4.85 per cent. in April 2003.

Phil Hope: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: I can resist the hon. Gentleman's soothing bromides not a moment longer. I give way.

Phil Hope: The hon. Gentleman is practising his communication skills most eloquently this evening. I have a couple of questions for him. Given that they are to vote against the Bill tonight, have the Opposition given up on the NHS and its principle of treatment according to need, not ability to pay? If they intend to match the spending on the NHS that we have pledged, how will they pay for it? Will they make the sick pay for being sick?

Mr. Bercow: No, we are certainly not going to do that. I am indebted to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the

opportunity to confirm that we believe passionately in the ideals of the national health service. However, we believe that after five years of mismanagement and ineptitude under a benighted Labour Administration we are now further away than ever before from those cherished ideals. The Opposition are committed to reform—

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: In a moment—the hon. Gentleman must contain himself with what resilience he can muster.

The Conservatives are committed to reform. We will look at the options. We want a service that is better. Next week the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope) and I are to play alongside each other in a tennis match on behalf of the House. Let me say, in all charity, that it is to be hoped that his excellence at tennis is rather greater than his capacity to make incisive interventions in debate.

Mr. Rammell: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's statement that he remains committed to the national health service free at the point of use. If that is the case, can he explain what the shadow Secretary of State for Health meant by "self-pay"? What does that concept mean to the Conservatives?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman has not grasped the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves. We have a two-tier system. Last year, 250,000 people without insurance paid for their operations. It should not be necessary in the year 2002 for people to use their life savings to save their own lives. My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Health has said that people are having to pay, and he does not want that situation to become worse. He recognises the need for reform and he is considering the various options. He knows that the Government have made a mess of things. I say to the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) that my hon. Friend has probably forgotten more about the national health service than the Secretary of State knew in the first place.

Mr. Chas Roy-Chowdhury spoke about the savage imposition on married women, as reported in the *Financial Times* on 3 May. He is the head of taxation at the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants. He said:

"This extreme and disproportionate increase for those currently paying the lower rate is grossly unfair and is a case of the Government wishing to wring as much money as possible from everybody, even widows and older women. Many of these women"—

this is hardly a laughing matter, even for the hon. Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband)—

"are near retirement, and the last thing that they need is this tax hike to upset their finances."

There is speaking with forked tongue, the breaking of promises and picking on the most vulnerable. It is clear that there are no depths now to which new Labour will not sink.

John Whiting is a tax partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers and president of the Chartered Institute of Taxation. He often quizzes people as to what is the second biggest tax after income tax. It is not value added tax, it is not corporation tax and it is not petrol duty. It is the national insurance contribution. As he said:

"We now have a top tax rate of 41 per cent., and another hole in the fiction that national insurance contributions are anything other than a tax."

What has been the reaction of business to what has been unveiled by the Chief Secretary and his ministerial colleagues? The CBI says:

"It is the worst kind of tax rise as it adds straight to the cost base and is unrelated to profits."

The head of the Engineering Employers Federation, Martin Temple, observes:

"£3 billion of extra costs is £3 billion less to invest."

Nick Golding of the Forum of Private Business labels the rises

"a further disincentive to employ."

Ian Fletcher of the British Chambers of Commerce attacked the rise as "indiscriminate".

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): The hon. Gentleman has quoted many organisations. Will he quote ordinary people? Will he quote what individuals in our constituencies are saying about the extra investment that will go into the national health service, and how important they think that extra investment is? Does he think that to quote them would be worth more in this debate than quotations from representatives of the organisations to which he has referred?

Mr. Bercow: I am slightly perturbed by the hon. Gentleman's intervention. The individuals to whom I have referred would find it peculiar to be described as in some way extraordinary. They have the advantage of the hon. Gentleman because they boast experience and expertise that lend authority to their pronouncements. However, the hon. Gentleman is always good at egging me on and encouraging me in debate. If he will exercise some patience, which is a virtue, he will recognise that I intend to refer to the impact of the measures set out in the Bill on the very ordinary people for whom he purports to care.

Mr. Andrew Smith: Is the hon. Gentleman prepared to quote the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, who may be an ordinary person? At the last general election, he said:

"Conservatives will retain a free and comprehensive national health service."

Will the hon. Gentleman repeat that pledge? If he cannot, why not?

Mr. Bercow: I am disappointed in the Chief Secretary. He should know by now that my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer is an ordinary person blessed with extraordinary abilities. That should be patently apparent to all Members of this place and others well beyond. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) must contain himself; he must exercise what restraint he can muster. I know that he is a distinguished Member of this place and I believe that he is the Chairman of the relevant Select Committee. I say to him in all kindness that if he behaves himself, I will give way. If he does not, I will not. He has a simple choice, but he must allow me to deal first with the Chief Secretary, which I shall relish. My right hon. and learned

[Mr. Bercow]

Friend the shadow Chancellor, and all my right hon. and hon. Friends and I are committed to an improved NHS which serves the people of this country instead of letting them down. I reiterate the fundamental principle that the availability of health care should be determined on the basis of need, not ability to pay.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman must wait.

That consideration is so strikingly clear that, as the late Enoch Powell used to say, only an extraordinarily clever person could fail to grasp so simple a point.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): On the impact of the increase on ordinary people, is my hon. Friend aware that the John Radcliffe hospital, which serves the Oxford, East constituency of the Chief Secretary, as well as the constituencies of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) and myself, is short of 300 nurses and its vacancy rate is running at 14 per cent? Has my hon. Friend calculated the effect of increased national insurance contributions on trying to hire badly needed staff in our hospitals?

Mr. Bercow: It is very simple; the bull-headed and short-sighted policy on which the Government seem intent will make a difficult task much more difficult.

Mr. Webb: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: In due course; I do not want to squander the hon. Gentleman's contribution. His professorial interventions are of great value and it would be a pity to waste one just yet. If he will allow me, I shall store him up and deal with him a bit later.

Most strikingly of all, Stephen Alambritas of the Federation of Small Businesses stressed that taxes will rise for 3 million self-employed workers. Pointing out that the average income from self-employment is just £13,890 a year, compared with an average income from employment of £21,842 a year, he rightly castigated the Government for undermining any attempt to help the low-paid. My right hon. and hon. Friends will have noticed that whenever I have spoken today about increased burdens, higher taxes and objections from business and other organisations, Government Members have been determined to throw me off the scent. They do not want to talk about damaging consequences, to focus on the realities or to acknowledge the protests that are springing up from reputable organisations and individuals the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, because they prefer to live in an ivory tower. They can try to do so, but it will not work; we shall point out the damage inflicted by their policies.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is a regular contributor to our debates; I anticipate eagerly what he has to say, but he will not say it just yet.

The timing of savage tax rises could scarcely be more insensitive. In the past year, manufacturing output has fallen at its sharpest rate for a decade. Manufacturers are struggling in a sea of tax, regulation and administrative complexity which is deeper and more hazardous than ever before. Ministers' response has been to deliver a financial body blow by jacking up the cost of employment. It is no wonder in those circumstances that representatives of no fewer than nine manufacturing industry trade associations from the plastics, rubber, coatings and associated machinery and tool-making sectors, speaking for 315,000 employees, fired off a letter of protest to the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry only last Wednesday, complaining that a staggering 78 per cent. of all the new money to be raised in 2003–04 will be grabbed from business. If the Chancellor knows that for 20 plastics companies the extra bill will be £3.4 million a year, or that 60 per cent. of them plan to meet that cost by cutting jobs, he should be ashamed. If he is ignorant of that important fact, it is frankly time he did his homework.

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): Earlier, the hon. Gentleman said that the shadow Chancellor was an ordinary man of extraordinary talents; he seems to be proving this afternoon that he himself is an extraordinary man of ordinary talents. He said that the increases in national insurance contributions on both sides may be a tax on jobs. What is unemployment in his constituency, and what was it in 1997? How does he explain the fact that it has fallen by 55 per cent.?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman really ought to do better than stick to a prepared script that ignores what I have said. I do not know about his educational attainments and other attributes, but let me explain my position in easily intelligible terms. If a tax rise has not yet taken effect, it should not be too difficult for him to grasp that the damaging employment consequence that I predict has not yet taken effect. Ordinarily, for his edification, the impact follows the policy; the policy will have an impact in due course. I am a charitable fellow, so if he is still in doubt and requires further illumination, I will happily go to any recess in the House later and give him a tutorial on that elementary point.

Mr. Bryant *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: No, the hon. Gentleman made a mess of it once; he can hardly be so unreasonable as to expect me cruelly to compound his embarrassment.

Mr. Webb *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: Of course, I shall give way to the good professor.

Mr. Webb: The mention of tutorials got me going.

The hon. Gentleman implied that employers' national insurance is a tax on jobs and that increasing it will damage jobs. Does he think that employers' national insurance contributions are at an optimal rate, or should they be cut?

Mr. Bercow: That is a useful intervention. We shall set out our position on taxation levels with clarity and specificity well in advance of the next general election. The hon. Gentleman, who is a reasonable fellow, will accept the proposition that for a party which aspires to government—I cannot credibly accuse his party of that—

it does not make much sense, having lost an election 11 months ago on its last manifesto, to be expected to produce today the contents of its next one.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that the tax increase is particularly unwelcome for the plastics industry? I recently visited a plastics manufacturer in the automated components industry in my constituency. It faces the prospect of price reductions of 7 to 15 per cent. being forced on it by its customers. It is desperately trying to pare costs and is having some success, but is nevertheless confronted with a bill of an additional £70,000 to £80,000. It told me that the change is particularly unwelcome because it pays national insurance whether or not it is making a profit; I do not believe that the Government have realised that.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is correct; the cost is incurred, regardless of whether a profit is being made. The Government's message to companies in my hon. Friend's constituency and elsewhere can be succinctly encapsulated: "Thank you for trying to bear up under competitive pressures. Here's our solution—please pay another tax so that it is more, rather than less, expensive, for you to employ people." The National Association of Pensions Funds has warned that more companies are likely to axe final salary pension schemes to recoup the cost of the 1 per cent. rise in employers' national insurance bills. It said that the change, which will cost companies about £4,000 million a year, would drive businesses to seek out ways of cutting costs. That is the considered verdict of people at the grass roots, not the self-appointed judges on the Government Benches.

John Mann: The hon. Gentleman has quoted various business spokesmen to support his case. The chairman of the Bassetlaw chamber of commerce, a small business man in a heavy manufacturing area, describes the Budget as fair. Why?

Mr. Bercow: I do not know. It must be something in the water in Bassetlaw. The hon. Gentleman and I served together on Lambeth borough council from 1986 to 1990. I thought then that the hon. Gentleman was a peculiar fellow, and I have never had any reason since to revise my opinion. Quite what caused the people of Bassetlaw to vest their faith and confidence in the hon. Gentleman I do not know, but I cannot be held responsible for the results.

Tax rises—I know that Labour Members do not want to hear about the tax rises, but they will keep hearing about them—mean that a house officer in the national health service will be £276 a year worse off. A nurse consultant will be £312 a year worse off. A specialist registrar will be £408 a year worse off. A senior house officer will be £516 a year worse off. A consultant will be £672 a year worse off. The Government are punishing the very people whom they disingenuously claim to support. The Chancellor stands exposed. Far from being a generous distributor of largesse, he is now seen in his true light as the nation's most outrageous pickpocket.

Mr. Kevan Jones *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: I want to make progress, but if the hon. Gentleman contains himself—I do not think he is about to pop like a champagne cork—I shall happily give way to him later.

Just as older women have been singled out for discriminatory treatment, so too have those on modest earnings. A self-employed person on £20,000 a year, even after allowing for the offsetting effects of tax deductibility, can expect to pay an extra £143 a year.

Perhaps the most shaming fact of all is that those who possess the least must cough up the most. Over the past five years, tax on the poorest quintile of households rose from 38 per cent. to 41 per cent., as against a rise of only 1 per cent. for the highest quintile. The net result is that a 2 per cent. gap favouring the richest has risen to 4 per cent. since the party of Bernie Ecclestone and Lakshmi Mittal took office. [HON. MEMBERS: "And Richard Desmond."] Indeed, and Richard Desmond, as my hon. Friends helpfully advise me from their sedentary positions.

What about the public sector? The cost of the employer increase to the police service, with just under 125,000 people, will be an extra £32 million a year. The cost to the teaching profession, with more than 361,000 staff, will be an extra £79 million a year. The cost to local government—

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North) *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: In a moment. The hon. Gentleman is spectacularly misnamed, in view of his speedy commitment to the abolition of our national currency and its replacement with another, but he is a jovial character, and I can resist him no longer.

Mr. Pound: I am reluctant to interrupt the hon. Gentleman's flow, and I can understand why, on public service broadcasting in America, he is already considered something of a cult. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps that lost something in translation.

May I ask the hon. Gentleman a couple of questions? Has there ever been a time in the proud and glorious mercantile history of this nation when any honest cordwainer or cooper has said, "Whacko! More taxes. I'm happy with that."? Has there ever been an occasion when people have not objected to taxation? Has there ever been a time when manufacturers in this country have not recognised that the health of the nation is essential to the productivity of the nation?

Mr. Bercow: What people object to is paying their money and getting no value in return. That is the answer to the hon. Gentleman.

The cost to local government, which has been lumbered with more responsibilities than ever before and forced by Government to set the highest level of council tax since its inception, will be an extra £300 million a year. Perhaps the most depressing irony of all, in the context of a Bill which ostensibly is designed to bolster our national health service, is that the NHS itself will face a bill of an extra £200 million a year as a result of the increase in employers' national insurance contributions.

Look at the care home sector. *[Interruption.]* I know that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant), who is chuntering to himself—a very worrying sign at this early stage in his parliamentary career—does not want to discuss this important matter, but I say to the hon. Gentleman and to the House that since 1996–97 almost 50,000 care home beds have been lost, creating personal

[Mr. Bercow]

tragedies for thousands, owing to the blithering incompetence of Ministers. Now they seem hell-bent on strangling what remains of a sector whose margins are often slim—not infrequently, for the smallest care homes, less than 5 per cent.—and whose wage bills account for about 80 per cent. of their total costs. The Registered Nursing Home Association, the National Care Homes Association and individual nursing home owners have united in a chorus of condemnation of ministerial short-sightedness.

Yet the Chief Secretary claims that the Bill will bring about the improvements in health care that we all want to see. Of course, as my right hon. and hon. Friends are painfully aware, every year Ministers promise that reform and extra spending will go hand in hand, but every year that promise is broken. We see no reform; we see no change; we no improvement. We see only the higher taxes which are the instinctive response and the favourite sport of Labour Governments, new as well as old. Without change—

John Mann: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman has had one opportunity. He made a frightful, blithering mess of it. He can hardly expect me to have another go at indulging him—that I will not do.

Without change, we will not see the difference. In Scotland—

Mr. Kevan Jones: What reforms would the hon. Gentleman propose, in line with the tax plans that he does not intend to lay out tonight? *[Interruption.]* I accept his point about the election, but can he give a commitment that the Conservative party is committed to health care free at the point of need?

Mr. Bercow: I do not know how many times one has to underline one's commitment to a comprehensive national health service which is available to people on the basis of clinical need and not on the strength of ability to pay. I have said it many times before; I am saying it again. I am reiterating the commitment of the Conservative party to a fundamental, wholesale and searching review of the basis of delivery and funding of health care in this country. It could not be more explicit. It is not my fault that the intervention of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) was spoiled by the sedentary interjection of his hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound).

Mr. Kevan Jones *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: No, I will not give way again. I want to develop the arguments.

The Chief Secretary claims that the Bill will secure improvements. As I said, every year we see no reform, no change, no improvement; we see only the higher taxes which are both the instinctive response and the favourite sport of Labour Governments, new as well as old. Without change, as I said, we will not see the difference.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland spending on health is much higher than it is in England, but in key respects the service is getting worse. In Scotland over the past five years, spending has risen by 28 per cent. in real terms, but over exactly the same period the average waiting time for an out-patient appointment has risen by 25 per cent.

There could hardly be a more graphic testament to the sheer inadequacy of the status quo. The chairman of the British Medical Association said recently:

"The NHS in its current state cannot survive without radical change."

That change is essential if we are to translate care from a word to a deed. Even the Health Secretary has blurted out the worst kept secret in Britain—that the national health service is the last great nationalised industry.

Waiting lists and waiting times are rising. The number of care home beds is falling. Bed blocking and cancelled operations have soared. Mixed sex wards abound. Doctor and nurse shortages put us to shame in the league tables of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and of the European Union. Patients travel as far as South Africa for treatments that should be available here.

Mr. Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: No.

In 2000–01, the Department of Health failed even to spend £693 million that was allocated to it by the Chancellor. There are now more bureaucrats in the NHS than beds, and the morale of NHS staff is at an all-time low. Waste and fraud cost the service £10 billion a year.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: Of course I shall give way to the Father of the House.

Mr. Dalyell: Will the hon. Gentleman help us with his credentials for being quite so certain about what is happening in Scotland, as I know personally that many improvements have been made there?

Mr. Bercow: I always listen carefully and with respect to the hon. Gentleman. My assessment is that the service in Scotland has not improved as one would expect consequent upon the increase in resources that it has enjoyed under his Government. I say to him that I have not depended on advocacy, but grounded my case in evidence. I have referred to what struck me—and I hope would strike him—as the significant fact that in precisely the same period as spending on health has increased by 28 per cent. in real terms, there has been a 25 per cent. increase in the average waiting time for an out-patient appointment. That is the reality; it may not seem natural and might not have been expected, but it is the consequence of the mismanagement of our national health service and the defects of the status quo that reigns within it.

There are now more bureaucrats than beds in the NHS—*[Interruption.]* These points are important, so I shall repeat them. The morale of NHS staff is at an all-time low and waste and fraud cost the service £10 billion a year. All too many wards are breeding grounds for MRSA—methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus—and the Public Accounts Committee found but

18 months ago that infections caught while in hospital killed about 5,000 people a year. Perhaps most tellingly all, one's chances of surviving cancer are markedly worse in the United Kingdom than in many other industrialised countries.

What was the response of the Secretary of State for Health to the miserable catalogue of underperformance that is failing the British people? The night before his statement to the House on the NHS plan, according to the 21 April edition of *The Sunday Times*, the right hon. Gentleman sat in his office with colleagues with a collection of papers strewn all over the place, munching on Marks and Spencer ready-made pasta and sweating over what he could possibly say to the House fewer than 24 hours later. Professor Alan Maynard, the eminent economist from York university, dismissed the Government's proposals for reform as "horse manure".

I shall not go as far as that because I am a charitable soul, as you can testify, Madam Deputy Speaker. However, what we do know is that the extra nurses, doctors, hospitals and primary care centres about which the Secretary of State for Health talked are only expected, not promised, and are not even expected until 2008. We know that he merely hopes that the legislation to establish the Commission for Health Care Audit and Inspection will be introduced in the next Session and that the first inspection report is unlikely to materialise before 2005.

We know that the Secretary of State has not even begun to consult local councils on the plans to make them responsible for bed blocking. He wants to pass the buck from a Government whose fault it is to local government, whose fault it is not, and he has not even had the decency to let the fall guys know of his plans to stitch them up. What a shower these Ministers are.

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater): My hon. Friend is no doubt aware of the reduction in beds—256 of them have gone in Somerset—and that bed blocking is now a major problem in rural areas and is getting worse. Does he agree that unless the Government take action, care homes in rural areas will disappear and people will have to go into hospitals, as there will be nowhere else to go?

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is entirely right; he speaks from personal experience. It is only to be hoped that even now, at the 59th minute after the 11th hour, the Chief Secretary might be prepared to reconsider the matter. I am sorry to say, however, that he has specialised in putting his own case even if that has meant distorting the statements of others. For example, he referred to Anthony Goldstone and his supposed verdict, but did not quote all his remarks. Of course, Mr. Goldstone, whom he prayed in aid, said:

"we now have to live with these tax increases, but we say to the Chancellor there is no coming back for more, whether openly or stealthily."

Mr. Goldstone indicated that he did not think that the Government were going about things in the right way. What a pity that the right hon. Gentleman chose not to—or inadvertently omitted to—give the full context and flavour of Mr. Goldstone's remarks.

While the Secretary of State for Health ducks, dithers and delays, damage is done every day. The Bill offers no answer. It shows that the Government have a closed mind and refuse to learn from abroad. To adapt the celebrated and justified verdict on the Wilson Government,

"Never in the field of political affairs has a Government taxed so much, delivered so little and been in such an indecent haste to blow its own trumpet."

6.16 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and to have the chance to respond to one or two of the points that he made. I think that we are taking part in an historic debate in which we see clearly the divide between his side of the House and ours—it was made plain in his speech. It is historic as for the first time in a number of years, we have seen a clear argument put for the introduction of increased taxation to pay for improved public services.

With respect, I thought that the hon. Member for Buckingham made a strategic and tactical error when he referred to a range of occupations and professions and specified what the taxes would cost people in each of them. His mistake and that of the Conservative party is that they have not realised what Labour Members realise, which is that, far from seeing that cost in the old way in which they saw tax—money that they paid without getting anything—people are now saying that they want to invest in their public services. They have accepted the argument that was advanced at the last election for investment and reform in our public services. They now want to see that investment and they understand and realise that they will have to pay for it. The point is not what tax people pay, but what they get for it. The Government will be judged not on the amount of tax that we are asking people to pay through the increased national insurance contributions, but on whether they see the results of that increased investment that we are putting into the national health service.

The shift in the debate has been huge. I remember standing for election and arguing the case for increased taxes to pay for improved public services a number of times only to lose significantly. It is a great credit to our Government, the Treasury team and others that we have now shifted the debate away from tax cuts and on to investment and reform as the winning combination. That is a significant shift in our political culture.

We will pay for massive increases in health spending of 7.4 per cent. in real terms in the next five years. As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said, the amount spent will shift from £65.4 billion this year to £105.6 billion in 2007 and 2008. Those are staggering figures—huge figures—but people accept the need to pay more because they want new hospitals, shorter waits, new drugs and a modern NHS with more doctors and nurses.

It is a mistake on the part of Conservative Members to rubbish the NHS as it currently stands. To say that there has been no improvement in the NHS over the past few years completely belies people's experience. It is not true to say that it is a complete shambles and that nobody receives decent service, decent treatment or a decent operation—every single day, tens of thousands of people go to hospital or to their doctor and receive treatment that they are proud to be able to receive and about which they write letters of thanks to ward staff and doctors.

[Vernon Coaker]

We need more investment, and significant problems remain to be addressed, but to say that every single hospital, every single surgery and every single operation goes wrong and is a disaster is not true, and it is not the experience of ordinary people.

Phil Hope: Does my hon. Friend agree that what the Tories are doing is not an accident, but part of a carefully laid out strategy? They are running down the national health service to try to convince people that it does not work. Once they have done that, they can say that they have an alternative—that is, to charge people and force them into private health insurance. Their strategy is aimed at the eventual privatisation of the NHS, and we should reject it absolutely.

Vernon Coaker: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. Every time we see a Conservative spokesman on television or hear one on the radio, they simply rubbish what is happening in the NHS. When I speak to people who work for the NHS, they say that although there are real problems, we should recognise progress where it exists. We all have people in our constituencies who come to us to complain that they are waiting too long for an operation, there are not enough consultants, the buildings they have to visit are too old, there is not enough of this or that, or that a certain drug is not available. There are real problems and challenges still to be met, but we should reiterate that progress has been made. The solution outlined by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary at the beginning of the debate—to increase investment in the NHS through the rise in national insurance contributions in the Bill—is the fair and equitable way to rebuild the NHS and to respond to the difficulties that people describe to us.

We agree with the Wanless report that general taxation is the best way to achieve that. It is the fairest and most equitable system that we have, but it has been rejected by the Tories—they want more private medical insurance or social insurance, which are more inequitable and costly. My right hon. Friend quoted figures on the social insurance systems in France, where employers pay on average some £60 a week towards health care for an employee on average earnings, and in Germany, where employers pay on average £30 a week. We heard about the United States, where family premiums for private insurance average £100 a week and are set to rise on average by £13 a week.

Those are the choices that confront us. It is perfectly reasonable for people to say that we should fund the health service through private health insurance or social insurance, but I am proud that we have rejected those options and said that we want improvements in the NHS to be paid for through increases in general taxation and national insurance. That is because we believe that that ensures equitable access to treatment, that it is the fairest means possible, and that it remains true to the original principles of the national health service.

Mr. Maples: I share the hon. Gentleman's allegiance to the principle of care being free at the point of use, but I want to ask him the question that the Chief Secretary failed to answer. The national health service may be a far better way to fund health care than either social insurance or health maintenance organisations—the main component in the United States—but the hon. Gentleman cannot quote figures that hide what is being paid here. When we are spending £100 billion a year on the health service, the average family of four will pay £7,500 a year in tax towards it. That may be good value, but he should not pretend that it is cheaper than what people pay in France, Germany or the United States, because it is not.

Vernon Coaker: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, he will have to put those arguments to the electorate. My argument will be that general taxation is the fairest and most equitable way of funding improvements to the NHS and of ensuring that we have the standards that we want. I am happy to present that argument to the electorate, as are my hon. Friends.

The rise in national insurance contributions is paying for improvements. We all remember what happened under the Conservatives between 1979 and 1997, when national insurance rose from 6.5 per cent. to 10 per cent. without any corresponding improvements in the social wage. Our increase will lead to improvements in the NHS, with a £2.7 billion package for the low paid through a new tax credits system. The 1 per cent. rise that continues above the upper earnings limit ensures that the contribution increase is progressive. That is what people want—a fair and progressive way of raising the additional funds that are needed, then invested, in their health service.

Alongside that investment people want reform, and I am pleased that that will happen. There will be more beds, new buildings, increases in social services spending and structural change. I remind my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench that although we must ensure that patients are given more choice, that should be based on quality, not price competition.

The new health inspectorate, the Commission for Health Care Audit and Inspection, is important. It will not only audit the use of the new money, but consider private sector quality. More co-operation with the private sector is another important aspect of reform.

Mr. Bercow: I always enjoy listening to the hon. Gentleman, because he is decent sincere and well informed. I know that he is a Nottinghamshire, not a Scottish, Member, but may I nevertheless ask him this question? Why has Scotland experienced, throughout the same periods, both a real terms rise in health spending of 28 per cent. and an increase in the average waiting time for an out-patient appointment of 25 per cent.?

Vernon Coaker: The hon. Gentleman makes a mistake about the argument being for either resources or reform—it has to be for both, as we propose. We believe that increased investment and reform together will lead to shorter waiting times and a whole range of improvements in our national health service.

The country has faced a choice between publicly funding improvements to our national health service through higher taxation and taking the route of more private money. For many years, I stood for election calling for increased taxes to pay for improved public services. Then, I lost that argument. Now, thankfully, we are winning it. I am proud to be part of a Government who are increasing taxes to improve our public services. Reform must take place alongside that investment.

The Bill will go a long way towards ensuring that we have the funds and resources to provide the national health service that we need for the 21st century.

6.29 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The shadow Chief Secretary is right that much has been said about the subject of the debate—for example, by him, the Chancellor and my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor), who is giving me a chance to get my teeth into Government health policy this afternoon. I am pleased to see him in his place.

Several matters have not been tackled, and I hope to cover them this afternoon. It is important to emphasise that Liberal Democrats welcome the additional resources for which the Bill provides, and we will vote for the measure. After all, we called for the resources in the first place, not shortly before the Budget, and not one, two, three or four years before it but five years ago. We called for additional resources from general taxation to save the national health service. The Government made the same commitment in 1997, but without the resources to go with it. Year after year, we called for the very aspect of the Budget that is so popular with electors: increased revenue from fair taxes. Although I do not believe that the Government have gone far enough, the taxes should be as fair as possible in order to pay for the health service.

We welcome the resources, but we have several anxieties and criticisms. The measure is five years too late, and it came as a surprise to those who listened to the Labour party before the election. It said that taxes, which by implication included national insurance contributions, would not go up. Such behaviour damages the integrity of politics, because politicians should be honest with the electorate.

The Chief Secretary has stayed to hear my contribution, and I invite him to admit that, before the election, he did not predict that national insurance contributions would increase significantly. I give him the opportunity to say that he had no idea that that would happen or, alternatively, that he realised that national insurance contributions would rise, but did not believe that it was worth making that explicit to the electorate.

Mr. Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Harris: I was hoping that the Chief Secretary would reply, but I shall give way to a fine substitute.

Mr. Bryant: I am glad that I will do. Does not the hon. Gentleman remember last year's general election campaign? The subject was extensively discussed; many journalists pushed the Chancellor and tried to get him to make specific commitments on the upper earnings limit and various other aspects of national insurance. My right hon. Friend pointedly refused to do so.

Dr. Harris: The Chancellor pointedly refused to say that there was a good chance that national insurance would have to rise significantly shortly after the election. But it is in fact a popular act, and yet refusing to be honest with people before an election is destructive to the electoral process. I shall revert to that briefly later.

The measure is not as progressive as it would be if income tax were used. The 1 per cent. increase in employers' national insurance contributions is a stealth tax, which can represent a significant burden on industry and have an impact on job creation. To some extent, it is self-defeating because organisations such as local government, for which some of the money is intended, will lose through having to pay employers' national insurance contributions. I shall consider exactly how much money should be spent on local government later.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman became a Member of Parliament in 1997, at the same time as me. Does he remember the manifesto on which he stood? It promised a grand total of £540 million a year extra for the national health service—half the sum that the Government put into it. Liberal Democrats intended to raise that money through changes to the national insurance system. Why was it right then but wrong now?

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman needs to go back to our manifesto, because the funding was not intended to come from the national insurance system.

Dr. Ladyman: Here is the manifesto.

Dr. Harris: Let me deal with the point. Our commitment has always been over and above existing Government spending plans, not to burn the money that Labour found for investment but to add to it and to be honest and say that if people want decent public services they have to pay for them. I therefore believe that the hon. Gentleman deceived his electorate twice. Before people claim that they will save the NHS or invest in public services, they must specify the source of the money. In costed manifestos that were audited independently for two elections, we stated that funding for education would come from a penny on income tax. In the last election campaign, we said that money for the health service would be raised through an increase in the top rate of income tax. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that that is an honest and progressive way of raising the money? Will he answer that?

Dr. Ladyman: Yes.

Dr. Harris: Perhaps he is more honest than he was in the general election campaign.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman began by challenging me to go back to the Liberal Democrat manifesto, which I have. It states:

"We will:

Invest more in the NHS. We will invest at least an extra £540 million every year in the NHS to pay for our policy priorities."

It goes on to say that the money will be raised through the national insurance system. It is crystal clear. The penny on income tax applied to the health service only in the 2001 manifesto.

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman has the misfortune of being patently incapable of quoting and of facing an author of the document, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell. If the hon. Gentleman has the courage to provide the quote, we can refute his words. We have been clear about the matter. *[Interruption.]* All the fuss from Labour Members is simply defensiveness because they did not have the guts to do what they have

[Dr. Harris]

subsequently done. They did not have the courage to put to the electorate before an election the fact that income tax or other taxes must increase to pay for public services.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr. Harris: I can take as many interventions as Labour Members like, but they are on dangerous ground. However, I shall give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell.

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): My hon. Friend might find it helpful to know that our 1997 manifesto proposed cuts in employers' national insurance contributions, funded by the carbon tax, which the Government adopted in a different form through their energy levy.

My hon. Friend might also find it helpful to reflect on the fact that while we proposed an upfront increase of £540 million for the health service after the election, the Labour Government were elected on a pledge to save the NHS, but imposed two years of real-terms cuts by adopting Conservative Budget proposals.

Dr. Harris: They went further. They not only stuck to Tory spending plans, which were savage for public services, but found resources to fund tax cuts for the well off, beyond published Conservative spending plans. That was simply twisting the knife

John Mann *rose—*

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester) *rose—*

Dr. Harris: They want more. I shall give way to the hon. Member for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda).

Mr. Dhanda: The hon. Gentleman has not answered the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). Is it true that the 1997 Liberal Democrat manifesto proposed only an extra £5 billion for the NHS, when the Government provided an increase of £20 billion in three years?

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman mentions a £5 billion increase proposed by the Liberal Democrats. That sounds like Treasury calculations in a press release, given the Government's history of triple counting.

We are worried about not only the method of raising the money and the fact that it is not progressive, was not honestly advertised, is late and, in the case of the employers' national insurance increase, self-defeating, but the way in which it is spent. We are worried about whether it will go to the parts of the health and social care organisations where it can be most effective, or be channelled specifically to achieve political targets without making the maximum impact on patient care. We are worried about the way in which the Government continue to manage the health service through too much interference, centralisation and structural change for the sake of change, not the benefit of patients.

Labour Members, in pushing at an open door or facing an open goal with the lack of Conservative policy, talk about a health service that is universal, comprehensive and free at the point of delivery, but they should consider the health service that they have delivered. It is not free at the point of delivery; there are prescription charges for those who are not exempt. Many believe that that is a regressive method of asking the sick to pay for the health service.

Many people cannot afford to pay prescription charges for all their medication. Patients often ask my former colleagues in the health service to specify the prescription medicines that they do not need so much, so that they do not have to pay for them. We have made a commitment to try to remove the unfairness in exemptions for prescription charges. People believed that the Labour party might do that for cystic fibrosis sufferers, since it made a pledge in opposition to exempt those who survived into adulthood from prescription charges. Again, it reneged on that in government. Similarly, eye checks and dental checks are not free at the point of delivery, as the Liberal Democrats would wish them to be, not only because that is a fair way of doing things, but because it would encourage people—

Vernon Coaker: Free eye tests, free dental checks, free prescriptions—how much is all that?

Dr. Harris: If the hon. Gentleman had read our manifesto more than his colleague has, he would know. If such screenings were free, people would go for such checks, which would help them to have good health in the future.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Dr. Harris: I look forward to the intervention of the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell).

Mr. Rammell: As usual, I have taken the opportunity to read the alternative Lib Dem Budget. Many people listening to the hon. Gentleman's last contribution will have gained the impression that the Liberal Democrats are in favour of abolishing prescription charges. Will he confirm that the alternative Liberal Democrat Budget—the only document on which he can be reasonably judged—does not propose to abolish prescription charges?

Dr. Harris: In the alternative Budget, we made it very clear that we would freeze prescription charges—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Well, I think that people who find it hard to pay prescription charges would prefer, in the first instance, a policy of freezing the charges that the hon. Gentleman's Government have increased year upon year. The increases in prescription charges under his Government—increases similar to those that he and his colleagues used to criticise when the Conservatives implemented them—have been significant in this Parliament.

We made it clear in our manifesto that we would seek to abolish prescription charges. If the hon. Gentleman looks at our next manifesto, he will see how that is going to be funded, because, unlike the Labour party, we say how we are going to fund our commitments. Rather than making empty promises to save the NHS—as Labour did five years ago, four years ago, three years ago and two years ago—without having the resources to do so, we will provide an indication of where those resources would come from.

Labour Back Benchers, in criticising the Conservatives, suggest that the NHS is somehow comprehensive at the moment. I do not blame the Labour party for the fact that it is not comprehensive, and that there is rationing, but it is important that those of us who want to save the NHS are at least honest about the fact that not every treatment is available to everyone who could benefit from it. Labour Members who campaigned on these issues know that, for example, someone suffering from multiple sclerosis will not necessarily have access to beta interferon. People wanting prompt surgical treatment might have to wait, sometimes for too long, and sometimes beyond the point at which their condition is operable. A whole series of drugs in cancer treatment, and in others, are not available to people.

The question that we all face today—it is also one that the Conservatives must address—is not whether there is going to be rationing but how much rationing there will be, and how comprehensive we can make the health service. That will depend on the amount of resources going in, the amount of preventive work that is conducted, which the Government often ignore, and the efficiency with which the resources are spent. So, let us not pretend that, under Labour, the health service is as comprehensive as we would wish. The Government have to recognise that, before they attack the Conservatives for seeking to make it less comprehensive.

I want to return to my earlier point about this not being the most progressive way of funding the health service. Income tax would clearly have been a more progressive way of funding this increase, and that is what we propose in our alternative Budget. The Chief Secretary was singularly unable to recognise that an increase in the top rate of income tax would ensure that those who were paying for an increase in funding for the health service were those most able to pay.

I gave notice to the hon. Member for Bolsover Mr. Skinner) that I intended to point out his rather ridiculous intervention in Treasury questions last Thursday. I know that I am taking my life in my hands by saying this, but I did give him notice. He argued that, because some pensioners pay income tax—he said that half of them did so, when it is actually one third—it was a bad, regressive tax, and that obtaining these funds through national insurance contributions was fairer. I do not know on what basis he feels that it is his job to protect the interests of Baroness Thatcher and her husband, who are wealthy pensioners living off a large unearned income and who will not pay a penny more on their national insurance contributions.

Before Labour Members argue that income tax is somehow regressive because wealthy pensioners would have to pay it, they must recognise that if we want to find the most progressive way of funding these increases in public services, we have to look at the better off who have done very well and ask them to pay a little more, in a fair way, before we ask people earning small amounts—as little as £5,000 a year—to pay more through national insurance. Before we ask those people to pay, we should ask the very wealthy.

John Mann: I would not dream of putting words into the mouth of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), but our constituencies share quite a long border and very similar characteristics, having both been mining constituencies. I want to ask the hon. Gentleman a question about pensioners in my constituency, who have the same characteristics as those of my hon. Friend. The vast majority of pensioners in mining areas have a second pension from British Coal and—because of the scandal of health and safety in the coal industry—now receive industrial injuries compensation to the tune of £6 billion. They are precisely the pensioners who would lose out if this increase were to be funded through income tax rather than national insurance contributions. How would the hon. Gentleman answer that point?

Dr. Harris: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer that my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell gave to his almost identical, but more briefly expressed, question at column 975 on 1 May. I suggest that he picks up a copy of *Hansard*.

The point that the hon. Gentleman's pensioners will make clear to him, as mine do to me, is that pensioners rely on the health service and on adequate funding being given to it. They are of one voice in wishing that these increases had been introduced five years ago. By now, we could be five years into a 10-year plan, instead of one year into it. We could be watching the first newly qualified medical students emerging at the end of their training, rather than seeing new medical schools being set up only this year. Nurses whose training places had been funded by increased resources could already be on the wards by now. Five years have been wasted. For the many pensioners who cannot write to the hon. Gentleman because, sadly, they have passed away, this increase has come too late, as has the delivery that the Labour party promised.

The Government published the NHS plan in 2000. In the following year, and in this one, they have published details of the delivery of the NHS plan. Perhaps, in 10 years' time, we shall see a new document outlining how they will deliver the delivery of the NHS plan. The Government's history on the management of health service funding consists of a series of comprehensive spending reviews that have not been comprehensive and in which the money has sometimes not been spent. The only thing in their favour is that they have constantly been reviewed and revised. In 1997, this Government hit the ground reviewing, rather than running. They have not dealt with the health service in the way that it needed to be dealt with.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Dr. Harris: I shall give the hon. Gentleman one more chance.

Mr. Rammell: One of the difficulties with these debates with the Liberal Democrats is that we hear spending commitments sprayed around like confetti, but when we analyse them they do not add up. Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House clearly and precisely what net additional health service spending—above and beyond the Government's current plans—the Liberal Democrats are committed to, and how they would finance it?

Dr. Harris: As I said earlier, we welcome the current plans. The level of resources that the Government are now talking about for the NHS—social services are still to be the poor relation—is about the level that we would wish to see spent. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman can look at our

[Dr. Harris]

manifesto and our alternative Budget to see that we were the only party at the time to be honest with the electorate about what these resources would be. I know that the hon. Gentleman is not used to straight counting and straight figures, because of the triple counting and re-announcing that he is used to from his own side, but I think, in all modesty, that he should give us credit for announcing our spending plans to the public before the election.

The 1 per cent. rise in employers' national insurance contributions is a stealth tax, and is a potential significant burden for industry. Indeed, the Government recognised that when they announced, in their March 1999 Budget, that they were going to tax the "bads" and not the "goods", and cut tax on employment to encourage employment opportunities. That was in reference to, yes, a cut in employers' national insurance contributions. What applied in 1999 to employers—particularly those in manufacturing industry, faced with the problems of a high pound and the decline in manufacturing—should really apply now if this really is a Government of stability, at least in terms of policy.

The proposal is also self-defeating, because the local authorities will have to pay in NICs about the same amount extra that they will receive to fund care of the elderly, even before the ridiculous and punitive fines system is imposed. It has been estimated that the additional costs for the care homes sector will be £50 million in NICs. That has not been factored in. If it has been factored in by the Government, they must give a net figure for an increase in funding in those important care sectors. They have not done so, because they fear that there may be a negative net figure in certain areas—a cut in the money available to social services.

The Government want to spend the money on the health service and they have set out examples of how in a Department of Health document. Some issues are worrying, and I would be grateful if the Minister addressed our concerns when she winds up the debate. The idea that those moneys should be spent on financial incentives for hospitals wholly misunderstands the basis on which people in the health service work. They work because of a public service ethos to treat patients to the best of their abilities.

The idea that we can wring more out of those dedicated professionals by giving hospitals financial incentives to get people in, to get people out and to treat them as day cases or not as day cases suggests that their inspiration is mercenary rather than professional and dedicated. It also runs the risk of significantly distorting clinical priorities and makes the health service more of an accountants' paradise, moving to a bottom-line analysis of health care delivery rather than one based on consideration of the patient's needs.

The Government say that they will establish a new commission to reassure us on how the extra funding is spent. The first place to which a new commission examining whether funding is spent correctly should look is its own creation. Remember, the Government rightly set up the Commission for Health Improvement under the Health Act 1999. They followed that with a refusal to allow it to consider the private sector, setting up the National Care Standards Commission a couple of years later, to begin functioning this April.

Then, while debating the latest NHS deform Bill on Report, we heard about another structural reform, as the Government said that they would merge the CHI and the newly established NCSC after all, despite saying that they would not when we advocated it during consideration of the previous legislation. All that money was spent on establishing a commission that was dissolved shortly afterwards. We heard nothing more until another announcement of a new health commission—this time, merged with Audit Commission functions and the NCSC. How much money has been wasted on the failed attempts to get this right?

We also hear that the Government are to insist that primary care trusts send patients prospectuses to tell them what services are available. That would be even more worth while if the Government insisted that PCTs openly and explicitly tell patients what services are not available. I return to the point about rationing: we should consider not the question whether there is rationing for the health service, but how explicit we are, so that people who are deciding whether to vote for the resources to go to the health service know that some services will not be available if they do not vote for those resources.

The major concern, and our biggest problem with the Government's proposals for spending the money, is how social services are being treated. The Government must recognise that, across the country, local authorities are spending £1 billion more—taken from council tax and other services—than what the Government say they should spend on social services. So, the Government are saying that there is £1 billion of cuts to be had from social services spending or they are happy for education or, more likely, environmental budgets, as education is protected, to be cut to pay for the care of the vulnerable.

Perhaps the Government want council tax to rise. Whatever we say about NICs and income tax for pensioners, Labour Members must accept that council tax is much more regressive, particularly for pensioners on a fixed income. The failure of the standard spending assessment to match need means that the most vulnerable—pensioners paying council tax or children who want funding for education or special needs provision—have to pay for the vulnerable users of social services.

The Government have not only failed to fund social services adequately, but they now say that social services will be fined if funding is not provided to deal with bed blocking and the problem of delayed discharge. We know what that means—not that social services and local authorities will pay the fines, but that they will cut other social services funding on which they will not be fined to avoid those fines. Spending on responsibilities without statutory protection, including vulnerable children, the mentally ill and the disabled, as well as some where statutory duties apply, will be cut.

Indeed, pressures on social service spending come not only from the elderly, but from the vulnerable young and the huge increase in the number of looked-after children who need those resources. Forcing local authorities to rob Peter to pay Paul or to rob Darren to pay Dora to avoid those fines is low politics of the worst kind.

The Government should ensure that their social services funding matches if not exceeds NHS funding. The Wanless report is revealing in that respect. Table 5.4 shows personal social services spending in England and

every column covers four years of projected increase, except that for the current spending review period. Instead of covering the years 1998–99 to 2002–03, it covers the three years from 1999–2000 to 2002–03. Every projection in that column lists average real-terms growth of only 1.2 per cent. compared with about 7 per cent. for the NHS. That shows the low priority that the Government plan to give to social services.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Harris: In a moment. What the Wanless report does not show is that between 1997 and 1999, according to the Library, there were real-terms cuts made under Tory spending plans, imposed by the Government on the most vulnerable. *[Interruption.]* I note that the Paymaster General is yawning at this point.

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Harris: In a moment. Vulnerable people who use social services will want to know why the Government felt it possible to cut social services in real terms—after allowance was made for the additional duties funded by the special transitional grant—in those first two years. Was not that asking the most vulnerable social services users to pay for the Government's unfunded education promises in those early years?

Dawn Primarolo: I was listening closely to the hon. Gentleman, but will he return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell)? I studied the shadow Budget produced by the Liberal Democrats not two months ago and the total spending raised for all public services, including health, would not match even what we are spending on health. Would the hon. Gentleman like to apply some of the honesty that he implores the rest of the House to apply by talking about what the Liberal Democrats have costed instead of his wish list?

Dr. Harris: I am delighted that the Minister is paying attention. If so, she will see that our investment in the early years of that projection, which is what our alternative Budget was due to cover, is higher and made quicker than what the Government promise. One of our main concerns about the Government's proposals is not only that they are one, two or five years too late to meet their commitment to save the NHS, but that they are slow to start. That is why not all the proceeds from NICs are going into the health service, particularly in the early years.

Dawn Primarolo: If what the hon. Gentleman says is true, the Liberal Democrats would need to raise more than the Government are currently raising to invest in the NHS. Will he now tell the House, as he recites his wish list, how much it would cost and where the Liberal Democrats would raise the money to pay for it? That is not in their shadow Budget.

Dr. Harris: It most certainly is in the shadow Budget. I take every opportunity to make the point that we would ask the best off in society to pay not the extra 1p NIC on employees that trickles through as the only progressive measure, but 10p on the top rate of income tax on incomes of more than £100,000. That means that those who have done particularly well out of the Minister's Government—many of whom may have contributed to her party, we hear—would be asked to pay for the health service. If she looks at our figures, which have been independently costed, she will see that our funding matches what she is providing over the cycle, but that it provides more in the early years.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Dr. Harris: The Paymaster General has still not replied to my question, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman who is seeking to intervene can tell us why the Government cut social services funding in the early years. Does the Paymaster General now regret cutting social services spending in the first two years?

Mr. Webb: The Chancellor stood up on Budget day and announced that the economy would grow substantially faster than the Government had previously thought. The Government had billions of pounds, which provided these substantial extra sums for the health service. That information was not available to my hon. Friend when he set out our proposals.

Dr. Harris: That is the point we are making. The funds and the taxation that we promise are additional to Government projected revenues.

Mr. Bryant *rose—*

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman will know and will be jealous of what we have been able to achieve in government in Scotland, and we could do more if the Labour party in Scotland had not shackled itself to the commitment not to raise fair taxes, which is what the Government did for far too long.

I question the Government's position on money following the patient; it is sad to see the Labour party parroting the Tory line on money following the patient, which it opposed when it was in opposition. The Labour party said that it would abolish the internal market. That internal market never really existed, except that money followed the patients for the services that were commissioned—which is the new Labour word for purchased—by fundholders. The Government have created primary care groups and primary care trusts, which are fundholders writ large. Now they are saying that money will follow the patient. But that does not mean more choice if the money merely follows the patient from queue to queue. People who write to me do not want a choice of which 12-month queue to join; they want access to their local hospital. A litany of local health services have been closed under the Government, so local choice has been denied, not increased.

What is the Conservative position on the future of the health service? The Tories are the second greatest danger to the health service, were they to come to power. It is clear that they do not love the NHS, because their strategy is to talk it down in the hope that they can persuade people to move to a different system that is palpably less fair.

The Government are hoist on their own petard, because one of the strongest Tory arguments is that Labour put huge resources into the health service in their first four

[Dr. Harris]

or five years in office—a false argument—and the health service has not got any better. I think that the Government accept—it is certainly accepted by Wanless—that that funding was not the step change that they are now proposing.

The Labour party cannot have it both ways. It cannot agree with us that the funding it is now proposing is required and is a step change, and also argue that that happened five years ago. We are not where we want to be already, because the Government have not put in the resources.

It would be fine if the Government had said that they were not going to put in the resources because no one wanted to pay more tax, so we would not save the health service. Instead, they stuck to Tory spending plans and provided only limited increases, and during that time they repeated announcements, triple counted and talked about billions of pounds. To the people who are now asking what has been delivered that made it seem as though the money had gone into the health service.

The Tory posters saying "You paid the taxes, but where are the teachers and the doctors" were only half wrong. The Government announced significant increases—although presumably from Santa Claus and not from taxation—but never put in those resources.

We do not have the health service we require, because we do not have the doctors, the nurses and the beds. The resources that the Bill will make available will provide those doctors, nurses and beds. I hope that the five-year delay and the Government's failure to be honest does not make it too late to save the NHS with the funds provided in the Bill, which we will support tonight.

7.4 pm

Phil Hope (Corby): A filibuster is traditionally used in Parliament when Members oppose legislation, not when they are in favour of it. Given the previous contribution, I am surprised to learn which way the Liberal Democrats intend to vote.

What we are doing in the Bill is historic. This is landmark legislation, and will place the national health service on a sound and robust financial footing. It puts a roadblock in the way of Tory plans to privatise and break up our national health service. The Bill produces a structural shift in the resources available to the NHS. That is the important point. It will provide a permanent future for health care, built on Labour's principles of a free health service based on need, not on ability to pay.

Under the Tories we experienced 18 years of deliberate disinvestment. Money was taken out of the NHS to pay for tax cuts. We know what happened. Every day we see all around us in our constituencies the legacy of that disinvestment. The Tories run down the NHS—I was sad to hear the Liberal Democrats doing the same just now—criticise it endlessly, and never accord it the success that it is having, so that people lose confidence in it. As people lose confidence in the service, in come the Tories with their plans for charges and private health insurance. They play on people's fears to force them down that route. They have no moral right to do that.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): I do not want to interrupt the hon. Gentleman's robust start to his speech, but should I deduce from what he is saying that any future increases in health spending that necessitate more Government money will come from national insurance increases rather than income tax increases? That seems to be the logic of what he is saying.

Phil Hope: The hon. Gentleman has hit on exactly the point I was trying to make. As a consequence of the 7.4 per cent. increase year on year that the Bill will generate, spending on the national health service from national insurance contributions will rise from £65 billion in this financial year to £105.6 billion in 2007–08. He is right to point out that as a result of the Bill, national insurance contributions will provide the robust financial security for the NHS that it never had under previous Tory Administrations. That is why the Bill is historic.

For a century, Labour has campaigned and fought for social equality and social justice, and for the fundamentals that matter in society, such as people's health. I feel privileged to be in the Chamber for the Second Reading of a Bill that is placing the NHS beyond the ravages of a Tory Government, and putting it in the hands of the people for its future longevity and sound delivery.

It is also significant that this is not just about a system of health care in the United Kingdom. If we get this right, it will be a model for other countries. It will show every western democracy and every emerging democracy in other parts of the world that we can deliver health care through general taxation that meets people's needs without forcing them to pay from their own pockets, without making the sick pay for being sick. We do not have to go down that route. The Labour Government in the United Kingdom are showing the world one of the most spectacular success stories. *[Interruption.]* Tory Members are shaking their heads. They cannot bear the thought that a Labour Government are showing the world how to produce one of the finest health services on the planet, which is fairly funded and efficiently delivered.

I could not believe it when the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) said that national insurance contributions were not a progressive form of taxation. Of course they are. That is the point about national insurance: people pay according to how much they earn. Moreover, pensioners on low fixed incomes will not have to pay because they do not pay national insurance. As we know, pensioners use the NHS disproportionately; the older people get, the more ill they will be. How much more progressive can you get? Those who need the health service most will not have to pay for these extra resources.

Dr. Evan Harris *rose—*

Phil Hope: We had 35 minutes of the Liberal Democrat spokesman, and that was plenty of time for him to make his points.

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend is right to say that the Liberal Democrats' argument is nonsense. In their 1997 manifesto they promised to spend £540 million extra on the health service. We spent more than that on the health service during that Parliament. They promised to fund increases by putting up taxes on cigarettes—which the Government did—and by tinkering with national

insurance. It is utter tripe for them to suggest that they would have spent more on the health service than we have spent.

Phil Hope: Tripe may be too polite a word to describe the contribution of the Liberal Democrats. It was interesting that the Liberal Democrat spokesman signally failed to answer the question that my hon. Friend the Paymaster General asked about exactly how the Liberal Democrats were going to fund their proposals. What was it they announced today for their manifesto at the next election? I think I heard it said that they would abolish all prescription charges. I think that free eye tests and free dental checks were mentioned. It will be interesting to read the Liberal Democrats' manifesto. Their current spending plans do not match what we are putting into the NHS, and they would put extra costs on top, which they do not have a clue how to fund.

Dr. Harris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Phil Hope: We can dismiss the Liberal Democrats. In the hon. Gentleman's 35-minute contribution, he failed signally to deal with—

Dr. Harris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope) has made it clear that he has no intention of giving way.

Phil Hope: There is another reason why this debate is important. Why do we need to put more money into the NHS? The Labour Government have spent five years investing in the NHS. In my area, we have a totally refurbished accident and emergency unit. We have a new orthopaedic centre, a new endoscopy suite and a new eye care ward. I have a list here. There has been hundreds of thousands of pounds of new investment under a Labour Government in the past five years, which I am proud of and which my constituents are benefiting from—but all is not right in the NHS. We would not be here raising money through national insurance contributions and putting through wholesale reforms of the NHS if all were well with the world. We know that it is not. That is why we have the Bill. We need more resources and more reform.

There are still huge problems to be addressed, but unlike the Tories and the Liberal Democrats, instead of running down the nurses and doctors who work in the health service, instead of rubbishing what has already been achieved, we acknowledge what we have achieved, but rightly say that we have a lot more to do.

I shall now make a small constituency point—a plea to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who is now on the Front Bench. I know that she does not have responsibility for health care spend, but forgive me if I make the point that a recent report by Northamptonshire health authority showed that Corby had the highest inequalities in Northamptonshire. Corby people have the lowest life expectancy, the highest levels of coronary heart disease, the highest death rates from cancer, the worst rate of respiratory diseases and the highest levels of child poverty in Northamptonshire. Therefore, Corby desperately needs the extra investment. Increased spending on the NHS is literally a question of life or death for my constituents, so while we may argue about the niceties of how to raise the money, the fundamentals are there, staring us straight in the eye.

Dr. Harris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Phil Hope: I guess the hon. Gentleman still does not realise that he had 35 minutes, and we do not want to hear any more from him.

This is not just about the treatment that people receive from their general practitioner, or their hospital operation. We all have people with those particular needs in our constituencies, but I want to emphasise what I call the softer side of health care, which is about preventing ill health. The money should be used to promote a healthy lifestyle. Activities such as the sure start programme, which is partly funded by the health service, make a real difference to children and families in the poorest estates in my constituency.

In the rural area of my constituency, we have some innovative schemes run jointly by health and social services. We have a hospital at home service, funded by the NHS but allowing patients in rural areas to return home sooner than they would otherwise do after their operations. We have heard a lot of nonsense from the Opposition about bed blocking. We know that bed blocking causes a squeeze in the system because people cannot leave hospital, but we are putting the resources in. We are investing in social services and in provision such as intermediate care for elderly people, so that people can leave the NHS when they have had their treatment and recuperate away from the hospital bed, freeing that for another person to be treated. In a place near home, or even in their own home, they can receive the treatment that they need after an operation.

Corby has many needs that still need to be met. That is why I support the Bill—to raise the money to meet the needs of my constituents. We need a new cardiac diagnostic centre for people in the town because we have such a high level of coronary heart disease. We need improved dental services. There cannot be one hon. Member who does not know of problems with the delivery of good dental care in his or her constituency. We also need better services for people with cataracts—basic ways of delivering services, which can be improved through raising resources and reforming the NHS as we are doing at the moment.

The Tories' contribution today was shambolic. They have not said that they will match our spending plans, yet they say that they believe in an NHS free at the point of delivery. How will they pay for the expenditure that is clearly needed for an NHS free at the point of delivery? They hide. They do not say how they will do it. They say, "That will be explained in four years' time at the general election"—but that is not good enough. The challenge is on the table. Would Conservatives charge patients for their care? Would they force people into private health insurance?

We have seen some clues to what the answers may be. We have heard the shadow Secretary of State for Health publicly state that he wants to break the link between the NHS and health care. We have heard the shadow

[Phil Hope]

Chancellor talk about a Stalinist NHS. Clearly, that is a message that they want to break up what we have had since—

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): What does the hon. Gentleman think about the 250,000 people who last year had to pay for their health care by using their own money to obtain operations and appointments?

Phil Hope: That almost indicates the Tory mentality exactly. Their answer is not to provide a decent NHS but to offer tax incentives for people who have the money to get a better health service. They want a two-tier health service—one standard for the rich who can afford it and a second-class health service for those who cannot. That is the essence of Conservative philosophy.

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, Maryhill): Is it not the height of hypocrisy for Conservative Members to talk about the rise in national insurance, because last time they were in government they increased national insurance in 1995 but cut benefits? This Government may be increasing national insurance, but they are doing it for the benefit of the whole population.

Phil Hope: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is the essence of Labour's approach: a fair form of raising taxation to be distributed equally, so that people in most need do not have to worry about whether they can afford to have an operation, because it will be provided for them through the NHS. Under the Conservatives, people would wake up and say, "Can I afford that operation? Should I put a bit by? How will I afford to pay for my visit to the doctor?" Can hon. Members imagine a Conservative world where people wake up every morning thinking, "I hope I don't fall ill today, because I haven't any money in the bank to pay for an operation"? That may be the Conservative world, but it is not the world that I want to live in.

Mr. Bill Wiggin (Leominster): The hon. Gentleman will understand that those 250,000 people who have paid for their operations are waking up thinking exactly the things that he has just mentioned. I understand why he is so excited about the expenditure that the Government are promising, but if things do not get better, at what point will he recognise that that expenditure alone has not been enough?

Phil Hope: I will know that I do not have to worry when the Conservatives decide to vote for the NHS for the first time in their history—when they decide tonight to walk through the Aye Lobby to support the Bill in favour of a national insurance contribution increase that will fund year on year the kind of health service that we want. This is not just about money. We know that. It is also about reform. I hope that in years to come the Conservatives will walk through the Division Lobby with Labour, voting for a reform of the NHS that will deliver a fair and efficient health service, as well as the money to go with it.

That will become the test, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said earlier. When we go to the electorate we lay out the choices, and today we see the choice that they will have. We are not having an election now, but I think that if we were, the Tories would probably have to abstain rather than vote against this Bill, because they know how damaging that decision would be.

This is a fundamental choice between left and right; it is back to good old politics. This is what we are about: an NHS funded through general taxation—a comprehensive system free at the point of delivery, and delivered according to people's need, not their ability to pay. When the Conservatives walk through the No Lobby they will be saying, "Look after yourself." That is the choice. It is a simple choice. Strangely enough, the Liberal Democrats will vote with us, despite the contribution of their spokesperson earlier—and I know that the Conservatives will vote against. I know that people in my constituency will welcome the fact that we are making a historic decision, and I am proud to be part of it.

7.19 pm

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): It is always interesting to listen to somebody describing one's party's policy when they are getting it so comprehensively wrong. If the Conservatives wanted to do as much damage to the NHS as the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope) says, why did we not privatise it or start charging people when we were in charge? The fact is that we did not.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) put his finger on what the debate is all about. Will the Government's dramatic increase in health spending—from £60 billion to £100 billion—show up in better health outcomes? He said that it will, as though it were a given. I would say that the crucial test is whether it does or does not.

The issue within the health service is clearly a lack of capacity. We see that in waiting lists, rationing and poor health outcomes compared with a lot of other countries. That is partly due to the fact that we spend less money than comparable countries, but it may have something to do with the model or the system by which we turn that money into health care.

The Government ought to think about the example of Scotland. In Scotland, health spending is at the level of our main European competitors in this regard, but the outcomes and waiting lists are not that much better. One must ask what is going wrong there; why is that extra money not being turned into better health outcomes? Will our model use this enormous increase in spending efficiently? If it does, we will have as good a health service as France, Germany and Holland, which are the most interesting countries to compare us with. If it does not, it will throw into question whether the model to which we have been wedded for many years is the right one.

The Government have produced an interesting combination of a massive increase in money and a reform of the way in which that money is spent within the health service. It is a change from when I used to shadow on this subject for the Opposition in the first years of the Government, when they were doing exactly the opposite of what they are proposing to do now, in terms of the using the driver of the internal market. It is an interesting combination and, I say to my hon. Friends, it may work. We all have doubts about whether the system can deliver, but it may work.

My belief is that the jury is out and will not be back for three years or so. We have had three years of quite large increases in health spending. By the next election, we will have had another three, making six. If at that time we are seeing far better outcomes, the Government will have been proved substantially right in the way in which they have handled the issue. But if, by the next election, we are not seeing dramatically lower waiting times, better health outcomes and less rationing, the Government and their supporters will have to examine whether the model they are using to turn the money into health outcomes is the right one. It is an interesting experiment, but I have my doubts.

One problem is that there are huge supply-side constraints within the health service, at least in the short term. In the long term, one can train more doctors and nurses and build more hospitals. In the short term, one cannot. The proposal could lead to health sector inflation, about which the Government must be careful. They could spend all the money on increasing everybody's pay and have no additional outcomes. They could also introduce an enhanced role for the private sector on the supply side of health care. There may well be greater flexibility and less short-term constraint there than in the public sector.

The NHS is very good at controlling costs at a macro-level—largely because the Chancellor decides how much money will be spent—but not at a micro-level. This will be the crux of the issue.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman is one of the more thoughtful Conservative Members and I accept his goodwill in this matter. But does he agree that the logical conclusion of what he is saying is that the Opposition should support the Bill, to give us the money to see if our modernisation programme works, while possibly making proposals to amend the modernisation programme? To deny us both the opportunity to modernise and the money to do it with is nonsensical.

Mr. Maples: The Government will get a lot of support for what they call their modernisation proposals. But it is a bit much to expect the Opposition to support the Government over a stonking great tax rise that is in breach of their own manifesto. There is only so far I am prepared to go in helping the Government to make their case.

There is little choice within the NHS for patients or GPs. In the private sector, choice is what drives efficiency and quality because it produces competition. That cannot happen in the NHS, so we try to create proxies for it. The Government have created some interesting proxies that are similar to what we did some time ago; their supporters will argue that they are different. They are trying to create proxy drivers for efficiency and quality in outcomes, which are missing, by definition, from a nationalised and Government-run service.

One other concern that I have is what in the jargon is called "turbulence". The Government are trying to get a hugely increased amount of money turned into health care: something that has never been done before. Very senior civil servants who are friends of mine say that they have never done it before, and that it is difficult to get 7 per cent. real terms increases in spending through into the front line. At the same time as doing this—and while introducing a new way in which money moves around the system to create incentives—there has been a huge reorganisation, with the creation of primary care trusts and strategic health authorities as well as new monitoring organisations and their merging.

At the moment, health authorities are being abolished and strategic health authorities and primary care trusts are being created. In my constituency—other Members will have noticed this as well—for the last six months, people have been concerned about what job they will do and whether they will still have a job when the authority is abolished. When they do get a job, they spend the next six months setting up the organisation, hiring the staff and ensuring that the working methods and protocols are in place. Those very people—particularly the senior managers in the health service—who will be responsible for driving the money through into health care have been massively distracted over the last six months and are likely to be so distracted over the next six months.

Phil Hope: Like my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), I welcome the thoughtful approach of the hon. Gentleman. Our dilemma is that if we are to achieve the increases in spending needed to deliver real health care, we require leadership. He has given an academic view; he stands back and says it will be interesting to see whether the model works or not, and we will decide in three years' time. Does he agree that we have to show leadership, and that we as a country must show that we want the spending and that we want those NHS managers to deliver? We need the managerial ability to drive the measure through. It is not an academic exercise in which we can make our minds up at some point in the future. It requires real leadership, which the Government are giving to the NHS.

Mr. Maples: I agree that we will require effective management to turn the money into health care. That is what I have been trying—perhaps rather laboriously—to say. I am concerned that those very managers will be distracted by the change in the bureaucracy and the structure of the health service that has been going on for the past six months and which is likely to take another six months, or longer, to bed down. However, I agree completely that management may well be the key.

I want to refer to the "but if". If the plan does not work, people will have to be prepared to look at other ways of working. Ours is the only OECD country of which I am aware—certainly the only advanced European economy—that uses this model for funding and running a national health service. Clearly, it has attractions; the primary attribute, of which we are all in favour, is that it provides care free at the point of use on the basis of need. But anyone who pretends that there are no problems with the system, that some people's needs are not more easily met than others, or that some of the rationing is not very arbitrary, is pretending that there are not flaws in the system, which there are.

My friends and colleagues who are Members of Parliament in Germany, Holland or France do not have weekend surgeries and postbags full of complaints from people about the time they are waiting. It is worth looking at how others do these things. We ought not to treat this subject like religion—something that you either believe in or not. We are looking for an effective way of turning a citizen's money, however it is paid—whether through taxes, social insurance or whatever—into the best possible health outcomes.

[Mr. Maples]

There has been much trashing of the United States system, and I do not advocate it. What is wrong with the US system is that it is very bad for the poorest third of the population, but it is jolly good for the other two thirds. If you are rich, there is no question but that the United States is where you would choose to be if you fell ill. The US has a self-funding and classic insurance system that wealthy people tend to use. In the middle, they have developed health maintenance organisations, which are extremely interesting. They ration health care, but do so openly. The system involves the money that a family spends as an insurance premium; whether one pays it as a premium or in tax seems a relatively minor detail. However, health maintenance organisations are interesting. They present the health care that they are going to provide openly and honestly.

That model is worth looking at, but a yet more interesting one is the social insurance model that Holland, France and Germany use in one way or another. In those countries, such issues seem not to be as political as in Britain, in that they do not bother their elected representatives quite so much. The model allows some choice and gets more money into the system. When people can see money going directly into health care, they are willing to pay more than if the Chancellor takes the money in tax and then decides how much he is going to spend on health care. In other words, when the arrangement is more direct, people are prepared to pay more, and the service can still remain free at the point of use. That said, it should be pointed out that our health care system—and those of other countries—does make charges, but basically it is free at the point of use.

Under that model, rationing does not disappear, but it is more open. Other things being equal, the more money spent, the less rationing there will be. However, it is a fallacy to imagine that it will disappear altogether, and that we can eliminate waiting times completely and create a health service that is prepared to provide any drug that anybody wants. Drugs are becoming incredibly expensive.

If we are to go down this route—I agree that it is worth looking at—I should like to adopt the model used by Germany and Holland, in which people can contribute to several social health funds. At the moment, we spend about £60 billion a year on health care—a 10 per cent. levy on everybody's taxable income produces roughly that sum—but we should consider a system in which people's taxes are reduced by 10 per cent. Here, the "straw man" of the £60 or £100 a week cost arises. The idea is that, if the sum is being paid as an insurance premium, it is not being paid in tax, but we should consider a system similar to that suggested by the Liberal Democrats, under which a 10 per cent. levy on people's taxable income is put into the health fund of their choice. It is at this point that I part company with the Government's thinking. Under my suggested model, the national health service would become one such health fund, and other organisations—the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress, insurance companies—could set up others. People would have a choice. The Government would lay down the minimum standard of care to be provided, but people could top it up if they wanted to. Again, that should be done as a percentage of one's income, so that equality can be maintained.

One thing that I do not like about the health service is that, although we pay a lot of money in tax for our families' health care, we cannot choose to pay a little more in order to get a bit more of a service; we must either take it, or leave it. If we leave it, we have to pay for the whole thing over again out of private resources, while not getting anything for the taxes we have paid. A social insurance system would combine the two incentives. The Prime Minister and the Minister have mentioned scare stories about the £60 a week that employers pay under such a system, but as I have pointed out, projected health spending of £100 billion a year will amount to about £1,700 per person per year, or about £7,500 for a family of four. In other words, we are paying a hell of a lot of money for health care, and we want to know that the existing system for delivering it will use the money to maximum effect. Describing the costs of other health care methods as additional to, rather than a substitute for, current costs, is a straw man. It is not an honest way to argue.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman quotes the Dutch model, but as chairman of the all-party group on the Netherlands, I can tell him that the biggest issue in this week's Dutch general election—excluding the death of Pim Fortuyn—is long waiting lists in their health care system. The Dutch perceive that their health care system does not work. Social insurance is not the panacea that he perhaps suggests.

Mr. Maples: Nothing is a panacea, and we will never be prepared to pay enough for the health care that we need at a particular point. If I had been making this speech three or four months ago, I would have suggested that my alternative is a better one. Given that the Government have pursued a policy whereby a huge sum of money is being raised in order to make a difference, my question now is whether the medium of the national health service can translate that into an equivalent increase in health care. If it cannot, it is worth looking at other systems, and it would be sensible to consider the one that I am describing.

Dr. Evan Harris: The hon. Gentleman is right: we need a grown-up debate, and it is wrong to argue that private health insurance will cost X amount, implying that it is more than people are paying in tax. However, as he will recognise, the problem that many have with alternative models concerns equity. It is difficult to find a more equitable way of providing health care than the current system, which, arguably, should prove more efficient thanks to the lack of cost to the administrative system of national and social insurance.

Mr. Maples: If there is a trade-off—I am not sure that there is—we are paying a high price for it. We are enforcing a system on those who would perhaps pay more for their health care, and reducing that care to a level that everybody is prepared to pay for. I want people to be able to top up a minimum guarantee from their own resources. There are many health procedures that people want to undergo—the hon. Gentleman is a doctor, so he knows far more about such matters than I do—but which are not strictly necessary for their health. Perhaps such people are prepared to pay a little extra for such procedures, but at the moment they cannot.

I have not heard continental social insurance systems being criticised as inequitable. I would imagine that my proposed system would have exactly the same equity as the national health service; however, it would provide rather more choice, and enable people to spend more money.

John Mann *rose—*

Mr. Maples: Perhaps I can move on. None the less, I agree that the jury is out on the matter. We need to wait two or three years and see whether the Government are right and their system works, and I am simply describing the system that we should consider if it does not.

I welcome the Government's change in attitude to the private sector. When I was shadow Secretary of State for Health, we discussed the abolition of various mechanisms such as local health plans, in which local hospitals are used for various purposes. Money certainly did not follow patients under those plans, and I am glad that they are being reinvented. I genuinely welcome that change of heart. Choice in the commissioning of health care will drive improvements in efficiency and quality, and replicate the drivers that one normally expects to find in economic mechanisms in the NHS. I am also glad that the purchaser-provider split is being retained. Internally, at least, that will offer a choice between providers.

The Government abolished fundholding on taking office, and in a sense they have recreated it through primary care trusts. My worry about such trusts is that they are a bit too big. I hope that some flexibility will be allowed internally, so that they will not corral every GP into exactly the same choices. Allowing such flexibility is more likely to drive up efficiency and quality.

The Government will need private sector involvement on both the supply and demand side if they want to meet their targets and ambitions, and we certainly share their ambitions. On supply, we must recognise that many elements of the health service are already provided by the private sector. The drugs industry and the medical supplies industry are private, and hospitals are now built—and in many cases operated—by the private sector. In fact, GPs are private sector contractors to the health service. We as a nation spend well over £1 billion a year on over-the-counter drugs.

One business in my constituency owns several MRI and CAT scanners, and operates them on behalf of hospitals on various bases. Although every head of radiology wants a scanner, some hospitals do not need constant access to one. Given that they cost £1 million, why should such hospitals buy one? That business will supply such a scanner for, say, two days a month. Such scanners are mobile. The business will staff them, or hospitals can staff them themselves. Hospitals can pay so much per week, or so much per episode. The private sector provision of capital is likely to prove more efficient than the purchasing by small and medium-sized hospitals of their own facilities. That system could be replicated across many clinical services, such as pathology. Unlike large hospitals such as the one across the river, some others might not be able to justify a full-scale pathology service. That is another example of how huge capital expenditure items can be more productively shared among several hospitals.

Cataract surgery is the fifth most common surgical procedure. It accounts for nearly 4 per cent. of admissions, 5 per cent. of waiting list admissions, and 11 per cent. of total waiting list days. The average wait for a cataract operation is 203 days. Given that most people who are in need of a cataract operation are already pretty old, that constitutes a significant part of their life expectancy. Subjecting people to such waits is scandalous. There is clearly a capacity constraint, whether through choice, or because certain fundamentals are difficult to effect. Commissioning authorities should get together and say, "Let us commission a cataract service from the private sector, which will perform a certain number of operations at X cost per year." That way, perhaps we can eliminate the scandal of the 203-day wait.

The Government could use the private sector to supply health care in several similar areas. The Government will have difficulty in turning money into health care because of the serious short-term supply-side constraints that they will face, and they might find it easier to meet their targets by using the private sector.

Private sector funding could also be used imaginatively on the demand side. Nobody would seriously suggest that private health insurance should be used to provide all health care, but I shall give an example of how it might be used. Ten surgical procedures account for 35 per cent. of all admissions and all waiting list days, and 20 procedures account for between 46 per cent. and 49 per cent. of admissions and waiting list days. A relatively small number of surgical procedures account for a huge amount of the work. That is the old 80:20 rule and—I suppose—it is what one would expect to find, but it is surprising that it is true on examination of the figures.

Given those figures, we might do a lot to reduce waiting times and lists by giving a modest tax subsidy to a limited private insurance subsidy that covered only those operations. That would be sensible for the Treasury to consider. I understand the arguments on private health insurance about dead-weight cost—many people already have insurance, so why give them the tax subsidy?—but the subsidy could be pitched much lower than the cost in lost taxation and still create an incentive. People could be encouraged to spend more of their own money and, in the process, could help the Government to meet their targets by taking some of the pressure off the NHS.

I am glad that we have Treasury Ministers on the Government Front Bench, because I have another idea to suggest. One of the problems that we face is that people are not saving enough for their retirement. When I worked at the Treasury, it was one of the main concerns of senior officials that people are heading for retirements during which they will cost the state a lot of money. However, we could allow people who have significant pension funds to spend some on private health care. Some people have pension funds considerably in excess of what is needed to keep them off state benefits, and we could encourage people to have a retirement fund not only for income purposes but for residential care or nursing care in their old age. If they need an operation or a hospital stay, they could also be allowed to spend money from their fund on that.

Ann McKechin: The hon. Gentleman has expressed some interesting opinions. However, one of the difficulties faced by the NHS is the lack of specialist staff, especially consultants. He mentioned cataracts and the length of the waiting lists in particular, but consultants in Glasgow are already tempted to move to other areas where they are likely to get more private work. If we

[Ann McKechin]

spend too much time focusing on the needs of people with private insurance, it skews the health service away from those who are most in need, which is those who suffer from the worst poverty.

Mr. Maples: I do not know about the Glasgow example, but the supply of health services is probably more flexible and less constrained in the private sector than it is in the public sector, at least in the short term. The Government have decided to chuck a huge amount of money at health services, but because of the constraints they will find it difficult to turn the money efficiently into health care. I do not argue that all the money should be spent in the private sector, but in the Secretary of State's statement on delivering the NHS plan he clearly envisages purchasing services from the private sector. By giving some examples, I hope to suggest an efficient way to spend a marginal amount of the money. The supply-side constraints are less in the private sector, although in the long run there are constraints on both sectors, because the problem is the number of consultants and nurses. Nurses can be trained relatively quickly, but it takes about 15 years to become a consultant.

It will be an interesting experiment to see whether the Government's model and the increase in health spending will work. We will not know for two or three years whether they will. We obviously all hope that the Government get the outcomes they want, but if the experiment does not work we will need to recognise that the model will have been tested close to destruction. Those who have been its passionate advocates will have to be prepared to look at other systems; and I suggest that we should look to our continental partners, who are not all completely crazy, to offer systems that differ from ours. I am glad that the Government are encouraging the use of private sector suppliers and encouraging private sector demand. They are likely to find that a less constrained and more productive way to spend some of the money than trying to increase capacity at the margin in the NHS.

7.45 pm

Mr. John Lyons (Strathkelvin and Bearsden): I welcome this debate on national insurance, but I do not welcome the fact that it has been used to rubbish the NHS. That is both unfair and untrue. Since the announcements on national insurance, I have had the opportunity to speak to my constituents. I admit that they have not queued up to tell me that the Chancellor is brilliant, outstanding and has done a wonderful job on national insurance, but they have all accepted that it is a fair and decent way to pay the extra 1 per cent. Many constituents have also welcomed the fact that the money will go to the NHS.

My constituents know that the NHS is a key service for them and they want to preserve and defend it, so that it can flourish. They also know that spreading the cost widely is fairer. More people in my constituency now pay NI because more people are in work since 1997. Many of the young people among them are happy to pay those NI contributions because they are now in work.

The health service must be kept at the top of the agenda. I declare an interest in that I have spent a lifetime defending the NHS and fighting on behalf of its staff, so I have some bias on those matters. As a member of a health board in the past, I know that staff have been struggling against difficult circumstances across the health service for a long time, whether in acute services, primary care or elsewhere. The staff have fought hard to try to turn the situation around.

I am not the sort of person who goes around saying that everything in the health service is wonderful, but some brilliant work is being done. We need look no further than last Friday. The people dragged from the carriages at Potters Bar were treated by the best of our health service, and they were well looked after by firemen, ambulance workers and health care workers.

I welcome the NI changes, but we must ensure that the money raised goes to front-line services so that people can see real value for the health service from what has been asked of them. The money should be spent on investment in consultants, nurses and nursing auxiliaries to ensure that we have people in place to provide and deliver a proper health service for our constituents. However, the time delay in training staff, whether nurses or consultants, is a problem. Major changes cannot be made immediately, even though they are desirable politically.

It takes time for staff to qualify, but progress has been made. In 1997, 21,370 consultants were working in the NHS. By September 2001, the figure had risen to 25,690—an increase of 20 per cent. or 4,320. That should not be the end of the matter; I want us to build on those figures. Everyone will agree that an increase in the number of consultants will have a knock-on effect on a range of services. It does not matter how many nurses are employed, if there are not enough consultants to treat patients, thus reducing waiting times and waiting lists, we shall be stuck—we can achieve nothing. The first thing that we need is more consultants—that is important. Thereafter, by all means, let us have more nurses and auxiliaries to treat the flow of patients. I am not making a political point. Any Government would be proud if they could achieve that result—I am sure that no Member would deny it.

I have been a Member of Parliament for only 10 months, but during that time I have tried to listen to people and to my constituents—irrespective of their political view—on matters such as the health service. Across the political spectrum, people want one thing: a national health service equipped for the 21st century. They want a national health service that will deliver in a modern way, but they all realise that we cannot achieve that by wishing—we need proper investment. That is the key. Without that investment, we can forget about everything else. The national insurance changes give us, properly, the funding for the investment that people want.

My contact with the health service, especially during the 10 months since I became a Member, has done nothing but reinforce my awareness of the importance of the NHS and of its centrality to people's lives—along with the police, the fire service and so on. Our constituents value the staff of the health service. People who have been in hospital always talk about the kindness of the staff and about the quality of the care that they received. The public realise that NHS staff are delivering a first-class health service.

Members who oppose investment in the service need to consider their position as regards their constituency and the services provided there. People need reassurance—

especially those working in the service. The rubbishing of the service and of the people who deliver it must stop; it is undermining and destroys morale. We should change our political attitudes in that regard.

Our constituents think that they are well served by the people who work in the service. Today, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary was presenting awards to the outstanding public servants of the year. We need to keep making such awards, especially for health workers, to let them know that we trust them and, above all, that we value them and their commitment to public service.

We must tell them that our confidence in them will be matched by increased investment and increased training to allow them to fulfil their potential in the health service. We need to break down some of the old barriers, especially for nurses or auxiliaries who, because they are paid at a certain grade, are not allowed to undertake certain work. We should find the means for a spread of work for nurses and auxiliaries—we should use them to the best of their ability.

People want a real return for the investment—a qualitative change in many services. That can be achieved. We have taken the right approach; it is bold and open and has been well received by the electorate. At the end of the day, that is what counts.

7.53 pm

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): I am glad to be able contribute to this good-natured and thoughtful debate, with good speeches from Members on both sides of the House, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples).

The Bill gives us the chance to meditate carefully on the contributory principle of social insurance that underlies the national insurance fund. On Budget day and since, we have heard much from Labour Members about William Beveridge—much has been done in his name. The reality is, however, that during successive decades and under successive Governments of all political persuasions, there has been an erosion of Beveridge's concept of genuine social insurance and the contributory principle, to the point where those ideas have become highly confusing and confused.

I regret that the process has continued in the Bill, whose author, almost inevitably, was the Chancellor of Exchequer—Complexity Brown—a man who unfortunately, Budget after Budget, not only welcomes confusion in the national insurance and taxation systems, but does much to generate even more confusion in those systems.

The essential element of the contributory principle is eligibility for certain benefits—in essence, at present, jobseeker's allowance, incapacity benefit, and retirement and widow's pensions—based on compulsory contributions from employees, employers and the self-employed. The system covers about 20 million employees, about 1 million employers and about 2.3 million self-employed—a great many people—all of whose national insurance contributions are paid into the fund. Until now, only a small percentage of those contributions has gone to NHS spending.

Figures produced by the Library show what the regime was like before the Budget announcements and before the Bill was introduced. Just over 1 per cent. of an employee's earnings between the primary threshold and the upper earnings limit was devoted to the NHS, and about 0.9 per cent. of the earnings in respect of which employer's contributions were paid. Most of the national insurance fund covers contributory benefit pay-outs.

The national insurance fund operates on a pay-as-you-go basis, so that today's contributions by today's workers cover and finance the current outgoings paid to today's benefit recipients. The problem is that there is little direct financial relationship between what an individual puts in over a lifetime and what that individual may or may not pull out by way of benefit. That point was powerfully and brilliantly exposed in the fifth report of the Select Committee on Social Security in June 2000. The Committee was worried about the future of the contributory principle and what it actually meant for the public in accounting and practical terms.

My contention is that the current national insurance system is light years away from the model of social insurance that Beveridge envisaged and that Ministers so assiduously pray in aid. Beveridge thought that the system should be fully funded. That is clearly not the case in the current national insurance system. He envisaged a fairly low flat rate for all contributors, thus allowing—in his view—middle and higher-income earners to make their own voluntary, private provision on top. They would have been able to do that because the flat rate was relatively low. That is not the case with the current system.

The fault does not lie merely with the Government over the past five years, but it has continued under them and it makes the system very different from Beveridge's model of social insurance. The problem with Beveridge's system—its corruption, some would argue—had much to do with the fact that, at an early stage, the Government of the day did not allow the social insurance fund to mature, which would have taken about 20 years of contributions. Instead, full pensions were paid at an early stage and swiftly resulted not in a fully funded insurance system but a pay-as-you-go system.

Other factors beyond the Government's control have, of course, contributed to the corruption of the original idea. In part, it has been caused by the change in women's employment in the work force, which we all celebrate but which Beveridge did not envisage at all. His view was that the man would continue to make the contributions and the wife would stay at home. Another example is life expectancy. When social insurance on a fully funded basis was talked about at the end of the 1940s, the life expectancy of a worker on retirement was one year. It is now in excess of 20 years. Those are changes that make a fully funded model very difficult to deliver. We now have a mish-mash in which what is paid into the fund, and what is received out of it, are, to say the least, untransparent transactions.

Another point about national insurance and the contributory principle properly defined was that there would be less reliance on means-tested benefits—under the contributory principle, means-tested benefits should have declined. In the last 40 to 50 years, of course, the reverse has occurred. At the end of the 1940s, more than 60 per cent. of Government social security expenditure was on contributory benefits, and only 13 per cent. was on means-tested benefits. Today, contributory benefits make up 47 per cent. of spending, and means-tested benefits have grown to more than a third of the total.

[Mr. David Ruffley]

Much of the growth in means-tested benefits is attributed to the failure of many people to qualify for the contributory national insurance benefits. It is also due to many new means-tested benefits: rent and rate rebates or the new housing benefit and council tax benefit. Undoubtedly, successive Governments have not done much to clarify in the public mind what should be paid out in relation to what is paid in by an individual payer of the stamp or national insurance contribution.

How many of our constituents, if asked about the Bill and about the contributory principle, would understand that the bulk of national insurance does not go to the national health service? Research undertaken by Dr. Bruce Stafford in 1998 for the then Department of Social Security produced some interesting findings. He discovered an individualistic approach underpinning views of the national insurance fund and the contributory principle:

"Generally, the respondents believed that through their contributions they had secured a contract with the state that gave them a 'right' to contributory benefits. In some instances, respondents thought, incorrectly, that their contributions were paid into a 'personal kitty', which was available when needed, and this was linked to the notion that contributory benefits 'top-up' other state benefits and/or private insurance."

In giving evidence to the Social Security Committee, the Trades Union Congress also complained about the lack of transparency in relation to the national insurance contribution system. When it was campaigning against the introduction of jobseeker's allowance—when it was cut from 12 months to six months, in relation to contributory benefits for the unemployed—it was surprised by the public's complete lack of understanding about the working of the contributory system. It blamed

"the complexity of national insurance and the widespread ignorance of its main features".

This may be the first time that I have agreed with the TUC, but it is right in that regard.

Increasing evidence exists that the link between contributions put in and benefits drawn out is getting vaguer year by year, Budget by Budget. The restrictions on which contributions can be counted and when they can be counted will often mean that someone who has paid national insurance at the lower end will still end up not qualifying for benefit. In 1995–96, the then DSS estimated that there were about 4 million people, mainly those with low earnings, who paid standard or self-employed contributions for short periods during the year who did not obtain a qualifying year for basic state pension, even with the benefit of credits adduced to them. At the other end of the scale, much higher earners make a similar complaint about what they get for what they put in.

From whichever end of the income scale one looks at the issue, the idea of national insurance contributions as genuine social insurance is becoming outmoded. As Professor Disney of the Institute for Fiscal Studies has observed, national insurance is merely a device for raising money because people dislike the idea of paying income tax. He said:

"They"—

the public—

"think that if they pay contributions somehow they have a greater entitlement than if they pay income tax . . . You can make the argument 'I have paid contributions all my life, I ought to get more pension'. Why not make the same argument 'I have paid income tax all my life. Why do I not get the pension I deserve?' To me they are almost identical statements."

That observation reflects what successive Governments have increasingly done. They have always altered national insurance contribution rates and the benefit conditions attached to them without strict adherence to any kind of actuarial calculation. In short, although the idea of benefits as a right might be popular with some members of the public, it does not have much basis in economic or accounting reality.

It seems that it is high time to explode the myth that the current national insurance regime is "insurance". To be much more honest, the Government should admit that we have a social security tax—a straightforward redistribution mechanism—to get contributions from those in work and to make payments to those outside the labour market. I would not advocate or support such a system but that is what the new Labour Government and the Chancellor are perpetuating with every Budget that they pass. It is incumbent on the Chancellor to own up and admit it.

I have described the manifest confusion in concepts of national insurance, but that is not the only confusion attendant on the Bill. There was much confusion in the presentation of what was undoubtedly a tax increase, not a genuine national insurance contribution increase. The hike of 1 per cent. in alleged national insurance contributions together with the removal of the upper earnings limit in relation to that rise equals a tax increase identical to a 1 per cent. increase in the basic rate, a 1 per cent. increase in the standard rate, and a 1 per cent. increase in the top rate of income tax, with increases in liability for many of the categories to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) drew attention—nurses, police inspectors, firemen and many other public sector workers.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies is in no doubt that what we are talking about, effectively, is a back-door increase in income tax rather than any form of contribution. It says that the Government's increase in national insurance is,

"for somebody whose sole source of income is from paid employment exactly like increasing the starting, basic and higher rates of income tax by 1 percentage point."

Many sage observers in the City and in the newspapers have made the perfectly legitimate and far-sighted point that the increase opens the door for increases further down the line—from 1 per cent. to 2 per cent., 3 per cent. or 4 per cent.—gradually working up to a much higher increase in the top rate of tax by the back door. What we have seen in the Bill is merely the thin end of the wedge. On 20 April, *The Economist* followed the same line of argument and said:

"NICs are barely distinguishable from income tax, except that they are levied only up to a ceiling of around £30,000. There is no ceiling on this extra new percentage point. So Mr. Brown has not raised 'income tax'; he has simply changed the incidence of NICs so that . . . they are exactly the same thing, and raised that instead."

The measures in the Budget and the Bill are in breach of the spirit of statements made by Her Majesty's Ministers at the time of the last general election. My favourite is from the Prime Minister in response to a question from Jeremy Paxman on "Newsnight" on 22 May and just before polling day. Mr. Paxman said:

"I am merely asking why you could give this guarantee"—

not to abolish the national insurance ceiling—

"last time but you can't give it this time and whether any reasonable person wouldn't suppose that you therefore propose to increase national insurance contributions?"

The Prime Minister replied, "They shouldn't" suppose that.

Then, of course, we had the all-time classic of its kind from the now Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. On the "Powerhouse" programme on 29 May 2001, she said:

"We've got no plans at all to raise that ceiling on National Insurance contributions . . . It is not going to happen."

The Select Committee on the Treasury also had some sage comments and judgments to pass on the Budget and the proposals in the Bill. I sit on the Committee and we observed the uncapped nature of the 1 per cent. rise in NICs and asked Treasury officials what they were up to. They said that the definition of the upper earnings limit on NICs is

"the point at which 11 per cent. stops and 1 per cent. starts with respect to employees."

That view seems to be greatly at variance with the previous, widely accepted and traditional definition of the upper earnings limit, which was that it was the maximum amount of weekly earnings in respect of which employee contributions are payable. The Committee went on to suggest rather insightfully:

"To insist, therefore, that the Upper Earnings ceiling remains intact seems to us mere sophistry. We note this departure from previous practice which could be viewed as a move of the national insurance contribution system towards that of general taxation."

That is the main thrust of my argument.

We have a national insurance system in which there is no direct relationship between what individuals pay and what it pays out. It is true that the Bill will direct more funds into the national health service. Conservative Members believe that more money should be put into the national health service, but that extra funding must be accompanied by reform. The Bill does not talk about reform at all. The extra financing must also be carried out with clarity and honesty, and the Bill does not do that.

Mr. Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ruffley: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I am coming to the end of my remarks.

Honesty, transparency and clearly delineated reform are not characteristics of the Bill or any other part of the Chancellor's legislation. Unfortunately Complexity Brown has complicated an already confused national insurance regime by a further damaging blurring of the distinction between general taxation and national insurance contributions.

8.13 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham): I briefly want to consider the Bill in terms of two general criticisms levelled against the national insurance increases announced in the Budget. The first is that it marks a break with Government strategy since 1997, and the second is that it compromises the national insurance fund through its extra financing of the NHS.

The Bill enacts the national insurance elements signalled in the Budget. From April next year, the primary threshold for the level of earnings at which national insurance contributions begin will be frozen at £89. Employees' contributions will be increased from 10 to 11 per cent. Employers' contributions will be increased by 1 per cent. to 12.8 per cent. From next year, the 1 per cent. increase will also apply to earnings above the limit. A person on median earnings, or £21,400, will pay £3.70 extra each week.

When considering those proposals, it is worth remembering that, between 1979 and 1997, NICs were raised for most workers from 6.5 per cent. to 10 per cent. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said, at the same time, there were no discernable increases in what might be described as the social wage. Indeed, when the increase from 9 to 10 per cent. was announced in 1995, it worked alongside cuts in national insurance support—down to six months—for unemployed workers.

In contrast, these national insurance proposals work alongside the developing tax credit regime to ensure that a two-child family with one adult in full-time employment on average pay will be nearly £4 a week better off even after the freezing of personal allowances. Under the Government's proposals, tax will rise as a proportion of national income from 37 per cent. in 2001–02 to 38.3 per cent. in 2005–06. Even then, average European Union tax takes are 3 per cent. higher. Moreover, our main rate of corporation tax is lower than in any other major European country. For small businesses, the situation is even more favourable.

The response to the revenue-raising proposals announced in the Budget was very interesting. Many commentators assume that the Budget marks a rupture with the patterns of economic management and investment sustained by the Government since 1997. That argument is worth addressing, because any specific proposals, such as these for national insurance, must be analysed in terms of the general strategy that underpins them.

I prefer to consider the national insurance proposals in terms of the evolution of Government strategy since 1997 rather than as a form of rupture that began on the day of the Budget. In that sense, four core elements in Government economic strategy are identifiable since 1997. First, the priority of efficient macro-economic management means that we have witnessed the lowest interest rates for 40 years, the lowest mortgage rates since the 1950s and the lowest inflation rate since the early 1960s. At the same time, debt estimates stand at a healthy 31 per cent. through to 2004. Secondly, we have attacked unemployment through our active labour market policy and work subsidies. Using those two strategies, the Government have dramatically altered the trade-off between levels of unemployment and accelerating rates of inflation. In one sense, that is one of the greatest hallmarks of their activity since 1997.

Thirdly, we have attacked poverty through re-incentivising work and by helping pensioners, especially poorer ones, and young families. Fourthly, I refer to our historic refinancing of public services. The effects of fiscal drag, debt repayment and reductions in unemployment have allowed us to refinance the public services with some £36.1 billion extra of annual cash expenditure by 2003–04 compared to 2000–01. As such, since 1997, we have witnessed an incremental strategy at work that systematically redistributes while simultaneously locking in stability and comparatively

[Jon Cruddas]

high growth rates. Rather than breaking with that incremental strategy, the Budget develops it further. The hallmark is its continuity in terms of stability, re-activating the supply of labour and confronting poverty and refinancing public services.

Within that overall strategy, three areas stand out in the Budget. The first is the way in which our comparative productivity shortfalls have moved centre stage in terms of our economic strategy, which I very much welcome. The second is the announcement of £33.5 billion of investment in the health service between 2003–04 and 2007–08, which, again, I very much welcome. The third is the acceptance of the revenue implications of such a strategy and, therefore, the national insurance proposals that we are discussing today.

The national insurance elements will raise £7.9 billion in 2003–04 and, alongside that, the freezing of allowances will raise £700 million. Despite those revenue-raising mechanisms, the Red Book projects that general Government net borrowing will be 1.1 per cent.—or some £12 billion—for next year, which is the end of the current comprehensive spending review period, and will rise further through the next CSR period.

I mention that briefly to highlight a prospective problem in the development of the overall strategy of refinancing public services—namely, the growth and stability pact that might interfere with this incremental domestic strategy and break the link with public service refinancing.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Before the hon. Gentleman moves on to discuss the growth and stability pact, will he assist me? I do not have his mastery of the figures, but will he explain how the 1p cut in the basic rate of income tax in 1999 and the 1p increase in employee and employer national insurance contributions reflects a continuity in Labour Government policy?

Jon Cruddas: I tend to perceive three distinct phases, which gradually paint a picture. Furthermore, it is possible to see evolution in the devolutionary strategy. First, after 18 years of Tory government, the focus between 1997 and 1999 was on reinforcing our bona fides in respect of general economic management. That moved us into a second phase—the three-year comprehensive spending cycle, which ensures real-terms reinvestment across all public services and, through the effects of the tax revenues of fiscal drag, retains healthy balances on the accounts to allow for that investment. The third phase, which was signalled in the Budget, is to accept the revenue consequences of another three-year real-terms refinancing of the health services, and at the same time to retain the core macro-economic conditions that allow real-terms growth across all public services. That strikes me as an incrementally radical agenda that systematically confronts poverty and inequality while retaining healthy economic conditions within which that radical agenda operates. I see no contradictions.

The growth and stability pact might interfere with the incremental domestic strategy and break the link between public services reinvestment and our revenue-raising initiatives. In so doing, we might compromise the reason why the public elected us last year, which I believe is also the reason why they will accept the national insurance contributions changes, in that they are being levelled so as to refinance our public services systematically. That link could be broken if we were seen to use the receipts to finance net balance at the expense of those investment plans. I therefore welcome the national insurance estimates and the way in which they will allow us incrementally to deliver the agenda on which we were elected.

The second argument—that the national insurance proposals signal a rupture with the past—relates to the historic role of the national insurance fund itself. The argument runs that, in contrast with the original assumptions behind the contributory principle, the new proposals, with their explicit link to the national insurance fund, weaken the link between contributions and benefits by cross-subsidising public service investment, which should come out of direct taxation. At the same time, because national insurance contributions are a payroll tax, the proposals act as a disincentive to employment.

However, the national insurance system has never been the wholly earmarked social insurance system that such arguments imply it was: for example, apart from a brief period between 1988–89 and 1993–94, there has been a Treasury supplement to the fund from the Consolidated Fund. At the same time, a portion of contributions income is paid into the NHS; the House of Commons Library estimates that, at various times, it has amounted to between 6 per cent. and 17 per cent. of NHS costs, and the figure for 2001–02 is some 12 per cent. of NHS revenue. If we assume that all of the increase in contributions is directed to the Consolidated Fund for use specifically in the NHS, in 2007–08, £13.2 billion from the insurance fund will amount to some 12.5 per cent. of NHS income.

It can therefore be argued that in a period of massive reinvestment in the NHS in the current CSR period, with £36 billion coming in the next CSR period, the national insurance proposals simply ensure that the proportion of contributory income directed to the NHS remains relatively stable at 12 to 12.5 per cent. Therefore, the proposals continue the principle established in the 1940s of raising resources towards the cost of the NHS through national insurance contributions.

It seems to me that these initiatives are in turn consistent with the arguments deployed by Beveridge in "Social Insurance and the Allied Services", specifically in terms of the anticipated comprehensive national health service. That is because of Beveridge's continuous emphasis on the link between the provision of social insurance, a national health service and continued paid employment. All his proposals have to be seen in the light of his desire to retain income maintenance. He states on page 8:

"the Plan for Social Security . . . takes abolition of want after this war as its aim",

and later he argues that

"the provision of an income should be associated with treatment designed to bring the interruption of earnings to an end as soon as possible."

The corollary of treatment was the anticipated form of socialised medicine. It is therefore entirely legitimate to direct an element of contributions to health care, not least because, as the CBI states, workplace absence cost British business about £10 billion in 1999. As for the

employment effect, any effect of the national insurance proposals must be seen alongside the totality of initiatives that have helped to reduce unemployment to about 1 million, reactivated much of the labour supply and created about 1.5 million jobs since 1997.

Overall, I strongly support the national insurance proposals. On the ground in my constituency, Dagenham, we are beginning to see real changes in health provision. A new hospital will be up and running within a few years, and the health authority is working on increased budgets. None the less, the needs of the community are immense: the incidence of heart and lung disease, infant mortality and life expectancy, especially for males, are among the worst in the capital. Yet the new PCT faces GP shortages and a swathe of GP retirements, while health inflation squeezes out its real-terms budget increases.

In coming years, the proposals will help to deliver the sort of health care that my constituents should receive as of right. The Bill is part of the Government's overall strategy to refinance that care effectively, and I strongly welcome it.

8.25 pm

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): It is usual at this point in proceedings for an unearthly calm to settle upon the debate. Thus far, it has been quite lively. The hon. Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) declared, with characteristic chutzpah, that this was a landmark Bill. In a slightly different tone, the hon. Member for Dagenham (Jon Cruddas) has just told us that new Labour is now in the third phase of an evolutionary strategy.

Mr. Chris Mole (Ipswich): I think that the person whom the hon. Gentleman has in mind is my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Phil Hope), not my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas).

Adam Price: I am grateful. My English geography has always failed me, but I am sure that hon. Members will forgive me.

It should be acknowledged that the Budget represents a welcome change in direction by the Government. Given the comments of the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), it should be said that it is a change for which many people, both inside and outside the Labour party, have fought.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury said that the debate was not about whether we need the extra investment in public services. We wholly agree with that assertion—we are glad that the Government have now adopted the view that Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party have held for some time. The debate is about how that money should be raised, and it is on that that I shall focus my speech, as it is where some of the problems arise. Clearly, we will support the Government on Second Reading, because the investment in our public services is sorely needed.

The Bill marks a small step forward, but hon. Members will forgive me for believing that half a step backwards has been taken in terms of the mechanism by which the Government have chosen to raise the funds. Despite claims to the contrary, national insurance contributions are relatively regressive. Increases in employer contributions have a deflationary impact on jobs and investment, and that will to some extent eat into the extra investment in the public sector.

In March, the Deputy Prime Minister tried to justify the use of national insurance contributions for the health service, saying:

"What people forget is that the health service started off as a payment out of national insurance".

He forget to mention that he was referring to the National Insurance Act 1911, which created a form of mandatory health insurance scheme whereby all wage earners and employers paid into a scheme, in return for which they received some degree of medical support. Anyone familiar with the novels of A. J. Cronin will know that that was not an entirely satisfactory arrangement, which is why the Attlee Labour Government placed direct taxation at the heart of the funding arrangements for the national health service. The National Insurance Act 1946 contained a partial link to health service funding, but was primarily about funding the provision of welfare benefits such as retirement pensions and sickness and unemployment benefits. A small proportion—it is now about 10 per cent. of national insurance contributions—goes to the NHS.

As we heard in a thoughtful speech from the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), the value of contributory benefits demonstrates a breaking of the link between national insurance contributions and welfare benefits. Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman is no longer in his place. I do not remember who said that the two things that can be said reliably about the national insurance fund are that it is not a fund and it is nothing to do with insurance. That is more the case now than ever before.

Semantics aside, the increase in national insurance contributions is an increase in taxation. When the Government transferred responsibility for national insurance contributions, the Inland Revenue probably gave the game away, although I need not detain the House too long on that.

Dawn Primarolo: The previous Government believed that national insurance should be transferred to the Inland Revenue, on the basis that it made sense to make some alignments to reduce the burdens on employers that result from some of the mechanisms. It was not a statement of what was to come, but I think that the hon. Gentleman is making some interesting points.

Adam Price: I am grateful to the Minister. One of the things that gives me the greatest pleasure in this place is that I never have to speak on behalf of the Conservative party. I certainly do not claim responsibility for the previous Government.

I believe that there has been some discussion within Government, or at least some feasibility studies, of the pros and cons of amalgamating the tax and national insurance systems. That might suggest that national insurance contributions, to a greater or lesser degree, are a form of taxation.

Dawn Primarolo: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman carefully and he is making some pertinent points. One of the problems, as business tries to persuade the Government that we should amalgamate national insurance with tax, is the loss of the contributory principle of the national insurance fund, which flags up benefit entitlement. That is precisely the point that the hon.

[Dawn Primarolo]

Gentleman is saying is missing. The very thing that keeps the national insurance fund in its present form is the fact that it is contributory and flags benefits.

Adam Price: I am grateful for that clarification. I note that the payroll sub-group of the Government's better regulation task force said that

"we understand that the really big regulatory gains would come from either combining national insurance contributions and tax into a single charge for those who currently pay both or NICs being shown as a social security surcharge."

I will happily person the barricades jointly with the Minister to oppose any further erosion of the contributory principle, but I would like to move on to the regressive nature, as I see it, of the national insurance contribution mechanism as it provides for general Government expenditure.

Generally, national insurance contributions are regressive because workers on average incomes pay a greater proportion of their income on contributions than those on higher incomes. The Chancellor could have abolished the upper earnings limit, but the anomaly of the ceiling would remain. Those earning £31,000 a year face a marginal tax rate of 23 per cent., whereas those earning less have a marginal tax rate of 33 per cent. That is clearly unacceptable for those who support a progressive income tax system.

To be fair, the Chancellor has been progressive to some degree in the way in which he has dealt with national insurance contributions. Previously, he has raised the lower earnings threshold faster than the upper earnings limit. In the most recent Budget, he introduced the additional primary percentage to operate above the ceiling. That is a partial breach of the upper earnings limit, and we hope that there is more to come. As a recent OECD study concluded, the shift from income taxation to payroll taxes leads to an overall decline in the progressivity of the tax system.

Labour Members would do well to be aware of those dangers. There has been extremely rapid growth in payroll taxes over recent years. If we include the employer contribution, we find that many people pay more in payroll taxes as a proportion of their total wage bills than they do in income tax. We have seen a continuous upward trend. Employer contributions have risen from 10 per cent. in 1997 to 12.8 per cent., according to the Government's proposals. Employee contributions have increased from 6.5 per cent. in 1979, under the Conservatives, to 10 per cent. in 1997, and now to 11 per cent. Both the employee and employer contributions represent the highest ever figures in terms of payroll taxes.

The problem is that the burden falls disproportionately on those on average and lower incomes. There are fewer bands within national insurance contributions because of the upper earnings limit. As we have heard from the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), unearned income is not taxed in this context. We live in interesting times when we hear the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) defending the rights of what used to be called the rentier class in days gone by in the Labour movement. I am referring to wealthy people who do not rely on employment for their income.

There is the rejoinder that those of us who are in favour of fairly taxing unearned income are in favour also of taxing pensioners. It should be remembered that the Labour Government introduced the tax on dividends from occupational pension funds. That has had a considerable impact on the welfare of those who rely on income from such sources.

If the NIC proposal is not classically redistributive, it certainly will be deflationary in its impact on the economy. We heard about the Beveridge principles from the Chief Secretary. It is true that the Government embraced the idea of shifting the burden of taxation from employment to phenomena that are more negative in terms of social welfare, such as environmental pollution. We saw that with the climate change levy. We now see a shift of the burden back on to employment. We have not had a satisfactory explanation of the rationale that lies behind that.

It is irrefutable that if non-wage labour costs are increased, ceteris paribus, there will be a negative impact on job creation.

Mr. Kevan Jones: The hon. Gentleman has been speaking for 12 minutes, and I am fascinated by his economics lecture. He obviously welcomed the extra investment in the health service, but where would his party get that extra investment, if not from national insurance?

Adam Price: I do not want to detain the House long, but I am happy to send the hon. Gentleman a copy of our alternative Budget, which has not been mentioned so far in our debate, although I am waiting. We favour abolishing the upper limit, introducing a higher tax band to restore a progressive element in the tax system and raising the standard rate. That is probably enough to be getting on with.

The increase in employers' national insurance contributions will affect business's ability to invest in growth and will delay economic recovery. It will hit labour-intensive businesses disproportionately, particularly small businesses with higher staff-related costs. A major Canadian study estimates that a 1 per cent. increase in payroll costs one year reduces total employment by 0.2 per cent the following year. As a 2 per cent. rise is proposed in the Bill, that analysis suggests a loss of 110,000 jobs in the United Kingdom in the year ending April 2004. Oxford Economic Forecasting has come up with the not dissimilar figure of 110,000 job losses over the next three years.

If predictions of an economic recovery in manufacturing are true, that recovery remains fragile, which is certainly the case in Wales, Scotland and areas where labour market problems involve not supply side constraints but an effective lack of demand.

Mr. Kevan Jones *rose—*

Adam Price: I should like to make progress. The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways; he cannot accuse me of speaking at length and being generous in giving way.

There was an opportunity to introduce an element of regional economic policy in the Government's thinking following the pre-Budget report, when we were promised a review of such policy. A number of us in Wales and Scotland have called for a look at regional incentives in

economic policy, especially in national insurance contributions. There is an opportunity to target reductions in national insurance on economic black spots where they could have a significant impact. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) made such a proposal two years ago, when he suggested targeting reductions in employers' national insurance contributions on unemployment black spots. It is therefore a shame that we are still waiting for Government proposals on regional economic policy.

Previously, we have discussed the impact of employers' contributions, particularly on the public sector, where there are still pent-up demands and wage inflation. Public sector employees, particularly nurses and ancillary staff in the NHS, believe strongly that much of the extra investment going into the public sector should be used to improve their wages and conditions. Logic is on their side; we cannot improve the NHS and other public services without tens of thousands of extra members of staff, as the Government have admitted, who will have to be enticed with higher wages, which involves a significant deadweight cost.

In that context, the increase in employers' and employees' national insurance contributions will only add to pent-up demands and public sector wage inflation. Scotland and Wales, because of the operation of the Barnett squeeze, will have a lower real-terms increase than that promised across the rest of the UK—6.8 per cent. and 6.5 per cent. respectively—and, in addition, the rise in national insurance contributions will increase public sector wage inflation. The public sector in Wales may therefore be left with a small real-terms increase, which is why Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party have argued for the public sector to be exempted from the employer contribution. That solution is not perfect—we are not arguing that it is—but at least it would ensure that the NHS receives the full benefit of the promised additional revenue.

In conclusion, we support Second Reading, because the Bill is the only way to overcome the 20 or 30 years of underinvestment referred to in the Wanless report, including the last five years of wasted opportunity, raised expectations and little delivery. We look forward to continuing the debate not just about the additional investment now going into health, but about other public services facing a similar shortage of funds. We hope that this is a beginning of a new debate with a different emphasis on taxation and public expenditure than has hitherto been the case.

8.44 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): The debate has been going on for some time. Elements of it were being discussed before the Budget, and discussion has continued at a fierce pace since then. Much of what needs to be said has been said, but that will not stop me saying it again, though perhaps not at the same length as one or two Opposition Members have spoken, as I know that some of my colleagues want to get in. Before my own contribution, I shall comment on some of the remarks from those on the Opposition Benches.

We have heard much about whether the tax is progressive or regressive, but we cannot look at just one tax. We must consider the whole tax system, which is made up of progressive taxes, regressive taxes and contributory taxes. The entire package must be examined and a judgment made about whether people at particular levels of income are paying the right contribution to society.

In choosing national insurance contributions to fund the proposed increase in public spending, the Government made some finely balanced judgments. We can argue about whether they have got it right, and Opposition Members can suggest that they have not, but the Opposition cannot attack the increase on the grounds that rich people are not paying enough into the tax system. That is an argument about the whole tax system, which we should have as part of the wider Budget debate, not in the context of a rise that is being levied specifically for the purpose of rebuilding the health service.

The Liberal Democrats tried to wriggle out of accepting that in their 1997 manifesto, they proposed an increase in national insurance to fund national health service spending. They cannot deny it; the proposal is there in black and white for anybody to see. Admittedly, the amount was piffling. The sum that the Liberal Democrats claimed was necessary to rebuild the NHS in 1997 was just £540 million a year, of which half would go on making prescriptions free. Their total extra spending on NHS investment for a five-year period would have been one fifth of the sum that the present Government put into the NHS.

The Liberal Democrats cannot claim now to be guardians of investment in the national health service. They were not when they faced the electorate in 1997, and all that they have done since is ramp up their demands every time Labour has put more money into the health service.

As for the contribution from the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, the less said, the better. It was a typical performance from the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)—more entertainment than information. If the national insurance increase that we are debating is so anti-employment, why did the Conservatives leave employers' national insurance at 10 per cent. through 18 years in government? Why, when unemployment was rising from about 750,000 to 4 million, did they never once reduce that national insurance? Why, when manufacturing jobs were disappearing at hundreds of thousands every year, did they never once reduce it? Now they claim that the 1 per cent. increase is anti-jobs.

When asked how the Conservatives would deal with the health service in the future, the hon. Member for Buckingham said that they had not yet decided. On previous occasions he said that he was not in Parliament for the 18 years of Conservative Government, so he washed his hands of everything that they did in the past. Conservative Front-Bench policy focuses on the present—it will never predict or take responsibility for the past. The Conservatives cannot be allowed to get away with that.

We should concentrate on four questions: how the national health service should be funded, in general terms; whether it needs more money; if so, whether we will raise that through some form of direct taxation, and whether national insurance is the right form of taxation for that; and how we will make sure that the money is spent wisely. We can discuss the various alternatives for funding the NHS.

[Dr. Stephen Ladyman]

Although they deny it, the thrust of the Conservatives' thinking is clearly towards some sort of private health care system or the increased involvement of the private sector. I say to the Opposition that there are many different business models, but two tend to predominate: high-turnover, low-margin businesses and low-turnover, high-margin businesses. In health care systems such as that of the United States, which is predominantly private, exactly those two business models dominate: the wealthy go into low-turnover, high-margin and high-quality health care systems and the poor go into high-turnover, low-quality and low-margin systems.

I mentioned in an intervention on the Chief Secretary a recent initiative in Florida, Jeb Bush's state, in which the pharmaceutical industry tried to help the state to reduce its Medicare budget, which was running out of control. The state has to provide such a budget for the health care of poorer people. The industry was asked to help and said that it would try to do so by providing preventive health care and decent primary care systems, on the basis that that might ultimately be the best way of driving down overall costs. For the first time in that state, poor people received preventive health care checks and saw general practitioners who took an interest in their underlying concerns. As we have seen in reports on television and elsewhere, many of those people, a significant number of whom are elderly, could say "This is the first time in my life when I have had a proper conversation and interview about my health needs with a GP."

That is what happens in an essentially private health care system, which is why we should never take that route. In this country, we have a system that is equitable and provides for people's needs when they arise—and it does so for free. Let me give the House a personal example. My mum has quite severe Parkinson's disease and the health care with which she has been provided is absolutely fantastic. She has never wanted for any medication or for the attention of her GPs. The level of care is such that we as a family could never have dreamt of providing it from our own resources. The health service does not quibble about providing that care. She needs it and gets it in its entirety for free. That is the dream on which our health system was built and we must not give it up easily.

My next question was whether we needed more money. I can tell the House that we have put substantial extra amounts into the health care system. In east Kent, I have seen the £2 million renovation of accident and emergency facilities and a new ward block in the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother hospital in Margate. Three wards around the area have been refurbished and new scanners have been provided, but it is still not enough. The East Kent Community NHS trust is the sixth biggest trust in the country and we have an elderly population of 20 per cent. above average. Despite the extra money, 835 people are still waiting more than 12 months for in-patient surgery and almost 4,000 people are waiting more than 13 weeks for out-patient work. We have done a huge amount, but we still need to do more. The total increase in spending between 1996–97 and 2002–03 has been almost 50 per cent. The level has gone from £262 million in east Kent to £521 million, so nobody can argue that we have not pumped extra money into the health service in east Kent or that we have not made real gains—but the gains have not gone far enough.

Finally, I asked whether national insurance was the right way of raising the extra money that we need. Opposition Members would do well to read the Bill; I fear that many of them have not done so. They would see provisions that I would have thought they would welcome. One of them asked whether the changes that are being made were the thin end of the wedge. The Bill is necessary because many of the changes that are being made require primary legislation. If we were further to increase the contribution that national insurance makes to the health service, that would require further primary legislation. I should have thought that Opposition Members would say that it is a good thing for taxes to be raised in a way that requires primary legislation. I should also have expected them to welcome the fact that clause 4 gets closer than the Chancellor has ever got to hypothecation by making it clear that the extra money has to be spent on the health service.

As we have heard, pensioners will not have to pay because they do not pay national insurance. That also applies to people saving for their retirement. That may give rise to anomalies. Baroness Thatcher and people of similar wealth will not pay any extra towards the health service, but that is a small price to pay for raising the money that the health service needs and delivering it to where it has to go.

There are already 31,000 extra nurses, 9,000 more doctors and 12 new hospitals as a result of the work that the Government have done. In a thoughtful contribution, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) went a long way towards saying that the money would have a real impact, with the proviso that the jury was still out on whether it would have the impact that Labour Members hope. He is right, and I accept his challenge. In four years' time, if the extra money that we are putting in has not reformed health care and our NHS modernisation programme has not turned things around, the onus will be on Labour Members to admit that we were wrong and to be prepared to consider alternatives. However, as the money that we have already put into the health service has led to demonstrable and good progress, there is no reason not to believe that the additional funding—which I hope that the House will take the first step towards approving tonight—will be the next step towards proving that the national health service can deliver the dream of its creators.

8.57 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I am pleased to make a contribution to this debate on one of the most significant pieces of legislation that the Government will pass in all their years in office. I genuinely mean that. Just as the Tory privatisation programme in the 1980s was emblematic of what the Tories in government were about, and fundamentally changed our society, the Bill and the budgetary changes associated with it define more clearly than anything what the Labour party and the Labour Government are about, and will change this country for the better.

The Bill is the culmination of a careful, deliberate and gradualist strategy to rehabilitate the concept that direct, progressive taxation can be used as a tool to achieve a

social good. Our arguments make that clear, and they have resonance with people. We are telling them that society does not get something for nothing and that if we want a world-class health service, we will have to pay a little more through extra direct taxes.

There is public support for that view, and I am confident that we are also beginning to win the debate in the House of Commons. Nothing gives me more confidence in saying that than the fact that, although this is one of the most significant pieces of legislation that the Government will introduce, for most of the debate no Tory Back-Bench Members have been present—currently, there is one. That shows that they do not have the stomach for debating this issue. They know the direction in which the public debate is going and how the public mood is moving.

Mr. Wiggin: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have been here for virtually the whole evening. I popped out to see a constituent, having made you aware that I was doing so. The hon. Gentleman is, perhaps inadvertently, attempting to mislead the House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): That is not a point of order for the Chair.

Mr. Rammell: The hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Wiggin) is the exception who proves the rule. If Conservative Members believed that they were in tune with the public mood and that they could win the argument, they would fill the Opposition Benches and try to make their case. Their absence speaks volumes.

Let us consider the substance of the Bill. I warmly welcome the measure because it firmly establishes the principle that taxation, and sometimes increases in direct taxation, is necessary in a civilised society. The Government are building on the developing consensus by introducing the measure.

In the 1980s, the public mood, to which the Conservative Government responded and which they also led, was tax cuts at almost any price. After more than 18 years, people have realised that such a strategy entails enormous cost in damage to schools, hospitals and public services generally. In 2002, there is greater public recognition that we do not get something for nothing. People look increasingly to Europe and countries such as France and Germany where waiting lists do not exist. People logically conclude that that is not unconnected to the substantially greater sums of public money that are spent on their health care systems. According to figures from the Library, of the 15 European Union countries, Britain has historically spent the second lowest percentage of GDP on health.

I increasingly believe that people are ready to endorse a preference for progressive taxation to fund the improvements that we need in the NHS rather than social insurance, private medical insurance or direct charges. I was interested to listen to the shadow Chief Secretary, who denied that the shadow Secretary of State of Health had advocated direct charges in the NHS. He may not have realised that his comments were recorded, but he went out of his way to advocate what he termed "self-pay". Self-pay or direct charges take no account of ability to pay and are far more regressive than direct taxation to pay for public expenditure. To appreciate how disastrous such a system can be, we should consider the United States, where 40 million out of 200 million people simply do not have access to decent health care. That is genuinely worrying.

We are moving in the right direction, but the key question is whether we can convince the public that direct tax changes through increases in national insurance constitute the right way forward. Initial opinion polling evidence gives ground for optimism. *The Daily Telegraph* poll shows that 77 per cent. of people support the increased expenditure for the health service and 63 per cent. believe that we were justified in raising national insurance.

I urge some caution. People have not yet started paying the taxes and we should never underestimate the capacity of people to support tax rises in principle but, when the crunch comes, to find all sorts of reasons against them. If we are to win the debate fundamentally and in the long term, we need to take some action. First, we must provide the extra doctors, nurses and beds to increase NHS capacity.

Secondly, we must be careful about the way in which the additional money is spent. I speak as a Member of Parliament for a south-east constituency, and I am conscious of the need to increase health professionals' pay, especially to meet additional housing costs. I give a word of warning. If the bulk of the unprecedented, substantial increase in public expenditure is spent simply on additional pay, and the public do not perceive sufficient improvements in the services that they receive, they will not thank us in the long run. I therefore welcome the fact that the Secretary of State for Health went out of his way to say that higher salaries must be accompanied by higher productivity and increased responsibility.

We must also make it clear, in terms of winning this debate, that this is long-term investment for long-term change. We have underfunded the national health service for more than a generation, and this is not going to be a quick fix; it is going to take time to build up the capacity. We need to say that because, otherwise, when the taxes start to bite in a year's time, the Conservatives will say to us, "People are paying the extra taxes. Where are the improvements?" There will be improvements—there are already improvements—but this is a long-term strategy. We need to make the point very clearly that we cannot underfund the national health service for 18 years and expect everything to be put right in just a short period of time.

I shall deal with some of the criticisms that have been put forward today by the Conservatives. First, they said that we had broken our election promises, but I certainly remember the Chancellor and the Prime Minister repeatedly refusing to rule out rises in national insurance contributions during the general election. Secondly, I simply will not take lessons from the Conservatives about keeping our promises on tax during a general election campaign. We all remember the 1979 campaign, in which they said that they would not put up VAT; they doubled it immediately after the general election. Similarly, in 1992, they said that they had no plans to raise the rate or change the scope of VAT. What did they do straight after the general election? They increased it by 2.5 per cent.

[Mr. Rammell]

I question the integrity of the Conservatives position when they say that they are committed to extra spending on the national health service. I have been staggered in recent weeks to read some of their statements, particularly when the shadow Health Secretary said:

"we agree on the need to spend more on health care in the United Kingdom".—[*Official Report*, 23 April 2002; Vol. 384, c. 162.]

Forgive me, but I simply do not believe that statement. The Conservatives were in power for 18 years—the longest period of one-party rule in this country since the second world war—but never did we see the increased investment levels that this Government are now introducing.

This is a debate about extra resources, and about the need for those resources. It is also about the fundamental choice that we face: do we want a socialised system of health care that is free at the point of use, or do we go down the road to private medical insurance and charging? The most revealing moment in this debate was when the shadow Chief Secretary was invited three times to say that he supported a national health service that was free at the point of use. Three times he ducked the opportunity to confirm that; he simply said that he was in favour of a better national health service. Put alongside what the shadow Health Secretary has said about wanting self-pay and private medical insurance, that makes it very clear that the fundamental choice is between rebuilding the national health service—free at the point of use—under this Government or being forced to pay for it, in a way that takes no account of the ability to pay, by the Conservative party. I am absolutely confident which way people will go.

9.8 pm

Mr. Bill Wiggin (Leominster): I can see that other hon. Members wish to speak, so I shall take no interventions and try to keep my speech as short as possible. I should like to begin by heaping praise on the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) for having actually read the Bill. Labour Members who refer to "ordinary people" should show those people the Bill and see whether they can make head or tail of it. The implementation of the Bill will raise about an extra £10 billion a year, and the Government have earmarked those funds to part-fund a 43 per cent. increase in national health service spending over the next five years. They are demanding yet more of the taxpayer's hard-earned money, but have so far failed to propose any policy for spending the extra cash that even hints at being effective.

My constituents are paying £1,600 a year more in tax than they were in 1997, yet waiting lists are rising again and the chances of surviving cancer in Britain are among the worst in Europe. The Chancellor's increase in employers' national insurance contributions will hit the public services hard. The Government have admitted that their changes to national insurance will cost the public sector £1.2 billion, of which £200 million represents the increase in the total salary bill for employing 1 million national health service workers in England. So, although the Budget has been heralded by the Government as the saviour of the NHS, it will actually start off by costing the health service money.

It is not just the Conservative party that has labelled the Budget as more tax and more talk, but making no difference. The message from the public is clear, too: it is not good enough. The British public lost faith in the Government several broken promises ago, so no wonder the Chancellor's latest money-grabbing initiative has not been as well received as they hoped.

Employees and employers are rightly unwilling to pay more of their hard-earned income in national insurance contributions, because of the Government's track record of failing to deliver. In Herefordshire, last-minute cancellations of operations for non-critical reasons have risen by 121 per cent. in the past year. That group, as a percentage of elective admissions, has doubled in size over the last year—and the number of those unfortunate patients not to be admitted within a month of the cancellation is up by 260 per cent. The number of patients in my constituency who are not admitted within a month in the first instance rose by 58 per cent.

In conjunction with the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch)—sadly, he is not in his place now—I have recently been involved with a petition that received more than 26,000 signatures from people in Herefordshire. The "Give us the beds we need" petition was part of my campaign for much needed funds to provide the new hospital at Hereford with the additional 120 beds that it needs to operate efficiently. It also needs those 120 beds to make it the same size as the hospital that it is replacing.

A large group of doctors, nurses and hospital workers from Hereford hospital made the 150-mile journey to London last month to present the petition to Downing street and to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the Government. The message from my constituents is loud and clear: the situation is unacceptable. I am sure that the good people of Herefordshire are not the only ones in the country who have had enough of broken promises, increased taxes and decrepit public services.

The situation in the NHS is that waiting lists are rising again, hospital beds are blocked—mainly because care home beds have been closed—and the odds of surviving cancer in Britain are among the worst in Europe. Last year 250,000 people without insurance paid for their own operations—more than ever before. More talk and more tax will not give people the standard of health care that they deserve. Scotland spends as much as Australia and Holland on health, and Wales and Northern Ireland spend as much as France, yet patients are receiving inferior treatment.

The Budget is a missed opportunity, and the Treasury has a closed mind on health care. It says that we have nothing to learn from other countries, despite the fact that Germany has no national waiting lists, and Danish patients have a legal right to treatment within four weeks of seeing a GP. We have an open mind. We have visited other countries that deliver better health care, simply to see what we can learn from them. Yes, Britain needs to spend more on the health service, but spending it on how the NHS is run today, and raising higher and higher taxes, will not give this country the health care standards that it has a right to expect.

Patients are paying to be treated outside the NHS. When the Independent Healthcare Association says that more than 250,000 people are having to self-fund their operations in the private sector this year, we know that things are not right. An article on BBC Online has revealed that hundreds of British patients are flying to South Africa for treatment to avoid NHS waiting lists in

the UK. Over the last six months, the number of Britons travelling to South Africa to take advantage of cheaper and quicker hospital treatment has risen dramatically.

The west midlands area health authorities, which cover my constituency, last year reported more than 1,000 delayed discharges from hospitals due to the shortage of care homes. The same was true the year before. To make matters worse, research has shown that over one third of those discharges are delayed by more than a month.

The NHS is in turmoil—we all know that—but the delayed hospital discharge problem could be eased greatly if the Government addressed the shortage of care home beds and the lack of funding for existing homes. Instead, their proposed national insurance contributions tax will have a dramatic effect on the operating margins of those homes—to their detriment, sadly.

Many small care homes in England are running at a 5 per cent. margin, but for an average care home, wages are 60 per cent. of costs. Therefore, the national insurance increase will reduce margins by 20 per cent. That increase may impose costs that are too onerous for many smaller care homes to cope with. Frank Ursell, the chief executive officer of the Registered Nursing Homes Association, said:

"For those care home owners who are already teetering on the brink, this tax increase on wages could be the final straw. Many care home owners could say 'I've had enough'".

In the current year, total NHS spending in the UK is expected to be about £68 billion. The Wanless review estimates that there will need to be a rise of between £154 billion and £184 billion by 2022–23 in order to deliver the high quality service envisaged. That implies total NHS spending increases at an average rate of between 4.2 and 5.1 per cent. a year in real terms over that 20-year period.

The increased activity implied by the projections in the report would result in a substantial increase in demand for health care workers. Derek Wanless estimates that at least two thirds more doctors and a third more nurses will be required over the next 20 years. Under the existing plans, which Wanless describes as "ambitious", the report estimates a small shortage of nurses by 2020, and a shortfall of 25,000 doctors, especially GPs.

That caused the British Medical Association much concern. In a statement to the House, the Secretary of State for Health pledged that the Government's plans for health reform would deliver 15,000 more doctors. I am left wondering where the other 10,000 will come from. It is time that the Government ceased promising everything and actually delivered. I accept that there are no quick fixes, and everyone realises that the situation is difficult and problematic, but the sensible route is not one of unattainable objectives. The Government would do well to forgo their announcements of miracles, because the public are no longer fooled. Only real results and real policies will do for the NHS and for the people of Britain.

Sadly, it is typical of the Government that the Wanless report was released on Budget day, when media attention was focused elsewhere. Perhaps the disparity between the number of doctors needed and the number pledged by the Government led to that attempt to bury the report.

The best insurance policy in the world is one that people can claim on and which delivers without delay. I do not believe that the Bill can do either.

9.17 pm

Mr. Chris Mole (Ipswich): The debate on national insurance contributions is important, because we must find the right way to raise funds fairly and efficiently for the NHS. It is clear that we should use national insurance, not income tax. The Budget package seeks to take progressive and significant steps on behalf of pensioners, and this is one way in which we can provide resources without calling on pensioners.

Investment clearly works—we have only to look at the cash for change funds that the Government made available from late 2001. In my constituency, that scheme is already delivering reductions in the number of acute hospital beds blocked by delayed transfer of care. The Ipswich hospital in Heath road has seen a reduction from 64 last November to 24 in March.

I would also like to draw attention to the investment of £1.9 million in intermediate care at the Ravenswood development in my constituency, which will help to meet the need of the elderly for the mixture of social and health care that increased resources can deliver.

The Opposition should lay out their proposals for a costed practical alternative. They need to explain to people what their proposals would mean and what they would cost. They must say whether, under their proposals, the health service would be free at the point of usage.

As we have heard, there are many reasons why there is increasing demand for additional health care expenditure. Demographic changes, new technology and rising expectations of the health care system demand that we take a close look at its financial needs. Many illnesses and injuries are now survivable that perhaps 50 years ago, at the inception of the NHS, were not. They can now be treated with some confidence. We are in the middle of a pharmaceutical and biological revolution, with new procedures and new practices. There are new technologies such as minimally invasive surgical procedures, and new drugs with greater efficacy and acceptability. My local primary care trust has confirmed evidence gathered nationally that the amount of medicines, dressings and appliances dispensed in the community has been rising by about 10 per cent. a year over recent years.

To return to the point about demography, the number of people over 65 is expected to increase by nearly one third over the next 20 years. That is why I welcome the element of the Budget that will raise real-terms spending on social care by some 6 per cent. per annum. Much ill health is age related, and that additional social care investment will be important if we want to deliver on the expectations of our health service, which I believe we all do.

If we compare our performance with that of many of our European competitors in areas such as life expectancy, infant mortality, premature mortality and survival rates for cancer and heart disease, we know that we can and must do better. People want us to deliver on improved use of new technology, shorter waiting times and enabling them to spend more time with their GP.

When we look at the Bill, we have to question what the alternatives might be. Clearly, there are alternatives such as charging, private insurance and social insurance. Most countries rely on a mixture of those. The trouble with charging is that, unlike a regular trip to the shops, our individual demands on health care are not predictable. In many instances, consumers of health care will have much

[Mr. Chris Mole]

less information and less expert knowledge than they would have when purchasing other goods and services. There is a risk of professionals setting the price for their service.

Eighty per cent. of patients in France take out supplementary insurance to pay for charges. If that is what the Conservative Opposition are proposing, that really is a stealth tax by any other name. It is important to us all that we do not go down that route, because if people are put off seeing the doctor, they are likely to end up back in the health care system with more severe health problems. Charging makes the sick pay for their sickness, so it is not a good idea.

Private insurance is not an efficient system. Administrative costs are higher. In the United States, administrative costs are about double those in Canada, which has a more general tax-funded system. In those countries, the people who need health care most are the least likely to be able to afford it. The evidence is that the sickest 10 per cent. of the American population spend six to seven times what the average American citizen does on health care. Someone with a private insurance policy that may cover only 80 per cent. of their charges can be faced with additional costs of, for example, $2,000 for hospitalisation during child birth. Many insurance policies exclude primary care and emergency care. I do not think that that sort of approach would drive consumers to change their pattern of consumption, because most of the costs of health care are initiated by the doctors, not the patients.

Let us have a brief look at social insurance. Compulsory contributions paid into and managed by independent, not-for-profit sickness funds are also a stealth tax by any other name. Is that what the Opposition are recommending? Employers end up footing much of the bill, paying on average £60 per week per employee, compared with the £5 or so that employers pay in this country through national insurance, or perhaps a total bill of £10, if we include the company's contribution through general taxation. It is also a system in which costs can fall on companies whose employees are sick. In our system, there is a significant sharing of risk among employers, which helps many small and medium-sized businesses.

We should now look at the national insurance system that the Bill is asking us to put our faith in. It offers a good deal over the lifetime of the individual, allowing us to have a health service more comprehensive than those funded by other systems. It gives us the general practice system, community nurses and other facets of our health service. It covers all of the people all of the time. Some 80 per cent. of the NHS is now funded from general taxation, and funding and costs do not fall on one group only.

We should affirm our support for a system that does not impose higher costs on those predisposed to illness and does not demand that employers bear the main burden of health costs. It is a modern and rational choice, and it is the best insurance policy in the world.

9.26 pm

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester): Before considering the Government's proposals on funding the NHS through national insurance contributions, I thought that it might not be a bad idea to have a look at some of the alternatives. Last Wednesday, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) said that the nation could expect his party to examine the experience of other countries and to offer clear and costed proposals when they have completed that period of analysis.

The hon. Gentleman does his own colleagues something of a disservice. I would like to take this opportunity to sketch some of the ideas that his colleagues already have, and about which they have, to some extent, thought long and hard. They are well documented, if one digs a little.

The hon. Gentleman said that it would be necessary to examine the experience of other countries, and that is all well and good. Let us take a slightly closer look at the American model. I understand that the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), on hearing that 14 million Americans are not covered by any health insurance at all, has ditched his American model, and quite rightly so. He ditched the American model in favour of a Swedish one. He said that in 1999, St. George's hospital in Stockholm was sold to the private sector, producing a reduction in costs of between 10 and 15 per cent. He said:

"If health care can be improved in Sweden without taxing spending and wasting, we can do it in this country as well, given the will."

I was somewhat surprised to hear a member of the shadow Cabinet expressing admiration for the public service policy of the one country in the world that is renowned for heavy taxation, but I am pleased that he has such an open mind. However, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman's Swedish model could be employed in this country, for the simple reason that while Sweden has, for the last 30 years, had one of the highest tax and spend policies to provide for its health service, the NHS in the United Kingdom has been chronically underfunded by the Conservative party.

I fear that the shadow Cabinet will have to ditch both their American and Swedish models. But it is quite astonishing how far they are prepared to go find a suitable model for the NHS. Let us turn to Canada, and to the example of the provincial Government of Saskatchewan. Between 1987 and 1989, the current shadow Home Secretary—a former Treasury spokesperson for the Conservative party—worked as an assistant director for N. M. Rothschild and Sons and advised the provincial Government there on a series of privatisation programmes. Most of us are aware of the hon. Gentleman's ideas about the public services, but before we consider the Saskatchewan model, I want to remind the House of some of his constructive contributions to the debate on funding public services in years gone by.

In 1987, in an article entitled "The privatization of education", the hon. Gentleman said:

"You can privatize just about anything."

In 1988, he wrote a thesis entitled—I am not making this up—"Privatising the World". In 1996, he described the privatisation of nuclear power stations as

"intrinsically an entirely bankable proposition."

He probably thinks, therefore, that his party could indeed consider privatising as many of the public services as it can get away with, including the national health service.

The Saskatchewan Government listened to advice from the person who is now the shadow Home Secretary about various privatisation programmes. He was obviously very

good at his job. His company was reportedly paid $30,000 a month for his services—very good work, for those who can get it. In his view, the Saskatchewan Government had not done a particularly good job of privatising the dental service, but his advice to them was heavily criticised in the state legislative assembly.

The Saskatchewan *Hansard* of 23 March 1989—I can provide a copy—says of the shadow Home Secretary that he

"will tell them that—and has told them, I understand—that the way they went about privatizing the dental plan was one of the worst examples that he has ever seen. He says: you don't do it that way. You got to be smoother. You got to con the people more. You got to work slower. Privatize some other things first and then work your way to health once you soften people up."

I doubt whether the shadow Home Secretary is very popular in Saskatchewan province. Given the verdict of the Saskatchewan Government, it may be best for the shadow Cabinet to ditch this model, along with the American and Swedish ones—unless they really do want to con the people, privatise some things first and work their way slowly towards health, once they have softened people up.

The shadow Cabinet need to clarify their policies on national insurance contributions and the funding of the national health service, and I am pleased to say that they need look no further than the House of Commons Library. In 1993, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), now the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, co-authored a pamphlet entitled "Who Benefits?" Four of the five Conservative Members of Parliament who wrote it are now shadow Ministers.

On page 19, under the heading "Privatising Insurance", the pamphlet states:

"The private sector should be encouraged to take on the role of providing the kind of insurance for which National Insurance Contributions must currently be paid."

It proposes giving rebates to those who can afford to pay for their own health insurance, and to those who can afford to insure themselves privately against unemployment, invalidity and even pregnancy. In return, a Conservative Government as envisaged by the Leader of the Opposition could scale down the national health service massively, because it would be a service only for the poor, the unemployed, the disabled, the elderly and the particularly needy—those who could not pay the premiums in a private health insurance scheme.

The proposals would make healthy and very wealthy people better off, and leave the rest of the country dependent on an underfunded two-tier NHS. However, the pamphlet also suggests that that state of affairs would be only a temporary solution. The Leader of the Opposition had longer term ideas, which the pamphlet puts succinctly:

"Ultimately, the state may provide no insurance of its own."

That is what the right hon. Gentleman put his name to, and I hope that it is helpful to the shadow Cabinet as they try to clarify their position on NI contributions and the NHS.

By contrast, the Government have laid their policy out clearly. The Bill says that they seek to make provision for

"increasing national insurance contributions and for applying the increases towards the cost of the national health service."

The Bill will do exactly what it says on the tin. The Government will raise NI contributions by 1 per cent. and increase UK health spending to £65.4 billion this year and to £105.6 billion by 2007–08. For the extra penny in the pound paid in NI contributions, my constituents can expect their local health authority to receive more than £430 million in the coming year, which is £206 million more than it received in the last year of the last Conservative Government, so I welcome the Bill. Its aims and means are clear, and it will guarantee an NHS that is free to all at the point of use.

9.36 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw): We have heard lots of bluster and a smattering of supposition from hon. Members on the usually empty Opposition Benches, but that is not surprising because they are in a quandary. Last week, I challenged the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) to ask his voters, through his website, what they thought of the NIC increases. Unfortunately, he does not appear to have done so. Let me help him out. Last Thursday, I visited Bassetlaw hospital with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears). The hospital presented 60 staff, from consultants to cleaners, and not one of them had any opposition to paying more NICs for the NHS. My hon. Friend also asked every patient whom we saw at random in the hospital what they thought of the NHS. Every single one was positively in favour of the NHS and what the Government are doing.

I have asked several times what model is preferred. I was told repeatedly, and *Hansard* will show, that the American model has been discounted, which can leave only the west European high taxation model. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda) mentioned Sweden and Canada, but my example is Germany. The German model is a pluralist, corporatist and regional model. Many of the hospitals are funded by organisations. For example, the trade unions run their own hospitals through the Workers' Welfare Agency—the Arbeiterwohlfahrt—as do the Lutheran church and the Roman Catholic Caritas agency.

If the Opposition have discounted the American model and the British model, do they prefer the German model? If so, which trade union will they invite to run the hospitals? Will they be honest and tell people that is what will happen? In fact, in the German model, health care funding is overseen at the regional level by the trade unions and the employers. One similarity between Germany and the US is collective bargaining. Some 99 per cent. of large employers in the US which run an insurance scheme have collective bargaining. The Teamsters in Ohio have five separate schemes that they attempt to negotiate with their members' employers. That is why the employer cost is higher. The employer cost in Germany is also higher, thanks to the system built up since the war and first created by Bismark. The trade unions are a full part of that system. Social insurance costs employers in Germany three times more than employers in the UK, and it costs employers in France six times more.

I am not sure what Baroness Thatcher would make of the Conservatives' move towards the social partnership model, but if they discount the model of the NHS and the model of privatisation in the US with its collective bargaining, that leaves only the high-tax Swedish model

[John Mann]

or the decentralised German model. It is make-your-mind-up time. Perhaps the Conservatives' spokesman will tell us when he winds up which one they are plumping for.

9.39 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Three things have been established during the debate: first, the Government have broken their promises; secondly, there will be damaging tax rises for employees, the self-employed and employers; and thirdly, there is no evidence that concrete improvements will flow as a result of the additional expenditure—any more than there was on any previous occasion.

The Government are always talking about extra concrete improvements as the return for extra concrete investment. On 24 June 1999, the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury—the present Secretary of State for Health—stated:

"We have fulfilled our commitment to publish Public Service Agreements covering all the public services. They set out the concrete improvements to be delivered in return for the extra investment we are making."—[*Official Report*, 24 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 458W.]

Those concrete improvements have not been delivered, yet the Government are talking about massive extra investment with no guarantee that we shall get the reforms.

Let me dwell on those broken promises—a serious issue. During the—

Phil Hope: The hon. Gentleman is running down the NHS.

Mr. Chope: That is exactly what the hon. Gentleman and his party did while we were in government—they ran down the NHS and tried to undermine confidence in it.

During the last general election campaign, the Chancellor of the Exchequer was repeatedly questioned as to whether Labour intended to raise the national insurance ceiling. His spin doctors briefed journalists in a dishonest way. On the BBC 6 o'clock news bulletin on 22 May 2001, Mark Mardell said:

"Those close to Gordon Brown say it's completely wrong to interpret this reluctance as meaning there is a plan to put up national insurance. They say that's not his intention."

At that time, no one was much closer to the Chancellor of the Exchequer than the Chief Secretary. Earlier in the debate, the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) challenged the Chief Secretary to deny that he knew a year ago that national insurance would have to be raised.

Mr. Andrew Smith: I had no such knowledge.

Mr. Chope: It is a pity that the right hon. Gentleman did not say that earlier. I am glad we have pressed him into saying it now. Perhaps it shows that he is not as close to the Chancellor as he thought.

Dr. Evan Harris: Does the hon. Gentleman find it surprising that the Treasury No. 2 could not foresee such a huge increase in taxation and NHS spending six months or a year before it happened? One would have thought that the Treasury team would be capable of predicting that.

Mr. Chope: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; many people would think that surprising, but our experience teaches us otherwise.

We shall continue repeating the comments of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the "Powerhouse" programme on 29 May 2001. She said:

"We've got no plans at all to raise that ceiling on National Insurance contributions."

This is the fourth debate on the national insurance changes since the Budget, but the Government have still not apologised for having blatantly misled the electorate on the issue.

Let me conclude my account of the broken promises by referring to the Prime Minister's words in Mr. Desmond's *Daily Express*. The right hon. Gentleman said that the Government had not "the slightest intention" of hammering people on £30,000 and £35,000 and the higher income brackets. Of course, if we consider the Prime Minister's words carefully, we realise that when he said that they had not slightest intention, that left the way open for them to have the greatest intention. That is an example of the way the Government use words to deceive the electorate. It is no surprise that the leading article in *The Economist*, referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), attacked the brazen claim that the Government had not broken any promises in the Budget.

A more important consideration for some people is whether extra employers' national insurance contributions will damage industry. On 6 October 1999, the Government's response to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry stated:

"The climate change levy and the associated reduction in employers' National Insurance contributions represents a shift in the burden of taxation from 'goods', such as labour, to 'bads', such as environmental pollution. The reduction in National Insurance contributions will reduce the cost of labour and thereby encourage employment opportunities throughout the economy."

That is what the Government were saying in 1999. By the Government's logic, therefore, the Bill will add to the cost of labour and discourage employment opportunities throughout the economy. That is endorsed by businesses large and small.

Mr. Anthony Goldstone, who was quoted selectively by the Chief Secretary in his opening remarks, said at the British Chambers of Commerce conference:

"There is no point simply pouring our money into a bottomless pit."

That will have severe implications for the public sector as well. It is interesting that the Treasury is going back on what Lord McIntosh of Haringey said in another place:

"the cost . . . to public sector employers is estimated to be around £1.2 billion in 2003–04."

He also said that

"the cost to the National Health Service is £300 million, not the £200 million to which the noble Baroness, Lady Noakes, referred."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 April 2002; Vol. 634, c. 244-45.]

Those figures now seem to be disputed by the Government's spokesmen, but that was what was said immediately after the Budget.

Are these national insurance increases necessary? The hon. Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Lyons) said that they were particularly fair because they were going to the NHS. He and his constituents are the victims of a massive confidence trick. If one looks at the Red Book and the Budget in detail, one sees that they add £4 billion to departmental expenditure limits for next year, £2.4 billion of which has been immediately allocated to United Kingdom health spending and £0.4 billion to personal social services. That adds up to £2.8 billion extra next year for the health service. The additional national insurance contributions, however, will yield £7.9 billion, and freezing income tax, personal allowances and national insurance thresholds will yield a further £700 million, which is again justified on the basis that it is needed for the NHS. Last week, in winding up the debate on North sea taxation, the Economic Secretary justified the £450 million taxation increase on North sea producers on the basis that it would be

"revenue that will help put the NHS back on a sustainable long-term financial footing".—[*Official Report*, 9 May 2002; Vol. 385, c. 359.]

If we add that yield of £450 million to the total, we are talking about tax increases of £9 billion next year, only £2.8 billion of which is necessary for the national health service.

This is a massive confidence trick. Like a child who says, "I'd like some more pocket money to spend on books, Daddy", and then spends it on sweets, the Government are saying to the taxpayers of this country, "Please pay up because we're going to spend it all on the NHS", whereas they are going to spend a heck of a lot on dealing with the waste already incurred in other Departments.

We have debated whether we will be able to achieve proper improvements in the NHS as a result of this expenditure. Nobody was able to show any evidence of improvements in the NHS as a result of increasing expenditure from 6.7 to 7.7 per cent. of GDP. Nobody was able to answer the question: why are a record 250,000 people paying for their own treatment? In many respects, performance is deteriorating. That is confirmed by the King's Fund five-year health check. Under the NHS plan, there were targets for July 2000 that no one should wait more than six months for in-patient treatment. By December last year, 277,500 people were waiting, which was more than in March 2001. Similarly, in July 2000, the NHS plan set a target for attainment by March 2002. No one was to wait more than 26 weeks for an out-patient appointment, but we now know that, by December 2001, the figure was 84,300 and higher than it had been in March 2001. That shows that performance is moving away from the targets that have been set and that bad performance is continuing with impunity, as far as the Government are concerned.

People have spoken in the debate of what things were like under the Conservatives. At least under the Conservatives, 89 per cent. of accident and emergency patients were admitted within four hours. By 2000, the figure had dropped to 76 per cent. So the proportion of accident and emergency patients not admitted within four hours has more than doubled under this Government. In 1996, 73 out of every 100 patients were seen by a doctor within one hour. In 2000, only 53.5 patients in 100 were seen by a doctor within an hour. Again, that is a manifest deterioration in the quality of service. The Audit Commission has said that there appears to be no link between work load and the speed of treatment.

Since 1996, there has been a drop of 49,700 in the number of places for long-stay residential care for the elderly and the disabled, and a host of care homes have closed as a result. In 1997, 50,505 operations were cancelled but, in 2001, 77,818 operations were cancelled. In 1996, there were 30,000 fewer administrators than now, but there were 13,000 more beds. Is it surprising that an increasing number of people say, "Bring back the Conservatives"? We know how to administer the health service.

My hon. Friends the hon. Members for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) and for Leominster (Mr. Wiggin) drew attention to what has been happening in Scotland. Of course, as people know, expenditure on health in Scotland is extremely high compared with in England. In 1999, NHS spending per head in England was £740; in Wales, it was £822; and, in Scotland, it was £904.

Before Labour Members troop into the Lobby to support the Government, they should be reminded of an interesting article that appeared in *Public Finance* on 29 March this year. It said that

"under devolution, so much cash is being thrown at NHS Scotland that health spending is projected to reach 8.1 per cent. of the nation's national income by the end of next year. This won't just be above the European average—it will be higher than in any other country in Europe.

Yet, for all this, the Scottish NHS is being denounced as a disaster by its patients. Waiting lists refuse to die down, the national health record is atrocious and, worst of all, the public is furious. Scotland is living Tony Blair's future, and it demonstrably does not work . . . The Scottish NHS has the cash that Blair covets so badly—and has nothing to show for it . . . If Blair's logic is correct, the Scots should be a pretty healthy bunch—and far happier with the NHS than the patients of the cash-strapped English system. But there is the rub.

The Scots have the worst health record in the UK. The death rates, also measured by National Statistics, show Scotland doing worse than any other part of the UK in everything from cancer to suicide rates. For every 100,000 people, 58 Scots die of bronchitis (49 for England) and 228 from coronary heart disease (205 for England) . . . A government survey of NHS patients, taken in Scotland last year, shows that 25 of every 100 patients were so dissatisfied that they considered making a formal complaint. This was true for only ten of every 100 patients of the lower-budget, longer-waiting list English NHS."

That is what is happening in Scotland, and that is what will happen in England if we have more expenditure without reforms.

The Government have been presiding over an NHS that is riddled with fraud and waste—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] We want a better system. Labour Members seem surprised. The amount of fraud was revealed by a senior civil servant, Stuart Emslie, who estimates that of the £54 billion annual budget of the health service in England, between £7 billion and £10 billion has been lost through waste and fraud.

The Labour party is not interested as long as it can carry on taxing. That is the difference between Labour and the Conservatives. We believe in getting value for taxpayers' money, and that is why we will oppose the Bill until we see reforms.

9.55 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): If the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) is in favour of the national health service, everyone listening to this

[Dawn Primarolo]

evening's debate will understand why the national health service is not safe in Tory hands: he made not one positive statement about the national health service.

Many hon. Members on both sides of the House have contributed to the debate. Essentially, they broke into two camps: those who agree that the national health service needs more money and investment, although they may disagree on how the money is raised, and those represented by most of the Conservative speakers, who prefer to state why the national health service should not receive any more funding and why they believe it should be privatised and broken up. The notable exception was the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), who made a thoughtful speech. I intend to return to some of the points he made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) started the Back-Bench speeches. He pointed out that the Chancellor's Budget set out plans for an unprecedented increase in spending in the NHS, and proposals for financing that increase in spending in public services which ensure that the investment achieves results. The Bill will deliver the funding for a sustained improvement in the NHS—unlike the alternatives of private insurance or employer-based social insurance policies.

Our proposals mean that the NHS will continue to be available to all, without restriction, not based on ability to pay, and funded through general taxation. Despite repeated requests and challenges to commit themselves to a national health service comprehensively available and free at the point of need, Conservative Members continued to decline to do so.

Using the national insurance contribution means that the money is raised as fairly as possible. Employees and the self-employed will pay an extra 1 per cent. of all of their earnings above £89 a week, and employers will make the same contribution, acknowledging the fact that an efficient health service is also in their interests. After the changes to national insurance, British companies will still pay less towards the cost of their employees' health than many other countries, particularly European countries.

The hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Adam Price) referred to the OECD study of the rising imposition on employment of social insurance taxes. He should remember that the 2002 OECD study "Taxing Wages" showed that the social contributions in the United Kingdom are significantly lower than those in our major European partners, and they will continue to be so. The very problem that many of our European partners are experiencing is of a social insurance nature and to do with the high cost of their health system.

In an excellent contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham (Jon Cruddas) said clearly that because of the new tax credits, no family with an income of less than £18,000 a year will be worse off. The new tax credit system ensures that lower earners will still have an incentive to take jobs and increase their earnings. Together with the freezing of the income tax personal allowances, the changes allow for a substantial increase in investment in the NHS.

There are no broken promises. The Government promised not to raise the basic or top rate—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Many conversations are taking place in the Chamber. The Minister is addressing the House, and she should be heard.

Dawn Primarolo: The Government said that there would not be a rise in the basic or top rates of income tax, and that the NHS would be rebuilt after decades of neglect. No promises have been broken.

Given the provisions that are set out in the Bill and the scale of the funding that is being directed to the NHS—from £65 billion this year to £105 billion in 2007–08—we can show that all the resources being raised by the increase in national insurance contributions are being directed to the NHS.

A few points were made about the quality of the health service, especially in Scotland. Questions were asked and observations were made, particularly about spending in Scotland on health care. In-patient waiting lists are about 8 per cent. higher in England than in Scotland. On average, people in Scotland have been waiting for admission for more than a month less than in England. Each year, there are about 10,000 more operations per thousand of the population in Scotland than there are in England. Investment is needed throughout the NHS in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, but the clear reforms and the clear investment that the Government are making prove that the NHS can work.

There have been comments about the imposition of 1 per cent. and the likely effects on employers. Raising money through the national insurance system ensures that we spread evenly the burden of the increased raising of tax. We have never disputed that. It is not true, as some sought to assert, that because of the national insurance changes, employers would seek to reduce pension contributions, for example, or to move away from particular pension funds.

Commentators are already suggesting that employers should increase contributions into pension funds because such contributions, unlike pay, are not liable to national insurance contributions. When we consider the benefits to employers of a healthy labour force, of reductions in costs for ill health, of low inflation, of low tax and of a high-growth economy, we can see that Britain is still a good place in which to be an employer. It is a climate that ensures that employers can continue to grow.

Comments have been made about the need to increase the number of care homes. Care homes and the care of the elderly stand to gain from higher NHS and social service spending. Increased resources for social services will include payments for more places for people who need that care. Personal social services spending is to increase by 6 per cent. in real terms.

The Bill will increase the amount of finance that goes into the NHS. It is a service that is valued and respected by our communities, even if it is not by the Conservatives. The Bill will ensure that the reforms take place and that the money is in place to ensure that we have a first-class health service for the people of this country. Investment must match reforms. We must have accountability. Money must go to front-line staff and primary care trusts to ensure that there is developing and improving care.

As my hon. Friends made clear throughout this evening's debate, this is a long-term strategy to put right the long-term problems in the national health service. It is a long march—no one is expecting immediate results—but with the finances and reforms provided in the Bill, at least this Government will be keeping their election promises and delivering a first-class health service.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 134, Noes 357.

Division No. 235] **[10.5 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, John
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Curry, Rt Hon David
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan Smith, Rt Hon Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Norman, Archie
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Desmond Swayne and
Mr. Stephen O'Brien.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Browne, Desmond
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Doughty, Sue
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Annabelle
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Francis, Dr Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike

Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Holmes, Paul
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Luke, Iain
Lyons, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miliband, David
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Price, Adam
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr John
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rayfisford, Rt Hon Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wishart, Pete
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Angela Smith and
Mr. Ian Pearson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on second or third reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Order [28 June 2001],

That the following provisions shall apply to the National Insurance Contributions Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Programming of proceedings

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House and all remaining proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.

Proceedings in Committee, on consideration and on Third Reading

(3) Notwithstanding the practice of the House as to the intervals between stages of Bills brought in on Ways and Means Resolutions, proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be completed in one day.

(4) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at half past Eight o'clock on that day.

(5) Any proceedings on consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on that day.

Programming Committee

(6) Sessional Order B (programming committees) made on 28th June 2001 shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House or on consideration and Third Reading.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

EXECUTION OF ORDERS FREEZING ASSETS OR EVIDENCE

That this House takes note of European Union Document no. 6980/02, draft Framework Decision on the execution in the European Union of orders freezing property or evidence; shares the Government's view that the general thrust of the measure will improve the speed and effectiveness with which assets and evidence can be secured in cases of serious crime; acknowledges the amendments which have been included, largely at the Government's instigation, to ensure that personal rights and freedoms are protected as far as is possible; and supports the Government's position on this measure.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 18(1)(a) (Consideration of draft deregulation, etc., orders),

HOUSING

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002, which was laid before this House on 17th April, be approved.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 18(1)(a) (Consideration of draft deregulation, etc., orders),

REGULATORY REFORM

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Carer's Allowance) Order 2002, which was laid before this House on 22nd April, be approved.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Question agreed to.

DEREGULATION AND REGULATORY REFORM

Ordered,

That John Cryer be discharged from the Select Committee on Deregulation and Regulatory Reform.—*[Dan Norris.]*

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

10.20 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I draw your attention to motion 7, which is about to be put to the House. You will see that the first two paragraphs, with which we have no problem whatever, refer to tomorrow's proceedings. However, paragraph 3 refers to proceedings next Friday, whereby the Government are attempting to reduce the amount of time for the motion on the Adjournment of the House.

May I ask you, Mr. Speaker, to use your powers on complicated questions? In 1888, the Speaker said that a complicated question can be divided if each part is capable of standing on its own. Clearly, paragraph 3 of the motion can stand by itself, and I therefore ask you to put the question on paragraphs 1 and 2 separately from paragraph 3, to which I shall object.

Mr. Speaker: I take it that the hon. Gentleman is speaking on behalf of the official Opposition and so is saying that paragraphs 1 and 2 of the motion have the agreement of the official Opposition. In that case, I ask the Whip to move paragraphs 1 and 2 together, and the House can then vote on those paragraphs. We can take the third paragraph separately, because I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that that paragraph can stand on its own.

Ordered,

That—

(1) at the sitting on Tuesday 14th May, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Mr. Robin Cook and Mr. Stephen Twigg relating to the Modernisation of the House of Commons, to Select Committees, Payment for Chairmen, Tax Law Rewrite, Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments, Liaison Committee: Power to take Evidence, Regulatory Reform and Power to Exchange Papers with Devolved Legislatures not later than four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; the Questions may be decided, though opposed, after the expiration of the time for opposed business and the Order [28th June 2001] relating to deferred Divisions shall not apply to them;

(2) at the sitting on Tuesday 14th May, the Motion in the name of Mr. Robin Cook relating to Code of Conduct may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour, and the Order [28th June 2001] relating to deferred Divisions shall not apply to Questions on the Motion or on any Amendments proposed to it; and:—*[Dan Norris.]*

Motion made,

That—

(3) at the sitting on Friday 24th May, proceedings on the Motion for the adjournment of the House in the name of the Prime Minister relating to matters to be considered before the forthcoming adjournment may continue for three hours, not including any time taken on Questions, statements or personal explanations made pursuant to paragraph (4) of Standing Order No. 11 (Friday sittings), and the Motion shall then lapse.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Mr. McLoughlin: Object.

PETITIONS

Accommodation Centre (Bicester)

10.22 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury): I am pleased to be able to present to the House a petition signed by more than 10,000 of my constituents from the town of Bicester and the surrounding villages, which declares:

That they object to the proposal by the Home Office to build an accommodation centre for asylum seekers on land vacated by the Ministry of Defence and they want the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions to exercise his discretion to ensure that there is a public inquiry.

That such a public inquiry should provide proper opportunity for the providers of local services, elected representatives of local communities and local people themselves to give evidence to be heard on the merits of any such proposal.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

To lie upon the Table.

Burford School Transport

10.23 pm

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): I beg leave of the House to present a petition on behalf of Mrs. Mullis and parents of children travelling to school by bus from Bampton to Burford school in west Oxfordshire. The petitioners are concerned that from 8 April this year, children from Bampton have been travelling on a double-decker bus instead of a traditional school coach. The bus is supposed to carry more than 100 children. It is unsupervised except by the driver and it does not include seat belts. The petitioners are concerned about safety and supervision. There are 251 signatures to the petition.

The petitioners therefore request:

That the House of Commons takes note of their petition and of the concerns about the safety of children travelling on double-decker buses to school.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

To lie upon the table.

Accommodation Centre (Bicester)

10.24 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I wish to present a petition requesting a public inquiry into any proposal to site an accommodation centre for asylum seekers near Bicester. I speak on behalf of no fewer than 324 constituents.

The petition states:

The petitioners request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions to exercise his discretion to ensure that in respect of any proposal by the Home Office to site an accommodation centre for asylum seekers on land vacated by the Ministry of Defence on the outskirts of Bicester there be a Full Public Enquiry.

That such Public Enquiry provide proper opportunity for the providers of local services, elected representatives of local communities and local people themselves to give evidence and be heard on the merits of any such proposal.

And that the Secretary of State in determining any dispute or differences between the Home Office and Cherwell District Council in respect of any application for such an accommodation centre, should, pursuant to the arrangement set out in Part 4 of the Memorandum attached to the DoE circular 18/84, exercise his discretion to ensure and facilitate a Public Enquiry.

And the petitioners remain, etcetera.

To lie upon the Table.

Marie Curie Cancer Care

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Dan Norris.]*

10.25 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down): First, I should like to thank you most sincerely for giving me an opportunity through an Adjournment debate to raise the serious funding concerns of Marie Curie Cancer Care and other voluntary hospices. I declare an interest because even after my election to the House last June, I could not bear to break my links with Marie Curie Cancer Care in Northern Ireland and chose, therefore, to remain as the unpaid chairman of its North Down support group.

In my absence, I have a committee of ever cheerful volunteers who continue to work enthusiastically as fundraisers for Marie Curie Cancer Care, and I am proud of the people of North Down, who continue to give generous support to their fundraising efforts.

I am extremely pleased to see you in the Chair, Mr. Speaker, because I know that you have always taken a keen personal interest in the great good work of Marie Curie Cancer Care, especially in Hunter's Hill, which is in your constituency and one of only two Marie Curie centres in Scotland—the other is in Edinburgh.

You are, Mr. Speaker, widely recognised as a loyal and active supporter of the hospice in your constituency, and in its silver anniversary year, your generosity in offering to host a reception in Speaker's House is greatly appreciated by Marie Curie. Hunter's Hill is regarded as a centre of excellence in specialist palliative care, but most regrettably, financial constraints mean that its full complement of 41 beds cannot be used.

Beyond Scotland, there are eight other Marie Curie centres throughout the rest of the United Kingdom—one in Wales at Penarth, six located around England at Newcastle, Liverpool, Bradford, Solihull, north London and Caterham in Surrey. Last, but certainly not least, there is one centre in Northern Ireland. The Marie Curie centre in Belfast was formerly known as Beaconfield. Again, it regrettably now functions with only 19 beds providing specialist palliative care.

We need to raise approximately £3 million for capital investment in an extension and we would obviously welcome Government support for that. In addition to the 19 beds in the Belfast centre, approximately 700 patients are cared for each year in their own homes by Marie Curie nurses across Northern Ireland. All staff make a wonderful commitment.

I want to pay warm tribute to the staff in the 10 centres as well as those Marie Curie nurses who cared for some 17,000 cancer sufferers at home in 2000–01. Their selfless dedication and compassion give tremendous comfort and support to those with cancer and their families. In that context, I should like to quote briefly from a letter that I received from a constituent, Mrs. Yvonne Mortlock, who described the last days of her father's life in the Marie Curie centre at Caterham. She wrote:

"The building was a haven of peace, kindness, love and compassion, which wrapped itself around one when entering the building. It was all so tranquil.

The nursing care was superb, so professionally administered it looked easy. But what was also so admirable were the love and care shown to the close relatives of the patient."

Mrs. Mortlock concluded:

"I commend this Government to pledge itself to support in whatever way is possible the tremendous work the Marie Curie charity has done, is doing and hopefully will be able to continue to do in the future. Without question it is a deserving organisation."

Mrs. Mortlock's plea is echoed by many Members of the House, and I am sure that the Minister will be well aware of early-day motion 1081, entitled "Hospice Funding", which has already been signed by 133 Members.

I should like the Minister to address two key questions tonight. First, are the Government supporting, in whatever way possible, the tremendous work of Marie Curie Cancer Care, as my constituent has requested? Secondly, are the Government supporting other voluntary hospices around the country? Sadly, the figures suggest that the answer to both those questions is no. Despite the fact that voluntary hospices provide three quarters of palliative care, the NHS contribution to voluntary hospices has dropped from 35 to 28 per cent. of annual running costs. This 7 per cent. drop has occurred since the Labour Government came to power in 1997.

The main reason for the fall has been that inflation uplifts to the voluntary sector have not kept pace with the voluntary hospices' increasing costs. For example, the Government have—quite rightly, I must say—made significant improvements to the salaries of NHS doctors, nurses and other staff. That, of course, means that voluntary hospices have no choice but to match the increases for their staff, without whom they could not function.

Moreover, the increase in employers' national insurance contributions announced in the recent Budget will mean that Marie Curie Cancer Care will need to find considerable funds to keep its 10 hospices running and to pay for its nursing service. I look forward to what I hope will be a guarantee from the Minister that the additional funding raised by the Budget for substantial investment in the NHS will also be extended to increase public funding to Marie Curie and other voluntary hospices that will have to bear the additional burden of increased national insurance contributions.

Another way in which hospices such as Hunter's Hill are severely penalised is through VAT. In the last financial year alone, Marie Curie paid £1.4 million in irrecoverable VAT. That is a huge amount of money. The amount of VAT that is being paid by hospices generally is not widely recognised. Surely it is time, therefore, that the Government gave active consideration to making voluntary hospices exempt from VAT.

In fairness to the Minister, however, I must say how delighted I was—I mean that truly—that, last Friday, 10 May, the Government announced that they were taking action to tackle the inconsistencies in the current system, in which some NHS trusts charge hospices for providing support services, such as NHS ambulances, pathology, imaging and pharmacy services, while others provide them free.

In their NHS cancer plan, issued as long ago as September 2000, the Government made a commitment that by 2004 an additional £50 million would be made available to the NHS for investment in hospices and specialist palliative care. I would welcome clarification from the Minister as to exactly how and where that £50 million will be spent. Does she agree that, in light of the 7 per cent. drop in NHS contributions to hospices

[Lady Hermon]

since 1997, £50 million may not now be sufficient? We all know that cancer has no respect for class, sex, colour, creed or any other status. Instead, it is a frightening fact that one in three people will get this awful disease, and that one in four will die from it. Looking around the Chamber and quickly totting up how many Members are here, that is a frightening statistic.

Hospices that care for terminally ill cancer patients have widespread public support from many, many thousands of volunteers who not only raise funds, but give of their time voluntarily in the hospices. I suggest that the Government must not risk losing the confidence of the general public or of those volunteers. Instead, they must give a firm commitment to developing a proper funding relationship with voluntary hospices as part of the forthcoming spending review. Like my constituent, Mrs. Mortlock, I commend the Government to pledge themselves to support, in whatever way possible, the tremendous work of Marie Curie.

10.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): I am happy to congratulate the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) on securing this important debate on hospices, specialist palliative care and, in particular, the excellent work of Marie Curie Cancer Care, which she highlighted. Policy responsibility for cancer services in Northern Ireland rests with the Assembly, so I am able to speak on those issues only as they affect England. However, I trust that what I have to say will interest Members, whichever part of the United Kingdom they represent.

The hon. Lady set out the success of the hospice movement clearly, passionately and in human terms. I hope that she accepts that this country is at the forefront internationally of standards in palliative care. I am the first to recognise that the hospice movement first showed that such care is possible and that patients, families and carers can be supported through illness and death, as well as during bereavement through counselling.

It surprised me to learn just how recent are the developments in palliative care. Only in the 1960s through dogged persistence, careful research, tireless fundraising and skilful lobbying did the hospice movement help others to see that such care was not only possible, but at the heart of excellent practice. Therefore, those health care developments are relatively recent.

The hon. Lady eloquently set out the important and valuable work that Marie Curie Cancer Care does to provide comprehensive care to people with cancer and their families throughout the UK. I am pleased to have the opportunity to acknowledge its work and to thank it for the way in which, over the years, it has worked constructively in partnership with the Department of Health. This certainly is not an example of the voluntary sector going along one track and the Department taking another. We constantly learn from each other in developing services for people in the community.

On the development of specialist palliative care, the hon. Lady asks how we shall help hospices throughout the country to provide a good standard of service. She will recognise that problems are associated not just with the diversity of palliative care, but with the massive regional inequalities in access to such care.

A survey conducted in 2000 by the National Council for Hospice and Specialist Palliative Care Services on behalf of the Department showed dramatic variations between regions: only 38 per cent. of health authorities in London had full palliative care strategies, whereas 92 per cent. in the west midlands were already well on the way to developing far-reaching palliative care strategies. In-patient provision varied across regions and there were similar variations in day care, home care and hospital support services. That is not good enough, and we are committed to trying to tackle those inequalities so that people throughout the country, wherever they live, can rely on good-quality palliative care services.

Inevitably, services that have developed from the voluntary sector depend to some extent on the ability, charisma and passion of individuals to take forward their fundraising programmes. That results in patchy service across the country. That is why the NHS cancer plan, which we published in September 2000, set out our intention to invest an additional £50 million in specialist palliative care by 2004. For the first time, NHS investment in this area nationally will match that of the voluntary sector, so there will be parity of funding.

It is true that merely increasing investment will not necessarily address the inequality of provision. That is why we have put in place other measures to try to tackle these issues. We have commissioned the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to undertake an evidence-based review of palliative care services as part of the supportive and palliative care service guidance. Initial findings are likely to be available later in the summer, and they will contribute to the strategy that we are developing as part of the overarching cancer plan. That will enable us, for the first time, to develop standards, so that people will know exactly what service is on offer and whether there is consistency and parity across services.

We have instituted a series of cancer networks, each of which has a palliative care strategy. Part of that strategy is to consider current population, the needs of a local area and how to build a service for cancer patients at community level involving primary care, secondary care, tertiary care and palliative care. We now have comprehensive data on the map of palliative care provision across England. That will enable more realistic support for voluntary hospices, and will help hospices to plan their own care, so that they can fit in with the network and collaborate with a whole range of professionals—clinicians, nurses and community support workers.

We recognise the importance of ensuring that the needs of voluntary sector providers are fully reflected in the investment plans that are developed, so as to ensure that we get maximum value from the extra £50 million. We have made central funding available to the national council to support people working in the voluntary sector and enable them to have a real input into the development of local plans. We do not want the plans to be a top-down mechanism. They should be based on the experience of local communities, and should build on the work, knowledge and expertise that voluntary sector providers have acquired over the many years they have been involved in this area.

We also want voluntary sector providers to have a role in helping to shape the standards that will be developed through the work of NICE, because learning from their

experience will be key to ensuring that standards are relevant to the needs of the people who will access the services.

The role of primary care trusts will be significant for palliative care, because they will spend 75 per cent. of the NHS budget by 2004. We have issued national guidance on the new arrangements for primary care trusts for this year's planning process, including the specific role of cancer networks. We have said that all primary care trusts should use the networks' service delivery plans to commission cancer services for their localities. That should ensure that there is proper planning, so that services do not spring up as a result of local initiatives that are unable to provide an equitable service for people across the community. Proper resources together with proper, detailed planning based on local people's experience should give us a much more coherent provision of cancer services and palliative care services than we have had in the past.

The hon. Lady raised some specific issues about hospice funding. I understand her concern that the sector should be adequately funded. Estimates by the national council show that total expenditure on adult palliative care services is about £300 million, of which about £170 million is provided by the voluntary sector and £130 million by the NHS. When the £50 million extra investment for the NHS comes through in 2004, funding from the voluntary sector and the NHS should be broadly equal. At a local level, that investment must be based on the agreed plans for palliative care provision within each of the cancer networks' plans.

According to the figures that the hon. Lady produced, it appears that NHS funding for the hospice movement—the proportionate funding, not the absolute funding—has fallen in recent times. The voluntary sector has been able to increase its fundraising by about 22 per cent. and NHS funding has gone up by about 14 per cent. Clearly, it is not matching the 22 per cent. increase by the voluntary sector. Therefore, proportionately, the figure will go down, but the absolute increase in cash terms has been about 14 per cent. over the past two years. Therefore, real funding for the sector is going up.

I congratulate the voluntary sector on being able to raise funds at a faster rate than the NHS. That does not mean that NHS funding is going down, but clearly the proportion will be less than the proportion of voluntary sector funding, which is increasing at quite a dramatic rate. I am delighted that local communities and individuals want to contribute voluntarily to the excellent fundraising of Marie Curie and a range of different cancer charities. As I said, this does not mean that the NHS contribution is falling, but it is not rising as fast as the voluntary sector contribution.

I say that not to blind anyone with figures and statistics, but to show that the Government are just as committed to putting money into the sector. However, we have not been able to do so as fast as the voluntary sector. That does not mean that the hon. Lady and her colleagues should not continue to press Government on the issue because it is obviously an important area for investment.

The hon. Lady has raised a couple of issues about VAT, about which officials at the Department of Health are in close contact with Customs and Excise. I understand that they will shortly be making a report to the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), to see whether any relief can be provided in relation to VAT.

We would expect the NHS to take the recently announced increases in employers' national insurance contributions into account when deciding the level of funding for hospices. Clearly, they are a key part of the calculation. Hospices have wage bills to pay, and we would expect those bills to be part of the calculation when primary care trusts decide the level of funding.

The hon. Lady generously drew attention to last week's announcement about several issues that were anomalous in the sector, including funding for training posts in hospices, the cost of drugs, pathology and ambulance transport. I am delighted to confirm that from 1 April this year funding for the full basic salary costs of specialist registrars in palliative care training in voluntary hospices will be met centrally through the medical and dental education levy. Therefore, they will be on exactly the same terms as they are in any other sector. The hospice movement will not have to find those extra costs.

We will be communicating with chief executives of trusts to ensure that their policy on pharmacy, pathology, imaging and ambulance services is consistent across the country, because there are variations at the moment. In some places, there are extra costs; in some places, there are not. NHS patients in hospices should get the free pathology and imaging tests and services that NHS patients in any other settings get, and patients should not be charged for transport by ambulance between hospice, hospital and home. We will be reminding chief executives that fully agreed pharmacy costs for hospices should be met by the NHS. I am pleased to say that we agree that NHS patients should have access to those services and that hospices should not have to bear those extra costs.

The close partnership to which I referred between the NHS and the voluntary sector enables us to provide some of the best palliative care services in the world. I recognise that people want us to do even more and to ensure that people across the country are able to get access to care not just in hospices but, importantly, at home, which is a rapidly developing sector. That is why in the NHS cancer plan we said that we would make an extra £50 million available. It is also why we take cancer itself so seriously. A massive amount of new investment is going into not just treating cancer, but cancer research, which is an important area.

Government investment in cancer research in the past year has been estimated at £190 million. Charities themselves found £180 million in the same year. Those are quite significant and substantial sums, and they are a recognition of the tragic cost to families, individuals and their carers caused by cancer in our community. The stark figures provided by the hon. Lady at the end of her speech brought that home to us.

As well as the extra investment, there is a massive programme of updating equipment. We are putting in more MRI scanners and linear accelerators. We are trying to bring our equipment up to the best standards that would be expected in any other country.

I am delighted to say that more than 95 per cent. of patients referred urgently with suspected cancer were seen within two weeks during October to December 2001, the last period for which we have figures. We are beginning to get on top of this matter, although we can do much more to make sure that we catch the disease as early as possible.

[Ms Hazel Blears]

An extra 85,000 women have been screened this year in the first phase of the extension of the NHS breast screening programme to women aged 65 to 70. Much more screening, detection and early diagnosis are taking place, and there is much more work on research and, crucially, prevention. One of our top targets was to try to get more people to give up smoking as a contribution to reducing cancer. Over the last 18 months, more than 118,000 people have reported that they have successfully given up smoking using the Government's world-class services to help people to quit.

We have a good programme right across the field in tackling cancer. The hon. Lady is right to raise the important issue of specialist palliative care, which is a relatively new field of health care that has been developed over the last 30 to 40 years. The people involved are some of the most impressive nurses, clinicians and community support workers whom I have ever met. I have visited hospices, and the words of the hon. Lady's constituent—that these places are a "haven of peace" that wrap themselves around people at a difficult time in their lives, and when they are at their most vulnerable—were appropriate. The services that I have seen are absolutely first rate and first class.

The task for the Government and the community is to make sure that these services are not simply available where there have been enthusiastic volunteers and that, as a national health service, we have a responsibility to people right across the community to make sure that they can have access to care at home or in a hospice, as well as support for their families and carers. The service must be designed around the needs of the patients who use it.

That is why I genuinely feel that the cancer networks and the collaboratives—local people working together with patients, talking about their needs and the services they would like to see—should be driving not just cancer services, but the whole of our national health service. Patients and the public fund our services, through fundraising or taxes, and our responsibility is to make sure that those services are the very best that we can possibly provide.

I am delighted that the hon. Lady has had the opportunity to raise the subject today. I reassure her that the Government certainly value these services and that we will do our very best to make sure that the new investment gets to them and makes a difference on the ground.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 14 May 2002

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Drugs Trade

1. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): What role the United Kingdom is playing in combating the international drugs trade. [54368]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Denis MacShane): I want to convey to the House my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's apologies for the fact that he is not here today. He is attending the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation Foreign Ministers meeting in Reykjavik, a long-standing commitment of which I understand he informed you, Mr. Speaker.

On my hon. Friend's question, it is a key, if unsung, aspect of Foreign and Commonwealth Office work to cut off, disrupt and delay the flow of heroin and cocaine to the United Kingdom. She will be aware that more than 90 per cent. of the heroin reaching the UK originates from the opium poppy grown in Afghanistan. I should like to inform the House that the Interim Administration in Kabul today announced the eradication of 16,000 hectares of opium poppies, which is about half the size of the New Forest, with a street value in Britain of approximately £5 billion. The United Kingdom has taken the lead with the Interim Administration in that task, and work to eradicate opium poppies continues as I speak. I congratulate the Interim Administration on the progress that they have made so far. The details of the eradication programme, maps and a video of what has been done will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mrs. Williams: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, especially the excellent news from Afghanistan. Does he agree that we have a rare opportunity to address the problems that led to the drugs trade flourishing in Afghanistan in the first place? Does he also agree that poverty, law enforcement and education are crucial considerations in achieving that? What will our Government do to address them?

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend knows about the investment made in Afghanistan by the Foreign Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence. The very good news about the opium poppy eradication programme shows that farmers are ready to turn away from opium poppy production and from drug barons and drug traffickers, to build new lives for themselves and their families, with the help of further investment. That is the next stage of the vital campaign to turn Afghanistan into a normally functioning, albeit poor, state.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The Minister spoke about the welcome reduction in poppy production in Afghanistan. What has been the effect of that on the streets in the United Kingdom? Has there been a reduction in the supply of heroin? Has it had an effect on the origin of heroin coming to the UK? What has happened to the price of heroin on the streets?

Mr. MacShane: I think that those are matters for my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Home Office. The Foreign Office is responsible for what happens outside these shores; we are not yet responsible for what happens within the UK.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): In respect of that answer, surely the point of having a policy is to have an effect, which in this case is to reduce the amount of drugs taken in this country. Will the Government and the Minister consider the fact that attempts to affect the supply of drugs have proven singularly ineffective with regard to the amount of drugs being taken? Indeed, this country has the worst heroin record in western Europe. On the other hand, if we affect the demand side by prescribing heroin, we will destroy the market and make many people much happier and much safer. It may not be in the Minister's remit to do that, but it is extremely important that he considers it.

Mr. MacShane: As the father of four school-age children, I worry about those problems. I listened to the debate on the "Today" programme this morning with interest and welcome the initiatives taken by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and, indeed, my hon. Friend to raise many of the issues. My hon. Friend is right that demand has to be tackled, but at the same time let us disrupt, delay and cut off supply where we can. We are dealing with organised networks of crime, and it is not just drugs that are involved. It is right that the Foreign Office works hard overseas to interdict those criminal networks.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): I think that hon. Members on both sides of the House welcome any step that is taken to bring about crop substitution in Afghanistan. However, looking elsewhere on the globe, will the Minister comment on the policing of ships and planes departing the Caribbean that might be involved in the transport of drugs? Newspapers have reported a significant increase in drugs trafficking by air, and we are also informed that the Atlantic patrol task ship, usually positioned in the Caribbean sea, will concentrate far more on hurricane relief than on working with the United States, French and Dutch navies to counter drug movements. What are the facts behind the deployment of that ship?

Mr. MacShane: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, there is concern, which is being taken very seriously by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, about the air transport of so-called drugs mules into this country. I have not been out to sea on my visits to Latin America, but I have talked to our people there about the high level of co-operation between the naval and other elements of Her Majesty's forces and their partners in Latin America. Given the tremendous damage that hurricanes cause in central America and the Caribbean, if one of our ships is on hurricane relief duty, I welcome that. I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman, if he so desires, with a detailed answer to his question.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): No one here would want to undermine the heroic work being done by the Interim Administration in Afghanistan in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, but my hon. Friend will recognise that the amount of the poppy harvest that has been grubbed out under the eradication programme is only a small proportion of the total. What additional efforts are being made to assist the countries that border Afghanistan, such as Iran, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, through which trafficking routes pass, to break the links in the international drugs trade?

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend draws attention to important points. The amount that has been eradicated is a substantial part of this year's crop, and the programme is not yet over, so that good work will continue. We have intense discussions with the neighbouring countries. Certainly, I know of work in the Balkans, one of the trafficking routes, where officials from the Foreign Office and other Departments are in place seeking to disrupt, delay or cut off that route and reduce the growth of the criminal networks that cause so much damage through drugs and other activities.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Speaking of the criminal networks, the Minister will be all too well aware that FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and the ELN, the National Liberation Army, both systematically exploit the drugs trade to gain weapons and resources to prosecute their murderous war against their own people. Can the Government, with their European Union partners, proscribe those organisations in the United Kingdom, so that at the very least they do not have the incentive to continue their activities in this country?

Mr. MacShane: The hon. Gentleman's knowledge of south America is appreciated in the House, and I associate myself with his definition and description of the two organisations that he mentioned. I would add to those the paramilitary AUC, a third group that causes great harm in Colombia and is linked to the drugs business. It is of course for the Home Office to decide which organisations are proscribed, but I believe that FARC is not an organisation that we can treat other than in terms of its links to drugs criminality and its use of terrorist tactics in Colombia.

Extremism (Europe)

2. **Mr. Michael Weir** (Angus): What recent discussions have taken place between his Department and EU partners regarding right-wing extremist political parties in Europe. [54369]

The Minister for Europe (Peter Hain): The European Union rose out of the ashes of a war fought against racism and extreme nationalism, and today Europe must fight extremism and racism with a five-point plan. First, the EU must be the world's biggest job creation factory, with economic reform to create full employment by the end of the decade. Secondly, the mission of the convention on the future of Europe must be to kill off the far right by bridging the gap between Europe's leaders and its citizens. Thirdly, by expanding the membership of the EU eastward we can reunite Europe's citizens and fight the forces seeking to divide us. Fourthly, Europe must be the toughest crime-fighting body in the world. Fifthly, we need a European asylum policy to stop human trafficking by criminal gangs.

Mr. Weir: I thank the Minister for that full answer. I accept the need for relations with other EU Governments, but does the right hon. Gentleman think that it is appropriate for the UK Government to pursue their much-vaunted special relationship with Mr. Berlusconi, whose neo-fascist party is in a governing coalition, especially given the united but short-lived EU action against Austria? Does not that inconsistency in the EU send out the wrong signals about the need for all parties to unite against racism and xenophobia throughout Europe?

Peter Hain: The hon. Gentleman knows all about nationalism. The Prime Minister of Italy is an elected Prime Minister and Italy is an important member of the European Union. Our Prime Minister and Government would be failing in their responsibility if they did not establish a good relationship with that Government and that Prime Minister.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): While I accept the five points to which my right hon. Friend referred—we certainly do not want right-wing and racist extremists elected anywhere in Europe, including this country—does he agree that we need to look not only at why people on the right vote for those parties but why people on the disenchanted left are sometimes attracted to do so? We should look at the reasons for that and tackle the core problems that sometimes cause people to vote in that extreme and unacceptable way.

Peter Hain: If my hon. Friend is saying that there is wider disenchantment with conventional politics across Europe, I agree; the five-point plan is designed to address that. We need to tackle people's sense of insecurity. It is disturbing that Le Pen, who is a racist and an anti-Semite, has strong support around the borders of France. There is paranoia that he fed on a fear of outsiders. We need to take account of that, and the five-point plan is designed to do so.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Does the Minister agree that as deplorable as the result was in which the British National party won three council seats

in this country, there is no comparison between the minuscule support for fascists here and the significant and growing support for fascists and neo-fascist parties on the continent?

While not in any way wishing to write off the prospect of democracy proving triumphant on the continent in the long run, will the Minister at least acknowledge that that is one reason why some of us, at least in the Opposition, have grave doubts about moves towards political unification with the continent when its political system is much more likely to elect extremists than ours?

Peter Hain: I really think that that shows appalling complacency. We have a serious problem with racism in Britain, particularly in certain parts of the country, and with the far right, including the neo-Nazis and the BNP. We must work with our European colleagues across Europe; I think that the hon. Gentleman should be a little more charitable about many of our European partners who have few or no race problems in their communities. We need to learn from each other and tackle the problem together, rather than allow the hon. Gentleman to indulge in his usual point scoring against the European Union.

Ms Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley): I, too, welcome the plan set out by the Minister. However, does he believe that it is important to have a stronger connection between the people of Europe and the EU institutions to dispel the scaremongering of right-wing parties?

Peter Hain: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, which is precisely why the Government and I, as the Government's representative on the convention on the future of Europe, are seeking a set of reforms in Europe to ensure that European leaders are much more accountable to European citizens and that the Council of Ministers provides a strategic political direction on tackling things such as rising crime, threats to security and unemployment. A body composed of Ministers from elected Governments who are accountable to their citizens should drive Europe's strategic direction; the convention's reform objectives have that aim as their priority.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): The Minister has a deserved reputation as an active campaigner in the past against discrimination, which we all applaud, but how does he square that with reaction to his recent remarks on isolationism in certain Muslim communities? Does he not agree that the real challenge for him and his colleagues is confronting illiberalism, bigotry and ignorance wherever they occur, in whatever community of whatever faith?

Peter Hain: Of course I agree, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not want to give me any lessons in fighting racism. The Government and the Labour party have encouraged the appointment of Muslims in all walks of life—we have more councillors in the Labour party from the Muslim faith than ever before and more than any other party; we are proud to have Muslim Members of Parliament and to have helped to appoint Muslims to the House of Lords. However, there is a tiny minority of isolationists in the Muslim community, just as there are tiny minorities of fundamentalists and fanatics in all religions, including, for example, in Northern Ireland. We stand four square against that to build a tolerant anti-racist society.

Afghanistan (World Service)

3. **Ross Cranston** (Dudley, North): What assessment he has made of the recent impact of the work of the BBC World Service in Afghanistan. [54370]

7. **Mr. Michael Moore** (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): What assessment he has made of the value of the BBC World Service's Arabic radio and online services. [54374]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Denis MacShane): First, I pay tribute to the former managing director of the World Service of the BBC, Mr. Austen Kark, who died in the Potters Bar tragedy. He was an outstanding servant of that outstanding and uniquely British institution.

The BBC World Service has played a key role in the middle east and Afghanistan since 11 September, especially through its radio and online services in local languages. The new relay station in Oman, which will come into operation later this year, will improve reception for some 50 million people in the region.

Ross Cranston: I congratulate those on the Front Bench on the additional funding that they have made available for the World Service since the events of 11 September. However, the online service that my hon. Friend mentioned and others towards which the World Service is moving—FM, for example—are costly. Will my hon. Friend add my name, as an unreserved supporter of that great public institution, to the list that he can exhibit to the Chancellor in the current discussions on the next spending round?

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend's name will follow mine, together with the names of all 659 Members of the House, I expect.

Mr. Moore: The Minister is right to praise the World Service. Since 11 September, its Arabic service has moved to 24-hours-a-day operation and the number of online users of its Arabic service has increased by a million. The American Government have recognised the importance of broadcasting in the region, with the announcement of an extra $30 million for the Voice of America service. Given the fraught situation in the middle east and the need for a fair and impartial broadcaster for the region, will the Minister add my name to the list and make sure that the Foreign Secretary and the entire Foreign and Commonwealth Office support the bid for the modest increase that the BBC World Service needs in the next comprehensive spending review?

Mr. MacShane: I am glad to say that this Government have provided an immodest increase for the World Service—an extra £100 million between 1999 and 2004, and an extra £64 million in the present spending period. It is not just in the Arab regions that the World Service counts; listenership has doubled in the United States. On visits to Washington, I am always surprised at the fact that leaders of the State Department and other US Government Departments turn to the BBC World Service, the

Financial Times and *The Economist* to get their news and views. The special relationship exists through the media, at least.

Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): It is right to pay a well-deserved tribute to the World Service in general, and to point out, for example, that it won the top honours at the recent Sony radio awards, and that Mr. Baqer Moin, the head of the Persian and Pashto service, won the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association award. I hope that my hon. Friend will not only add his name to the list, but ensure that the Chancellor's signature is added.

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend has, I suspect, far more influence with our Chancellor of the Exchequer than I am likely to have.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Let the record speak for itself.

Does the Minister agree that it is essential in present circumstances to recognise the value of the World Service, and in particular its broadcasts in Arabic and other languages throughout the whole of the middle east? Is not the World Service uniquely able to give an objective and impartial analysis of current events in the middle east—for example, the decision at the weekend of the Likud party to reject the idea of a Palestinian state, which many feel would unduly complicate the prospects of achieving a peaceful settlement in the middle east?

Mr. MacShane: The Arabic radio service of the BBC has about 10 million listeners and BBC Arabic Online receives almost 9 million page impressions a month. There is FM rebroadcasting in Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan and Sudan. I am sure that most key leaders in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem also either listen to or log on to the BBC World Service, which gives a view of what is happening around the world that is not only unique, but above all impartial and not propagandistic in any way.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): May I add my congratulations to Baqer Moin, head of the Persian and Pashto services? If money is available for the proposed bombing of Iraq, could one tenth of 1 per cent. of that amount be found for the World Service?

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend knows more than I do, but to my knowledge there is no plan to bomb Baghdad or Iraq. As I said, the Government have put more money into the World Service than it has ever received from any Government in the 60-odd years of its wonderful existence.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): May I associate myself with the tribute paid by the Minister to Mr. Austen Kark, who lost his life last Friday at Potters Bar?

Given the vital role of the World Service's Arabic radio service in promoting wider understanding of our international objectives—as we have just heard, that is especially important in the context of the coalition against terrorism and the regional threat posed by the development of weapons of mass destruction—does not the Minister agree that the message conveyed by the World Service should be consistent? In relation to potential future action against Iraq, which he just mentioned, will he tell us what the message is? Is it the Prime Minister's reported assertion last week that Britain will not back United States military action against Iraq unless such action is also backed by the Security Council of the United Nations, or the earlier assertion by the Secretary of State for Defence that

"we would be perfectly entitled to use force without the support of a UN Security Council resolution"?

Which is the true position of the Government and the one that they would like the World Service to convey?

Mr. MacShane: I worked briefly at the World Service in a previous incarnation, and I must say that the Government never told it what to report. When the Government's position is clear, no doubt the World Service will report it accurately. As the right hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well, the Prime Minister and other Ministers have made it clear that actions with regard to Iraq or anywhere else will take place within the context of international law. That is well known and understood, and it will be reported by the World Service.

Venezuela

4. **Mr. David Borrow** (South Ribble): If he will make a statement on the situation in Venezuela. [54371]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Denis MacShane): The Government deplored the removal of President Chavez from office following the strike organised by the CTV trade union confederation and the employers federation against him and we welcome the return of constitutional democracy in Venezuela.

Mr. Borrow: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. He will be aware that, under President Chavez, Venezuela has played a much more active role in OPEC. Will he explain what discussions have taken place between the British and Venezuelan Governments about the importance of oil price stability and tell us whether those discussions have been successful?

Mr. MacShane: When I was in Venezuela, I had a long conversation with President Chavez on that very subject. The assurance that he gave me is important and is worth putting on the record not only in this country, but internationally. He assured me that he would play a full part in guaranteeing that OPEC price stability would be maintained—when I spoke to him, there was a threat that Saddam Hussein would cut off oil production—and that there would be no threat to oil supplies and no threat of a sudden rise in the price of oil. He said that he would telephone Mr. Ali Rodriguez of OPEC to convey that message immediately. I was very grateful for that assurance.

Derek Conway (Old Bexley and Sidcup): Does the Minister accept that the all-party group on Venezuela, which I happen to chair, will be very grateful for and pleased with his comments? Will he tell the House whether President Chavez offered the British Government

any of the proof that he claims to have showing that two United States military agents were involved in plotting the coup, recorded on video and in photographic evidence?

Mr. MacShane: The answer is no. I am pleased that an all-party group of MPs will shortly visit Venezuela.

I have seen no evidence at all to back up any of those allegations, which were not, to my knowledge, made directly by the President himself, but by a number of newspaper reporters. What is important is that as soon as his removal from office became public news, every Government in Latin America, many of whom are quite critical of him, said, as did the British Government, that only a return to democratic and constitutional law and politics would be accepted in Venezuela. That was the right approach by the Government, and we should sustain that position.

John Cryer (Hornchurch): I welcome my hon. Friend's comments about the failure of the coup, although I do not remember his saying that at the time when the coup was happening. Will he take this opportunity not only to condemn the plotters and coup masters, but the United States Government for their failure both to condemn the coup when it was going on and to welcome the return of President Chavez?

Mr. MacShane: I am responsible, in this area, for what this Government do. If my hon. Friend would care to turn to www.fco.gov.uk and look for my statement of Friday 12 April, he will see a condemnation of the coup and a demand that constitutional democracy be restored. As far as I know, other than Latin American Governments we were one of the only leading Governments to make such a statement at the time. That is the message for Latin America—democracy rules. Perhaps my hon. Friend could have a friendly talk with some of his trade union friends in Venezuela, who organised the strike that led to President Chavez's disappearance.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Does the Minister think that it serves democracy when on the day after an elected President is removed from office he is described by a Foreign Office Minister as a ranting populist demagogue?

Mr. MacShane: I am happy again to place on the record the fact that the Government condemned the coup and called for the return of constitutional democracy. Having been a Member of this House for eight years, I have had continually to listen to ranting populist demagogues on the Benches opposite, and I need no lessons from that quarter in how I describe people around the world.

NATO Enlargement (Baltic States)

5. **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): What recent discussions his Department has had with *(a)* Estonia, *(b)* Latvia and *(c)* Lithuania about the political aspects of proposed NATO enlargement. [54372]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): We have had frequent discussions with all three Baltic states. We have made clear the importance that we attach to the political, as well as the military, responsibilities of NATO membership.

Mr. Marsden: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I recently visited Estonia and Latvia with the British Association for Central and Eastern Europe. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as I had the chance to see for myself, those countries have made great strides in reintegrating themselves into the new Europe?

Given that the NATO meeting in Reykjavik today is considering the whole issue of enlargement and applications for enlargement, will the Department continue to stress to those Governments the importance of the political dimension in the responsibility of NATO membership? In particular, will it emphasise the need to reassure and to give equal access to citizenship for Russian minorities in the countries concerned, so that we are able to reassure those minorities that membership of NATO will be a force for stability and integration in their countries?

Mr. Bradshaw: Of course. We are very pleased with the progress that the Baltic states have made in integrating and improving the human rights of their minorities, especially the Russian minority. It is particularly pleasing that Latvia is in the process of changing its electoral law to remove the language barrier that might have discriminated against its Russian minority. That shows one of the political benefits—not only for NATO, but for the countries concerned—in countries aspiring to and, eventually we hope, joining NATO.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): If the three Baltic nations specified in the question are admitted to NATO—we would welcome that—will they join the genuinely transatlantic alliance that constitutes NATO now, or the European pillar of a defence community that was proposed two weeks ago by the chairman of the EU Military Committee, General Hägglund? Does the Minister agree with the general that

"the new EU-NATO would also take part in long-term peacekeeping operations and humanitarian missions",

while the US-NATO

"would be responsible for . . . worldwide crisis management missions as well as rooting out terrorism at the source"?

How can that divisive proposal be reconciled with the Foreign Secretary's words in Washington last week? He said:

"NATO is the principal instrument for sustaining the means for European military collaboration with the US".

Mr. Bradshaw: Those nations will join NATO, which is and will remain the cornerstone of our strategic defence. The right hon. Gentleman quoted Mr. Hägglund out of context. He was making the point, with which we agree, that the European Union is developing the capability to manage crises in its backyard, as the United States has pressed us to do for a long time.

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): My hon. Friend knows that the Foreign Minister of Estonia will visit the United

Kingdom next month. Will he discuss the matters that we are considering with that Minister? Will he join me in congratulating Estonia on its victory last year in the Eurovision song contest and its forthcoming hosting of the event?

Mr. Bradshaw: I am happy to congratulate any country that enjoys a victory in that contest. *[Interruption.]* I am not sure whether it is a blessing.

Of course the Foreign Minister of Estonia will be warmly welcomed. Estonia has made great strides towards democracy and probably leads all the Baltic countries in its preparedness for NATO accession.

Mr. Ancram: The Minister cannot brush aside General Hägglund's remarks so easily. The general said:

"It would be appropriate to build this community"—

he meant a defence community—

" . . . on two mutually supporting pillars: a European and a North American pillar."

I understand that Javier Solana, the EU foreign affairs envoy, saw his speech in advance. Is not that yet another element in a creeping agenda to undermine NATO and create a separate European defence policy, decoupled from that of the United States? How can the remarks be reconciled with the Prime Minister's insistence in 1999 that the European defence project would reinforce, not oppose NATO? It is time that the Government came clean. Do they agree with the European view on defence or not?

Mr. Bradshaw: It is time that the Opposition ended the infantile anti-Europeanism that drives their agenda. The right hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that there is no conflict or contradiction between the role of NATO, the cornerstone of our strategic defence, and the European security and defence policy, which will be responsible for Petersberg tasks.

EU Enlargement

6. **Rosemary McKenna** (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): What measures his Department is taking to help United Kingdom businesses prepare for EU enlargement. [54373]

The Minister for Europe (Peter Hain): We are working hard with Trade Partners UK to help more than 15,000 British companies take advantage of the enormous opportunities in what will be the largest single market in the industrialised world. On 12 June we will brief British business journalists about them.

Rosemary McKenna: My right hon. Friend knows the importance of commercial assistance to UK companies that are trying to set up in the pre-accession countries if we are to be truly competitive and increase employment in the UK. He will know of the serious anxieties that have been expressed through our embassies and consuls about the available resources. What steps has he taken or can he take to improve matters?

Peter Hain: A third of our diplomats abroad are commercial officials, responsible for driving Britain's trade strategy and helping businesses. There are enormous opportunities in the countries that want to join the European Union. Ten are on target to do that and to complete their negotiations by the end of the year. That should be a wake-up call to all British business to go out and take advantage of those opportunities. Britain is perceived as a champion of European enlargement, the best friend of candidate countries. Our businesses would find an open door. They would be welcomed through it to great opportunities of which they could take advantage.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Before EU enlargement proceeds, some unfinished business needs to be tackled about people in the EU who are currently disfranchised. The Minister realises that I am referring to people in Gibraltar who have repeatedly been promised the opportunity to vote in European elections. Despite the Government's—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The question is not about Gibraltar.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Does the Minister recall that the last time I aggravated Ministers on the question of European Union enlargement, it was to ask why no Labour Secretary of State for Trade and Industry had visited the principal accession countries? Has the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—as distinct from a junior Minister—visited Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic or any of the other accession countries? If not, why not, and when is she going? What is more, will he kick the backside of Britain's commerce and industry, particularly the financial sector, which have been unbelievably tardy in their approach to central Europe, and still believe that it consists of far away countries of which we know little? The Germans, French, Swedes and others are engaged in this process but we are not. The British Government have been tardy on this, and so have commerce and industry.

Peter Hain: I know that my hon. Friend is really on my side on this matter, and on other matters of Government policy. I acknowledge his interest in central Europe, and his long association with it. I have been to Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia and Cyprus—half the candidate countries—and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is due to visit many of them in the next few weeks. Every time we go, we assist British business, as do our officials who are in post in those countries all year round. Moreover, I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will listen carefully to my hon. Friend's strictures.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): In preparing UK businesses for enlargement—which the Minister knows is an objective that the Conservatives prize—will he ensure that British businesses are not discriminated against? That applies particularly to British farmers, as our large farmers might be discriminated against in favour of smaller European farmers.

Peter Hain: One of our driving objectives in reforming Europe is to get a sensible agricultural policy, which we certainly do not have at present. The common agricultural policy needs radical reform, and enlargement will increase

the pressure for that to happen. Indeed, I do not think that the CAP as it is structured will bear the weight of enlargement.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

8. **Mr. Eric Joyce** (Falkirk, West): What recent discussions he has had on the peace process in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [54375]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Denis MacShane): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spoke to his French and Belgian counterparts about the peace process in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on 23 April and visited the region earlier this year.

Mr. Joyce: Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the work of the Association of Western European Parliamentarians for Africa, of which my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Donald Anderson) was a founder member? The AWEPA works towards the development of parliamentary democracies in parts of Africa that do not have them—notably, at the moment, the DRC and the surrounding countries. The association receives limited funding from some European countries, but none from the United Kingdom. Would the Government consider extending modest financial support to its efforts?

Mr. MacShane: I shall pass on that request to my noble Friend Baroness Amos, the Minister with responsibility for Africa. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the need to build democratic and parliamentary links, but we should also note that sub-Saharan Africa now has largely democratic Governments—with the notable exception of Zimbabwe—and that is a step in the right direction.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Does the Minister agree that the role of Zimbabwe in the DRC is simply helping to extend the conflict? Does he also agree that, unless President Mugabe withdraws his logistical and military influence, there is little chance of peace? What work are the British Government doing with the UN special representative to the DRC and with our friends in southern Africa to bring pressure to bear to stop this damaging involvement?

Mr. MacShane: The simple answers to those questions are yes, yes and a lot. The work is exemplified by the visit of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to the region, and his constant contact with our European and other partners. Our commitment to NEPAD—the New Partnership for Africa's Development—means that, possibly for the first time in a generation, this Government are focusing on Africa in its totality. Restoring democracy to Zimbabwe is undoubtedly one of the big challenges that we all face.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): What is my hon. Friend's assessment of the UN Security Council's recent decision to deploy troops from Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda along the eastern border of the Congo? May I draw to his attention the fact that, if we had that same troops-to-land ratio in the Congo—where 2.5 million people have died in the last three years alone—we would be looking at 10 million UN peacekeepers? Although that is totally out of the question, will the British Government none the less ensure that there will be a viable force to end the bloodshed in that region?

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend's personal commitment to and knowledge of the region are second to none in the House—and, I suspect, in the rest of SW1. She will know that the Congo is gripped by three major conflicting parties, all willing to commit themselves to using arms. What we are working for is a peace agreement. President Mbeki is in London today; he is one of those acting as facilitators in an attempt to bring the parties together.

The peace agreement must be followed by effective deployment of troops, and, much more important, by economic investment enabling this tragic region to devote its heart and energies to a better material future for its people.

Indonesia

9. **Rev. Martin Smyth** (Belfast, South): What recent steps have been taken to assist the Indonesian Government to protect their citizens against terrorism. [54376]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): The British Government have taken a number of measures to help Indonesia address the threat of terrorism and intercommunal violence. They include high-level information-sharing and visits to Jakarta by a counter-terrorism expert, representatives of the Ministry of Defence and representatives of the police. We continue to urge the Indonesian Government to take firm action to limit the activities of extremists.

Rev. Martin Smyth: The Minister will know of the latest upsurge, which happened at the end of last month. Is it possible that the Indonesian Government will need further help from other countries dealing with international terrorism? Can he say whether Laskar Jihad has any links with al-Qaeda, and can he say what steps are being taken to help a Government in charge of a tremendous expanse of land but with few resources to deal with a problem that affects both Christians and moderate Muslims?

Mr. Bradshaw: We have no evidence of links between Laskar Jihad and al-Qaeda. It is difficult to see some of the intercommunal problems in Indonesia in the context of the campaign against terrorism. I know that many hon. Members are very interested in this subject, as I receive many letters from them. I must tell them that there is not a monopoly of virtue on either side in places such as Sulawesi.

There have been improvements recently: the signing of the Molino agreement has been helpful, and we believe that the Indonesian Government are serious about clamping down on intercommunal violence. There are signs that refugees are returning home. Nevertheless, we will of course consider what more the British Government can do to help reconciliation.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Will the Minister pay tribute to all who kept the flag flying for the liberation of

part of Indonesia—the independent state of East Timor—and congratulate Xanana Gusmao on his election as President of that United Nations member state?

Mr. Bradshaw: Indeed, and the British Government's role in securing Gusmao's safety when he was in exile in Jakarta should never be underestimated. This Sunday, God willing, I shall have the privilege of passing on my hon. Friend's congratulations to Gusmao in person when representing the British Government at the celebration of East Timorese independence.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): As the Minister knows, Indonesia is not the only country facing terrorist threats. Has he discovered any alliances, or any connection, between the terrorists in Indonesia and the Maoist guerrillas in Nepal, who now control 45 per cent. of that country? Representatives of the Nepalese Government were here recently, asking Her Majesty's Government for assistance. What assistance will the Government give?

Mr. Bradshaw: We are already giving Nepal a great deal of assistance. The hon. Gentleman is right: the situation in Nepal is extremely grave. The Maoist terrorists, as I prefer to call them, have been exhibiting a savagery that is almost unprecedented.

We will certainly consider extra ways of helping the fledgling democracy in Nepal to resist the insurgents. Immediately after Question Time I shall have a meeting with Nepal's Prime Minister, who has already met other leading figures in this country. As far as we are aware, there is no contact between any organisations in Indonesia and the Maoist insurgents in Nepal.

China

10. **Ian Lucas** (Wrexham): What indications he has received that China is prepared to engage with United Nations human rights mechanisms. [54377]

11. **Mr. Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland): What representations he will make to the Government of China on their human rights record before the Olympic games. [54378]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Denis MacShane): At every meeting with Chinese Ministers and officials, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary or I raise human rights issues, in which China's record leaves much—very much—to be desired.

Ian Lucas: Although trade with China is an important issue, will the Minister continue to impress on the Chinese authorities that China will never be fully accepted into the international community until it fully respects human rights and the UN's role in enforcing them? In particular, will he point out that the Chinese people will not be accepted as people with whom we wish to do business until they respect the rights of the people of Tibet?

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend is right, but what we ask of the Chinese Government is no different from what we ask of every other Government: simply to respect international laws and the conventions that the Chinese Government themselves signed up to. That demand remains on the table, and it will be pressed by Ministers of this Government.

Mr. Carmichael: Is the Minister aware that Amnesty International estimates that some 240 Falun Gong practitioners have died in custody in China since January last year? Is he also aware that, according to a recent report, the Chinese Government have set up a special taskforce, known as the "610 Office", which is tasked with running a systematic and apparently officially sanctioned campaign against Falun Gong practitioners? Will the Government take advantage of increased world attention on China in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic games, in Beijing, to bring increased pressure to bear? Will they also make it clear that they will take a lead by encouraging athletes and sportsmen and women not to attend those games unless the situation improves markedly?

Mr. MacShane: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the brutal treatment inflicted on Falun Gong practitioners, and such issues are raised regularly with Chinese officials. He is wrong, however, to start demanding now a boycott of the Beijing Olympic games. Other Olympic games and World cups that have taken place in Asia in the past 40 years have without exception contributed to an opening up of, and a relaxation of, previously authoritarian or closed regimes. I am confident—although it is a hope rather than a guarantee—that the same movement will take place in China in the next few years.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): When the Minister is next able to raise the question of Falun Gong with the Chinese authorities, will he make particular mention of their refusal to renew the passports of Chinese citizens temporarily resident in this country? That is not only a denial of human rights but restricts the ability to travel of, for example, scientists on temporary assignments in such countries.

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Like the right to speak and to organise, the right to travel is a fundamental human freedom that should be available to every Chinese citizen, just as we insist that such freedoms be available to every citizen throughout the world.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): One important issue discussed during yesterday's No. 10 summit with the Nepalese Prime Minister will have been the threat to human rights in Nepal, particularly from the Maoist guerrillas to whom reference was made a moment ago. Cherie Booth, QC, was recently appointed by the Nepalese to fight a human rights action against the British Government. Will the Minister undertake that she did not meet—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should remember that the question concerns China, not Nepal.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I have got a Chinese one.

Mr. Speaker: Perhaps I shall call Michael Fabricant, then.

Michael Fabricant: The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) is right to raise the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners, but as the Minister will know, the small Christian community, the even smaller Jewish community and the gay community in China are also persecuted.

As China has now become a part of the World Trade Organisation, can we bring any pressure to bear through the WTO to ensure that human rights are maintained in China?

Mr. MacShane: Again, Chinese treatment of minorities and gay Chinese is to be deplored, but I am not sure that the World Trade Organisation is the right place to bring those issues to the world's attention. The hon. Gentleman said that he has a Chinese one. I am not sure what the one is, but perhaps one day he will wear pigtails in the Chamber. I am sure that he himself can raise those matters as he wishes to.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Does my hon. Friend accept that we all want to see China integrated into the practices of the western and civilised world in its trade and its behaviour towards its citizens? As a member of the all-party China group, I want to see China take on board more strongly the admonitions of my hon. Friend and his colleagues. Has he attempted to raise with the Chinese the fear that they are going backwards and that some of the behaviour of which they have been accused on mainland China has now spread to Hong Kong, which was a British protectorate for 100 years? It is not acceptable to this Government or to the rest of the world that the Chinese should deny people in Hong Kong the right to peaceful demonstration as they have previously denied it to their citizens on the mainland. Will my hon. Friend raise that point with the Chinese Government in the near future?

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend and other right hon. and hon. Members contribute to the understanding between Britain and China through the all-party China group, which does excellent work. I recently met Miss Emily Lau, the Hong Kong legislative council member, to discuss those issues and the British position is clear. The basic law—the joint declaration that protects human and civic rights in Hong Kong—must be respected. I have also appreciated the talks that I have had with human rights non-governmental organisations, activists and campaigners, and journalists, who are able to maintain a level of freedom in Hong Kong as part of China that sends some good signals for the future. Things should be better and we shall keep pressing for them to improve.

Nicaragua

12. **Julie Morgan** (Cardiff, North): If he will make a statement on relations with Nicaragua. [54379]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Denis MacShane): The United Kingdom enjoys good relations with Nicaragua. I briefly met President Bolanos at the inauguration of Costa Rica's new President last week and I look forward to meeting him at the summit of EU, Latin American and Caribbean states in Madrid this Thursday and Friday. We particularly welcome the headway he is making on tackling corruption.

Julie Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. What advice is given to British citizens who plan to buy islands off the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua? Is he aware of the Channel 4 documentary, "No Going Back", which featured a family in that position? Is he also aware of the 1987 constitution and its provision for the autonomous coast of Nicaragua that gives the rights to those islands and that land to the indigenous people of Nicaragua?

Mr. MacShane: I have never fully understood the attraction of buying one's own island, but undoubtedly some people have that ambition. I have been informed about the Channel 4 documentary and the tragic circumstances of the family in question, and the great help that our ambassador and staff there provided to them. I would advise anybody anywhere in the world to have the closest regard to local property laws and, especially in central and Latin America, the rights of indigenous people, whose needs and priorities are being raised and discussed throughout the region. I would have thought that we have plenty of pretty coastline and even the odd island off the British Isles that might be bought first.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): While the whole House will be much gratified to learn of the excellent relations between the Government and Nicaragua, will the Minister tell the House the aims and objectives of the Government's policy towards Nicaragua?

Mr. MacShane: The hon. Gentleman is an island unto himself. His new-found interest in Nicaragua is much appreciated. The key—which I discussed last week with our ambassador to Nicaragua—is to root out corruption inherited from the Sandinista Administration and their successor. I congratulate the Bolanos Government on the headway that they are making in combating corruption, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is as keen on rooting out corruption as I am.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In making this point of order, I wish to make it clear that no blame or discredit should attach to Lord Rooker, who has made strenuous and characteristically courteous efforts to ensure that the House is properly informed on this matter. However, a written question due for answer today asks the Home Secretary when he will announce the sites about which he will seek planning permission for accommodation centres. It transpires that the answer to that question appeared in the *Independent on Sunday* at the weekend. The newspaper correctly identified the three sites in question, which include Throckmorton in my constituency. The Home Office gave an assurance yesterday that the report was sheer speculation.

Do you agree, Mr. Speaker, that that is a gross discourtesy to the House? The matter is of huge importance to my constituents and to the asylum seekers who will be so inappropriately housed in accommodation centres. Should not the matter have been handled more properly? Given that there has been a leak from the Home Office, do you have any power to ask the Home Secretary to conduct a leak inquiry?

Mr. Speaker: I understand that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), made an announcement in Standing Committee E this morning, and that the hon. Gentleman was also contacted by a Home Office Minister beforehand. No doubt Ministers are as concerned as the hon. Gentleman over the leak. I am sure that they will take note of the comments that he has made on the matter.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. You have kindly given the House a judgment on the matter of the leak, but will you say something about the manner in which the matter has been brought before Parliament? When an announcement is slipped out as a parliamentary answer in the afternoon, hon. Members have no chance to ask questions about it. In this case, the Government have even supplied their own question and answer, but the question is different from the one that I wanted to ask. I was interested in the independence of the planning procedure. Can you, Mr. Speaker, give a judgment on that matter?

Mr. Speaker: It is up to the individual Minister to judge how to let the House know about such matters.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that the Order Paper is not your exclusive responsibility, but it is clear that some of today's questions in Foreign Affairs questions were somewhat lacking in topicality. That is because they have to be put down a fortnight in advance, and circumstances in foreign affairs can change very quickly. I wonder, when you are next consulted about the contents of the Order Paper, whether you might give some regard to the circumstances in which it might be possible to question Foreign Office Ministers about issues that have become topical since the Order Paper was drawn up. Is it possible that questions of a more open nature than has become the custom might once again be in order?

Mr. Speaker: I understand that the Procedure Committee is looking at parliamentary questions at the moment. I advise the right hon. and learned Gentleman to take his complaint to that Committee. I do not have powers to change the order of questions that come before the House on any given day, including today.

Planning (Publication and Infrastructure)

3.34 pm

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require applications for planning permission to be published at the time notice of the application is given; to require planning permission for new housing or business development to be conditional upon fulfilment of planning obligations relating to infrastructure; and for connected purposes.

They say that an Englishman's home is his castle. I hope that they say that of women, the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish too. Since the second world war, our housing policy has been largely to build houses and/or—sadly—high-rise flats for our poorest people.

The movement to build high-rise flats as a solution for our housing crisis came from the strong utopian—some say socialist—thinking led by the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier. His experiment in Marseilles—Unité d'Habitation—became better known as a village on stilts. When United Kingdom architects, planners and developers borrowed from these experiments, they failed miserably but, alas, not before many of our inner cities—and some of our outer ones too—had decided that that type of housing was the cheapest means of providing rabbit hutches in the sky. I know of only one architect of public high-rise flats who was prepared to live in them. That probably says a lot about our architects.

After the war, we seemed to forget the lessons of Saltaire, Port Sunlight, Bournville, New Earswick, Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City. I do not wish to upset certain hon. Members or their constituents, but of the new towns built since 1948, how many are we really proud of in terms of architecture, infrastructure and housing densities? Would we truly want to give grade 1 listed status to a Basildon, a Cumbernauld, a Milton Keynes or a Crawley as examples that can hold a light to our 19th century philanthropists who ultimately gave us the garden city movement? Thankfully, though, that is still a matter for debate.

Housing, especially in the south-east, has become, along with public sector pay and the need for a truly 21st century infrastructure, the key to the quality of life for everyone. House prices make it essential that we look again at extending the London allowance into a south-east allowance, but that alone will not solve our severe housing shortage.

I do not want this to be a Bill for the south-east—far from it. However, the way in which developers work in tandem with our unelected planning departments is a joy to behold. Developers can work with planners for two or three years without an elected councillor or the people whom it might affect knowing anything. The first part of the Bill would end the secrecy of developers and the relationship that they have with planning departments. It would make it law that when an architect, developer or whoever first contacted a planning department, whether by e-mail, letter or telephone, that department would have to put an advertisement in the local paper explaining the proposed development. It would also have to put that information on its website, inform all the elected politicians of the application, including borough and county councillors, Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament and inform all the relevant statutory bodies. The current system is undemocratic, open to abuse and unfair.

The second part of the Bill goes to the heart of the problem, and I shall cite examples from my constituency, parts of which resemble a building site. When families moved into the village of Bapchild, they were told that there was a primary school less than 400 m away. They were not told that the primary school had no spare places. Consequently, those children have been fitted into the primary schools all over Sittingbourne, with some families having to drive nearly three miles across the town in the rush hour.

On the outskirts of Milton—fast becoming a suburb of Sittingbourne—on the Meads estate, more than 500 new houses have been or are being built. I will resist commenting on the way in which developers such as Redrow Homes and David Wilson Homes have attempted to build these houses. Families were told that there was to be a new primary school built under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. They were also told that there would be a new doctor's surgery on site, shops and even a village hall. They still might, if they cross their collective fingers, one day in the future actually see the shops and the play space, but I would not hold my breath. Families are now driving back to Gravesend or Maidstone to see their former general practitioners and there is no new primary school, so there is no planning gain. No wonder the developers love planning departments. They love them because the odds are stacked in their favour. This must stop.

In another area of my constituency, the developer has been allowed to build and, at the same time, take down the woodland that shielded the new houses from the noise of one of the busiest highways in the county. The result is that not even triple glazing prevents the din. Worse still—because that development is almost in the countryside—is the fact that as my constituents sit in their gardens all they can hear is the drumming of cars and lorries on the concrete.

The most insidious part of planning that goes unchecked relates to the number of houses that can be built on a site. My guess is that no developer who puts in for 350 houses actually builds 350 houses. Anecdotal evidence suggests that developers will try anything on. Their initial instruction may ask for 350 houses but by the time the development is finished, there could be as many as 500 houses on the site. That benefits only the developer.

To the communities that we represent, more houses mean a greater strain on our already overworked infrastructure. We already suffer shortages of teachers, nurses, policemen and women, doctors and firemen and women. Our train service is becoming oversubscribed and, in the rush hour, it is beginning to be stretched beyond the bounds of safety.

We can continue to pretend that we need houses, but before we build them—especially on greenfield sites—the agencies that serve our people must agree to that new build. It should not just be a matter for planning departments. The second part of the Bill would provide for a legally binding, multi-agency document for planners, developers, trade unions, statutory bodies, including health, education and police, to detail the infrastructure needs, the funding and the time scale for implementation before any housing permission is granted.

[Mr. Derek Wyatt]

I hope that will mean that some of our public workers will be able to receive a new type of social housing as part of the planning gain.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Derek Wyatt, Paul Farrelly, Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Gwyn Prosser and Dr. Howard Stoate.

PLANNING (PUBLICATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE)

Mr. Derek Wyatt accordingly presented a Bill to require applications for planning permission to be published at the time notice of the application is given; to require planning permission for new housing or business development to be conditional upon fulfilment of planning obligations relating to infrastructure; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed [Bill 136].

Modernisation of the House of Commons

[Relevant document: The Second Report from the Liaison Committee, HC 692, Session 2001–02, on Select Committees: Modernisation Proposals.]

Mr. Speaker: Before I call the Leader of the House to move motion 2, it may be helpful to say how I propose to proceed.

Yesterday, the House agreed to a business motion which requires me to put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on motions 2 to 12 not later than four hours after the start of the debate on motion 2. I propose that motions 2 to 12, and any amendments to them that have been selected, be debated together. At the end of four hours, I will put the questions necessary to dispose of motion 2. I will then call Members to move formally motions 3 to 12 and any amendments selected to them that Members wish to move. The House will have an opportunity, if it so wishes, to vote on each motion and amendment. A list showing my selection of amendments has been placed in the No Lobby and in the Vote Office. After all proceedings on motions 2 to 12 have been completed, we will move to the debate on motion 13 on the code of conduct.

3.44 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): I beg to move,

That this House approves the First Report of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons relating to Select Committees, House of Commons Paper No 224-I, and in particular welcomes its commitment to more specialist and support staff for select committees; is of the view that the package as a whole will strengthen the scrutiny role of the House; and invites the Liaison Committee to establish common objectives for select committees, taking into account the illustrative model set out in paragraph 34 of that report, namely

to consider major policy initiatives

to consider the Government's response to major emerging issues

to propose changes where evidence persuades the Committee that present policy requires amendment

to conduct pre-legislative scrutiny of draft bills

to examine and report on main Estimates, annual expenditure plans and annual resource accounts

to monitor performance against targets in the public service agreements

to take evidence from each Minister at least annually

to take evidence from independent regulators and inspectorates

to consider the reports of Executive Agencies

to consider, and if appropriate report on, major appointments by a Secretary of State or other senior Ministers

to examine treaties within their subject areas.

The origin of this debate goes back to July last year when the House rebelled over the names put to it for appointment to Select Committees. There was feeling among a majority of the House that an injustice had been done to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Donald Anderson), who had been left off Select Committees that they had chaired until the general election. I remember that debate vividly. It was one of the more interesting afternoons that I have spent in the House, as it fell to me to propose the motions and to listen to Members' comments on them.

During the debate, there was much criticism of the Committee of Selection, which put a list before the House without questioning it. Rightly or wrongly, it was held partly responsible for the difficulty in which the House then found itself. I promised during the debate that the procedures for how we nominate Select Committees would be one of the first matters that the new Modernisation Committee would consider. Today's debate on the first report of the Modernisation Committee fulfils the commitment that I gave the House last July.

My first point is to invite those who were unhappy with the position in which the House found itself to recall how they felt on that occasion. They should remember that they owe it to themselves to support the recommendation that is before us so as to prevent the House from ever again finding itself in that position.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for giving way so early in his speech, but will he confirm that, even if many Members were unhappy then and look for a solution now, the proposals before us need not be the only or the right solution? The Modernisation Committee has done its work and the Leader of the House has come here with the result of its deliberation, but it is not a question of take it or leave it. If the House felt that the solution was not a proper one to the problem, it would be entitled to say no at this stage and to ask the Committee to do more work.

Mr. Cook: The right hon. Gentleman is perfectly correct. The House is always entitled to say no, and can say no in four hours from now when a vote is taken. However, this is not a new matter. We have been mulling it over for three or four years and it goes back to reports of the Liaison Committee in the past Parliament. Close on a year's study of the matter by the Modernisation Committee is before us, and there have been many ups and downs in trying to find the formula that is before us today. I have to say in all honesty and candour that, although the House is perfectly entitled to say no, I do not imagine that it will be feasible for the Modernisation Committee to come up with a better balance or one that is likely to command a greater consensus.

My second point in support of the proposal is to stress that the recommendation will improve and certainly amend the process by which the House receives nominations for Select Committees. It does not and cannot interfere with the process by which each party selects its members for those nomination lists. The measure replaces the role of the Committee of Selection in putting nominations before the House but it does not replace the initiative of political parties in resolving who should represent them on those lists.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I confess to my right hon. Friend that I have serious doubts about his proposals because I do not understand on what basis the proposed Committee of Nomination will put aside the recommendations of a party making its list. If it will not put that recommendation aside, what is the point of giving it the right to do so?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend makes a point that goes to the heart of the debate that we had last July when the Committee of Selection was criticised precisely because it did not put aside two of the proposals to the House. The Committee of Nomination will not be a court of first instance and it will not have the initiative to decide who should be on the lists, but it will be a court of appeal and be there to ensure that fair play is observed in each of the parties. It would be able to intervene if, as was the case last July, there was a sense that, in two of the names on the list, there had been an absence of fair play.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I am interested in what the Leader of the House has just said. Surely there is a court of appeal now—it is the House of Commons. Although the Government faced problems last year and although my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) was once removed from a Select Committee, there have been only three occasions in the past 20 years when the system has perhaps been found lacking. Therefore, why do we have proposals for such widespread change?

Mr. Cook: Three occasions make an argument for change. Unfortunately, one of those occasions was only last year and that is why I undertook in the debate that we would re-examine the matter. If I had failed to carry out that undertaking to the House, the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues would have been among the first to criticise me for failing to do so.

I would say to the colleagues who have intervened that I am confident that any list submitted by the Labour party would stand up to robust scrutiny in the light of our new democratic process. We have changed our procedures since last July. We have made the process more democratic and put it in the hands of Labour Back Benchers. I welcome that reform. Indeed, I served on the review committee that drafted that reform. So the choice of Labour representatives now rests with Labour Members.

The choice of Conservative representatives lies with Conservative Members—or some of them at any rate. I regret to say that the Conservative party has not taken the same steps as we have taken to make the process democratic. That is not a matter of responsibility for me; I cannot remedy that by changing the rules of the House, but I can ensure that those rules provide for the fair processing of the names and for fair play in their preparation.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the Committee of Selection became totally discredited because, as with the previous Government and at the beginning of this Parliament, it simply approved, almost without discussion, the political party nominations? If the Committee of Nomination, which is being recommended, were to do the same, it would also be discredited. It is absolutely essential that the party Whips or the party management—hon. Members can call them what they like—on both sides of the House do not decide who will serve on the Select Committees; otherwise we will have the row that has led to the present position.

Mr. Cook: I have a lot of sympathy with that point. My hon. Friend identified the nub of the matter, which is that

[Mr. Cook]

Committees of Parliament, appointed by Parliament to scrutinise the Executive, should be free from party influence, particularly the party representing the Executive. The decision should be taken by Parliament, and it should be ultimately in the hands of Parliament and those whom it trusts to take an impartial decision. That is why we welcome the agreement of the Chairman of Ways and Means to act as the convener of the Committee of Nomination.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): My hon. Friend knows that the parliamentary Labour party has changed its position on this matter. He has lauded its democratic structures and the fact that it is in the hands of Back Benchers. In exceptional circumstances, could the Committee of Nomination overturn nominations from the PLP, or indeed those from the Conservative party or the Liberal Democrat party? I should like that aspect to be clarified.

Mr. Cook: I am happy to confirm the fact that, of course, the Committee of Nomination, as the body responsible for putting the nominations on the Order Paper, will have the right to query the nominations of any party in the House. Indeed, we stated in our report that if it were unhappy with any list of nominations—for example, if it found itself in the position that the House found itself in last July—it would, in the first instance, refer back that list for the party to think again. I would imagine that, in those circumstances, almost every party in the House would indeed think again.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: Perhaps I could finish answering the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall). I shall then happily give way to my hon. Friend.

I am personally very confident that now that we in the Labour party have a more open, transparent and democratic system its nominations will survive scrutiny by any fair-minded and impartial Committee.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I wish to make the same point. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what gives him such confidence that seven individuals will provide a fairer and more democratic system than the rules agreed by the PLP or the committee of appeal that the House currently affords us?

Mr. Cook: I have to tell my hon. Friend that I am not suggesting for a minute that the Committee of Nomination would supplant the PLP process. The PLP process is a very important basis on which to decide who the Labour party wants to occupy the Labour places on the nomination list. The role of the Committee of Nomination will be to transfer those lists into nominations to put before the House and, in doing so and considering nominations from any party, including the Conservative party, to ensure that there is fair play. We can safely say, with hand on heart, that fair play was done.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion) *rose—*

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Mr. Cook: I have multiple opportunities, but I shall give way to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) because I fear that I shall be unkind to him later.

Mr. Thomas: At the risk of alienating the Leader of the House even more from his Back Benchers by giving him some support, may I say that the difference between the previous system and what he proposes is that the Whips controlled the party lists and then the Whips approved the lists in the Committee of Selection? He proposes a far more open and accountable process for the House and all its Members. It is time to blow away the cobwebs that cause confusion and hide the processes of the House from the public.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman provides a fair and accurate précis of the basis of many of the speeches to which I listened last July when the House was unhappy with the proposals before it. That is why we proposed the remedy offered on this occasion. I recall some of my hon. Friends sharing the criticism that the hon. Gentleman has just made.

Mr. Dismore: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I have been generous in giving way, and I owe it to the House to treat it to a speech, not just a series of answers.

I was grateful to the Chairman of Ways and Means for having agreed to act as convener of the Committee of Nomination. In our report, we identified as the criteria for the Committee of Nomination that its members should have

"a proven ability to perform with impartiality and a broad knowledge of the strengths and special interests of back-benchers."

No one will better fulfil those criteria than the team of Chairs whom we elect to oversee our proceedings. *[Interruption.]* I remind my hon. Friends that we elect all of them. One of the advantages of having the Chairman of Ways and Means to convene the Committee is that, if we want to move quickly, he is one of the few people in office immediately after a general election. The Chairman of Ways and Means would therefore bring to the role of convening the Committee of Nomination the authority of having been freshly elected with the confidence of the House.

It is, of course, important that the Chairman of Ways and Means should be kept free of party influence, and should also be kept free from great controversy, which I hope will be of reassurance to those who are apprehensive that the Committee of Nomination might meddle too much. The Committee of Nomination will not needlessly seek controversy, and will not needlessly interfere with the list submitted to it unless it feels that there are compelling grounds of an absence of fair play. It is best considered as a court of appeal, representative of

Parliament not of party. In many ways, it would provide a forum for Members who felt that there had not been fair play, so that the matter could be rectified prior to it coming before the House.

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although it has not exercised it, the Committee of Selection has the right to overturn a party nomination, in much the same way as the proposed Committee of Nomination?

Mr. Cook: It is perfectly true—*[Interruption.]* I am unable to participate in the discussion taking place among my hon. Friends, but it is perfectly true that the Standing Orders provide that the Committee of Selection could vary a nomination coming before the House. In practice, as the House heard when this was debated last July, the Chairman of the Committee of Selection made it perfectly clear that he would regard it as improper to vary the list submitted by party Whips. That is precisely what prompted the search for a body that would be impartial and would not meddle or interfere unduly, but which would apply judgment when considering whether there had been fair play in the preparation of those lists.

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): I merely wish to intervene to support my right hon. Friend. He is quite right. There was a Division in the Committee of Selection on this matter, which the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) initiated. A vote was taken, and the motion was overturned.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend spoke at length at the start of our debate last July. His speech influenced the view that emerged about the need for another process to handle the matter. My hon. Friend was vigorous, robust and frank, on all of which he is to be congratulated, in making plain that he did not regard it as the job of the Committee of Selection to change the party lists that were submitted to it.

Mr. McLoughlin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman once already, and I have given way several times during my speech. If I may, I shall make progress.

The Liaison Committee has endorsed the proposal that I am putting before the House. It says that it is a sensible new mechanism that is worth trying, and I agree with that. It appears, however, that in seeking to provide a Committee of Nomination to remove the controversy from nomination of Select Committees, I have not removed the controversy from the nomination of the Committee of Nomination. I understand the force of view of those who argue that the formula appears to reward gravity rather than to encourage freshness. *[Interruption.]* I am not sure on which side the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) places himself, but I am grateful for his concurrence.

My initial proposal to the Modernisation Committee was that, as Leader of the House, I should nominate its members. The Committee decided that I was a suspect partisan source for a Committee that is not meant to be partisan, and I bow to its collective wisdom—hence the formula before the House which removes the basis of nomination to the Committee of Nomination from any party political influence.

I recognise, however, that many of the newer Members think that the balance in the formula possibly rewards too heavily those who were here before them, so I propose to accept the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), which has the effect of re-balancing the membership of the Committee of Nomination and appointing to it two Members from each side—four in total—who were elected in the preceding Parliament. That would allow one third of the Committee of Nomination to be Members who were elected in 1997.

Mr. McLoughlin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: If the hon. Gentleman does a deal with me and allows me to proceed with my speech thereafter, I will give way to him for the last time.

Mr. McLoughlin: Is the Leader of the House aware that the Committee of Selection has four Members from the 1997 intake?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reinforcing the strength of my hon. Friend's amendment to have four Members from the 1997 intake on the Committee of Nomination. I welcome the opportunity to make common ground with the hon. Gentleman on that narrow point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant) has tabled sub-amendment (h) to amendment (d), tabled by our hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central. It would insert the word "current" before "previous Parliament", thus allowing the four new Members to be drawn from the current election to Parliament in 2001, not just from those elected to the previous Parliament in 1997.

At this moment in Parliament, one year on from the last general election, the amendment is perfectly sensible. I only remind my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda that in future Parliaments, the Committee of Nomination will be one of the first Committees to be set up, one hopes within two weeks of polling day. Whether in practice in those circumstances any party would choose as its representative a Member who had only just been elected is a matter of judgment.

Mr. Forth: What about Alastair Campbell?

Mr. Cook: I am not aware that Alastair Campbell is seeking a nomination to this place. I am sure if he does arrive here, we will all await his interventions with great anticipation. I have not the slightest doubt that the House will be full to hear his first one. However, I doubt that his first ambition would be to be appointed to the Committee of Nomination.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): There are many rumours about the press man at No. 10 wanting to take my place when I leave the House. He assures me that there is absolutely no truth in them, which he has made clear more than once. I am sure that he is correct in that.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that clarification. I am, of course, open to take interventions from any other hon. Member who wishes to give a similar assurance about their constituency.

[Mr. Cook]

As the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda is permissive and leaves the choice open to the political parties concerned, I will be content, if my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central is minded, to accept his hon. Friend's amendment to his amendment, which I, in turn, accept—I hope that the House is still with me. If we do accept both amendments, we will write into Standing Orders for the first time specific recognition of the right of new Members to be represented. That is another step forward for modernisation and sets a precedent that I hope the newer Members will support in the Division Lobby this evening.

The Modernisation Committee took the opportunity of its review of the nomination process to go much wider and review the present state of Select Committees and how they might be improved. The result before the House today is the most comprehensive package to strengthen the Select Committee system in the 20 years since it was set up. It offers a number of gains that Select Committees have been seeking for some years, the first of which is more resources to assist them in their work.

More specialised staff will be available to support all members of Select Committees, and there will be more administrative staff to help the Chairmen with their burden. There will be more professional help to assist with the design and layout of Select Committee reports. We want to harness the most modern technology and the most attractive design so that we can get across to the public the views of Select Committees. We have made some progress in recent months. I am pleased to tell the House that since January we have removed all Roman numerals from Committee reports. Significant though those steps are, there is a long way to go, which is why we propose that we should have available to us the best professional help in designing the reports.

In return for those additional resources, we are looking for greater focus and discipline in the way in which Select Committees approach their role. That is why we have suggested an illustrative model of the core tasks of Select Committees. I stress that it is illustrative. We are inviting the Liaison Committee to consider the model that we have proposed, to refine it further if it wishes and to make whatever changes it thinks appropriate in the light of its greater knowledge of the working of Select Committees. However, one has to start somewhere, and it is good that the Modernisation Committee has put on the table what we believe should be the core tasks and duties of Select Committees.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): As the Leader of the House has in the past two or three minutes removed the possibility of at least two votes, perhaps I can help by removing the possibility of a third. My concern was that the list was very prescriptive and all those tasks would be mandatory on the Committees. Given the number of weeks in the year in which we meet, even with Sub-Committees that list would constitute an intolerable burden that would be undeliverable and exclude the possibility of doing a little free thinking, which is one of the tasks of the Committees. If the Leader will make it clear that those are suggestions of the sort of agenda that the Liaison Committee would want to look at, and that they are not intended to bind it, I will be more than content to withdraw my amendment when the time comes.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his offer. Of course we would welcome the views of the Liaison Committee, which cannot be bound by the Modernisation Committee; indeed, we do not seek to bind it in the motion before the House, which leaves it to the discretion of the Liaison Committee how it proceeds with the list.

I believe, however, that there is a lot of common ground between the two Committees. For instance, I welcome the strong passage on financial scrutiny in the Liaison Committee's response to the report. Indeed, I thought that the Committee was possibly erring on the side of being rather stern with Select Committees when it described their performance of financial scrutiny as relatively patchy and being the fault of the Committees. That is a touch harsh. Financial scrutiny is necessarily a challenging and technical task.

What might help Select Committees with that is our recommendation, before the House today, that we take up the offer of the National Audit Office to second staff to the new unit of special advisers which we are proposing. That will make it more practical for Select Committees to carry out financial scrutiny as we suggest in our core tasks, and it may make that scrutiny more penetrating.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Following his response to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), will my right hon. Friend be a little more specific? The concern of many Select Committee Chairmen is that the flexibility of Committees is very important. My Committee, the Education and Skills Committee, recently was pleased to hold an inquiry into individual learning accounts. The prescriptive bullet points before the House do not include such inquiries. There is only so much time to do the work of the Committee, and it is important to be flexible, and not to be in a straitjacket.

Mr. Cook: I wish to be helpful to my hon. Friend. If he looks again at the list of proposed duties, he will see that his important inquiry into individual learning accounts comes squarely into the second category—considering the Government's response to major emerging issues. We appoint Select Committees for a Parliament so it should be possible for all of them to touch on each of the duties that I have outlined.

Mr. McFall: I welcome my right hon. Friend's common objectives for Select Committees, but I agree with several of my colleagues on the Liaison Committee that, to date, the examination of reports on main estimates, annual expenditure plans and annual resource accounts has not been our top priority. To effect change, we need much more support. My right hon. Friend mentioned the National Audit Office. What discussions has he had with Sir John Bourn and others, and what will the central support unit consist of, as it will have an onerous, but welcome, task, if undertaken properly with adequate resources?

Mr. Cook: I welcome what my hon. Friend said. The Modernisation Committee and the Liaison Committee

share common ground in their belief that we have not achieved rigour or consistency in financial scrutiny, which should be at the heart of Select Committees' work.

On the question of resources, my hon. Friend will be aware that the Comptroller and Auditor General has said that he is willing to second staff to assist Select Committees—and not just the Public Accounts Committee—with the work of financial scrutiny. I cannot think of a better source of expertise to support Select Committees, which could use NAO contacts to access the NAO's entire network. I hope that we can turn that offer into reality in the next year.

I should like to refer to one more proposed duty for Select Committees. The House will be aware that, over a period of years, I hope that the publication of Bills in draft will become the norm, rather than the exception. If Parliament wants a real influence on the shape of public Bills, it has to get in on the act much earlier than Second Reading, when party positions are already set in stone, so it needs to see Bills in draft. The report explains that pre-legislative scrutiny of draft Bills should normally be the job of the appropriate Select Committee.

Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Is not another danger of those illustrative examples the fact that the agenda will be set by the Executive, not the legislature? The legislation to be examined in advance is Government legislation; public appointments to be examined are by definition appointments made by the Government; the examination of Green Papers is, again, an Executive initiative. If, with the limited time available, a Committee followed slavishly the tick list of examples, there would be little time left for initiatives by the legislature itself.

Mr. Cook: I refer my right hon. Friend to the list in today's Order Paper, the third objective of which is

"to propose changes where evidence persuades the Committee that present policy requires amendment".

That is not dependent on the Government or Executive taking the initiative; it leaves it entirely open to the Select Committee to decide when policy needs to be changed. That said, it is difficult to get away from the fact that if Select Committees are the main instrument for scrutinising the Government, they will have to spend some of their time scrutinising what the Government propose to do. In the last Parliament, my right hon. Friend's Committee did a good job in its pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill setting up the International Criminal Court, for which I was grateful; it helped us to get the Bill through the House more quickly than we otherwise would have done. Pre-legislative scrutiny will be of benefit to both the House and the Government in making sure that when Bills come before Parliament, they are better thought-out and their rough edges have been rounded off.

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): My right hon. Friend will know that the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which I chair, has in the past 18 months undertaken to examine all legislation, as published on Second Reading, for compliance with various human rights instruments. It is difficult to do that under current parliamentary procedure, given restraints both on time and the opportunity for right hon. and hon. Members to absorb the lessons of pre-legislative scrutiny.

More time would allow the Government to reflect at greater length on the outcome of the pre-legislative scrutiny and make for better legislation all round.

Mr. Cook: I am very much aware of the challenges to the Select Committee that my hon. Friend chairs. She and I have discussed the issue before, and we have sought to be helpful to the Committee. I entirely endorse her point. The more we produce Bills in draft, the more it will be possible for all the various investigative and scrutiny Committees to make their contribution, including the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

It must be right that the people who perform that pre-legislative scrutiny of a draft Bill are the Members with the specialist interest and knowledge whom we find on the Select Committees. That is why we propose in the first instance—not always, but in the first instance—that pre-legislative scrutiny should be a duty on the Select Committees.

Taken together, the package will strengthen the Select Committee system. It has been warmly welcomed by the Liaison Committee. Indeed, in its press release about the paper from the Modernisation Committee, the Liaison Committee described it as "excellent"—a view that, I hope, will last at least as long as the debate this afternoon.

There was one issue to which—I must be frank with the House—nearly all members of the Liaison Committee objected violently: our proposal that the size of Select Committees be increased to 15. The proposal was born of the problems of last July, when we discovered that far more hon. Members wanted to get on to a departmental Select Committee than there were places for them. Even now, 186 Beck Benchers are not on any investigative Select Committee. Our proposal to increase the membership of departmental Select Committees to 15 would have provided an additional 50 places for those hon. Members.

At my meeting last week with the Liaison Committee, I was exposed to strong arguments to the contrary. In particular, the Chairs of the Select Committees expressed their worry about the danger of a loss of cohesion if the Select Committees became larger, and the problem of making sure that there was consensus among a greater number. I was struck by the force of the point from the Chair of the Select Committee on Public Administration, who told me that his recent report on House of Lords reform would not have been unanimous in a larger Select Committee.

Given that discussion and those views, I have reached a compromise with the Liaison Committee that is expressed in the motions before the House, in which the decision to increase the size of a Select Committee will be in the hands of each Select Committee. If the Committee decides to increase its size, it is free to do so up to 15, but it is not under any compulsion to do so. I hope that that sensible, permissive compromise will command general agreement in the House.

Conversely, I proposed a reduction in the size of the Liaison Committee. In the Committee's response, I found that, unfortunately, that proposal was almost as unwelcome as my proposal to increase the size of other Select Committees. I am therefore not proceeding with it tonight, but many on the Liaison Committee recognise that there is a problem with the size of the Select

[Mr. Cook]

Committee, and that the problem is likely to be aggravated if it proceeds to hold public hearings, especially if those public hearings are as high profile as with the Prime Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda has tabled another amendment that addresses the issue. I regret to say that on this occasion I cannot help my hon. Friend by commending it to the House. Its narrow effect would be, for instance, to leave out of the Liaison Committee the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, which I do not think would be right. However, I agree with my hon. Friend that there is a problem, and I very much hope that the Liaison Committee will be willing to consider it and propose a solution.

Pete Wishart (North Tayside): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that Select Committees need a minimum of 15 members, to ensure that we in the minority parties are represented? At present, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish national party have no place on a non-regional departmental Select Committee, and we find that unacceptable.

Mr. Cook: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman has found the argument that would most commend itself to hon. Members on the Benches behind me. As he is aware, I understand that the parties to which he refers did not receive the best allocation of places last time round, when they were represented in the discussions by the Liberal Democrat party. As he knows, we have addressed that issue and those parties are no longer represented by the Liberal Democrat party; indeed, many hon. Members in other parts of the House would wish to commend them on their freedom from the Liberal Democrats. Over time, we shall see what remedy there may be, but I do not think that the House is likely to vote for an increase to 15 members simply because of the position of those who represent—if I may be frank—4 per cent. of the total membership of the House.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: Yes, I shall on this occasion, but I must then make some progress if others are to speak.

Kevin Brennan: On the size of the Liaison Committee, while I accept the point that my right hon. Friend makes about the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant) and I, does he recall that I raised the matter in business questions last week? Does he agree that when the Prime Minister appears before the Liaison Committee, the House will be as much under the spotlight as the Prime Minister is? If the Committee has 34 members, including those from the domestic Committees, the House will not be seen in the modern light in which we would like it to be shown.

Mr. Cook: I agree that there is an issue that must be addressed. I am happy to say that when I spoke to the Liaison Committee last week, it volunteered the fact that it will be as much under examination as the Prime Minister when he appears before it. I hope that the Committee will listen in the intervening period to the views expressed in this debate and consider what consensual solution it might offer.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the Leader of the House indicate to the Liaison Committee that a degree of self-interest seems apparent on that issue? Is it not somewhat ironic that a Committee of 34 members thinks that it is impossible for other Committees to come to a sensible conclusion with only 15 members, while its own membership of 34, which is already in place, is apparently entirely logical?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman makes an entirely fair point with great force and eloquence. As I am seeking hard to build the maximum possible consensus, he will forgive me if I do not endorse what he suggests on this occasion, but the whole House will have heard it.

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West) *rose*—

Mr. Cook: I was probably wise not to give my endorsement.

Mr. Williams: I speak in the spirit of good will that emanates from my right hon. Friend and in recognition of the fact that I am the poor man who will have to chair a Committee of 34 members trying to carry out an investigation. The Liaison Committee indicated in response to the Modernisation Committee that it did not see any point in removing representation of the domestic Committees because such a change would reduce its membership by only six and because we are not an interrogatory Committee. It is only in the past three weeks that we have taken on an interrogatory role like that of other Committees. Therefore, our judgment was made in one context, but we are being criticised in another.

Mr. Cook: My right hon. Friend's statement is very encouraging. I recall that when I appeared before the Liaison Committee last week, it was repeatedly put to me that the problem about Committees with 15 members was that not everyone would be able to put a question to the witness. I think that that argument must apply with even greater force to a Committee of 34 members. He and his colleagues would be wise to address that point as a matter of urgency.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that I was not unsupportive of him in the Liaison Committee last week? If the Select Committees are to undertake their core tasks, all of which are very valuable—I refer not least to proper scrutiny of estimates and expenditure—I am concerned that it may be necessary for Committees to increase their membership from 11 to 15. They may have to do so if they are to undertake their essential tasks of scrutinising legislation and holding the Government of the day to account.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman deserves a mention in dispatches as the only member of the Liaison Committee who supported me on the increase in size, but regrettably he and I together do not a consensus make.

I remind hon. Members that the motion—I hope that it will be accepted, because it was a compromise with the Liaison Committee—provides for Select Committees to

increase their size. Come the next Parliament, we will of course be required to establish them with a minimum membership of 11 so that they can first take the decision on whether they wish to increase their size. In the circumstances of a fresh general election, a new Parliament and many Members disappointed at not having been appointed to a departmental Select Committee, Committees will find that they are under pressure to contemplate some increase in size, even if not up to 15.

I wish to refer to one last point from the report before I conclude. We have given the House the opportunity to reach a decision on whether the Chairs of Select Committees should be paid. We made no recommendation to the House on that—indeed, the Modernisation Committee was split on the issue—but we agreed unanimously that it was right that the matter should be put to the House to enable hon. Members to reach a conclusion. That is why there are two alternative motions. The only point of argument that I would make is that if the House were to vote for salaries for Chairs of Select Committees, that would give extra force to motion 7, which provides that no Chair should remain in office for more than two Parliaments.

Mr. Forth: For those of us who believe that the matter should be looked at in a wider context—sadly, amendments in my name that would have reflected that were not selected—it would be helpful if the Leader of the House could indicate whether, if the House were to approve the motion on Select Committee Chairmen and additional pay, his Committee would be prepared urgently to consider the wider issue of whether additional pay might be appropriate for other Members with additional responsibilities. I, for one, would be reluctant to single out Select Committee Chairmen, despite their great worth and distinction, then leave it at that, because others—for example, the Chairmen's Panel—may deserve similar treatment. Can the Leader of the House help me on that matter?

Mr. Cook: The Modernisation Committee considered Chairs of Standing Committees, but concluded that they did not have the same weight of responsibility and administration that falls on Chairs of Select Committees. The decision before the House is therefore limited to Chairs of Select Committees.

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: I should like to respond to the last point before I give way again.

I would not wish to make the decision that the House takes conditional on what might happen next, but it is of course always open to us to return to the matter in the context of wider issues.

Andrew Bennett: Before my right hon. Friend finishes, will he give a little more thought to term limitation? One or two Select Committees are not over-popular. For example, there is not a great queue of Members wanting to get on to the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. Having served on it for 28 years—for half that time making it clear to the Whips that I would be pleased to be replaced—it seems a little unfair to penalise someone who is serving on one of the less popular Select Committees.

Another difficulty is that of the changing names of Select Committees. Presumably, Members who have chaired the Committees covering matters that are dealt with by the Department with responsibility for the environment would not be covered by the amendment.

Mr. Cook: I am familiar with the problem to which my hon. Friend refers. He has done sterling work on the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. In retrospect, it is perhaps a pity that there is no amendment on the Order Paper that would enable us to confine the effect of the motion to those on the investigative Select Committees, who we had in mind when making the proposal on salaries. I assure my hon. Friend that I will be happy to revisit the matter in the event of the motion being carried, so that we can protect his position before another 28 years have passed.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Will my right hon. Friend remind us of the other non-ministerial appointments that draw a salary from the public purse? I understand that the Opposition pairing Whip is currently paid—for what, I do not know. Clarification would be useful.

Mr. Cook: I understand that, apart from members of the Executive, those who receive a salary are: members of the Speaker's team, the Leader of the official Opposition and, I believe, the Opposition Chief Whip and the Opposition pairing Whip. It is for every hon. Member to consider whether that constitutes the most rational choice of priorities. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst obviously regards it as rational.

Mr. Forth: I said the opposite.

Mr. Cook: Hon. Members will consider a motion on the payment of Chairs of Select Committees. I regret that the right hon. Gentleman's amendment on the subject was not selected. It is well beyond my capability to fix that on his behalf, and it has obliged me to remove a whole five minutes from my speech. I apologise for that. However, to cheer him up, I am prepared to accept his surviving amendment on term limits. It would provide for a maximum period of service of two Parliaments or eight years as a Select Committee Chair. I offer that to the right hon. Gentleman as a modest consolation prize.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I can cheerfully comment on all the proposals because, whichever amendment is accepted, I shall probably never serve on a Select Committee again.

Will my right hon. Friend make it clear that Chairmen who oppose payment do so because we believe that the strength of Select Committees is that all members are equal? They all work together and appoint their Chairmen, and we strongly believe that payment would make Select Committee chairmanship another office of patronage under whatever arrangements prevailed.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is right to say that there are strong and sincerely held views on both sides of the question. It is fair to say that the majority of the Liaison Committee favoured payment when it was last discussed. That is not necessarily a self-serving perspective. As the

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Modernisation Committee report points out, if hon. Members want to show that they attach equal value to scrutiny and service on the Executive, they must consider whether the only real opportunity of additional salary should be for those in the Executive rather than those who commit themselves to a career of scrutiny.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: How can I resist?

Mr. Mullin: I agree with my right hon. Friend, but emphasise that the nettle must be grasped if we are serious about Select Committees. Otherwise we are destined to watch the best and brightest continually seduced away by office or its prospect. Some members of my Select Committee have lasted as long as two months before becoming someone's Parliamentary Private Secretary. The only hope of reversing the trend is increasing the status of Select Committees by some of the methods that my right hon. Friend suggested.

Mr. Cook: In fairness to my hon. Friend, the House should know that he was seduced away from the Executive to be the Chair of a Select Committee. He makes the fair point that hon. Members must tackle the issue and make a clear decision. I warn hon. Members that if motion 5 is carried, motion 6 cannot be put. Those who share my hon. Friend's view must therefore defeat motion 5 and carry motion 6.

We have taken the opportunity of the debate to implement several agreed recommendations on other matters from the Liaison Committee, the Procedure Committee and various Joint Committees. They are expressed in motions 8 to 12, none of which is controversial, and I hope that hon. Members can accept them formally.

The other measures add up to the biggest package for strengthening Select Committees since they were established 20 years ago. They stand alongside the historic decision of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to give evidence twice a year to the Liaison Committee. It is the first time that any Prime Minister has agreed to be questioned by any investigative committee. Taken together, the measures demonstrate our commitment to working with the House to make the Select Committee system a success.

I have often said that good scrutiny makes for good government. I commend the package to the House as providing for better scrutiny and better government, if that is possible.

4.34 pm

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): I am aware that a lot of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House wish to take part in the debate, so I do not intend to detain hon. Members as long as the Leader of the House did.

I start by paying tribute to all the hard work undertaken by all Members from all parties who serve on Select Committees. They do an invaluable job, and they have the time to explore in detail many of the issues that are too complex to be examined in depth on the Floor of the House. We owe them all our gratitude.

I also pay tribute to the work of the Chairman of the Modernisation Committee, the Leader of the House. It is clear from his energy, involvement and initiative that he not only takes his role seriously but is genuinely interested in bringing about change. For that reason, I must advise him that he needs to watch his back, because it is clear that not all his ministerial colleagues share his enthusiasm for what he is seeking to do. Indeed, the Modernisation Committee is still reflecting on whether all his proposed changes are necessary in the interests either of modernisation or of scrutiny. The right hon. Gentleman has an agenda, however, and some parts of it are clearly desirable.

The first motion on the Order Paper in the right hon. Gentleman's name has our support, and I commend it to the House unamended. It seeks to increase the support staff for our Select Committees, and to strengthen the scrutiny that they give the decisions of the Executive.

The Leader of the House was, I think, incorrect when he said that Select Committees had been with us only for some 20 years. My understanding is that they have been used by the House for centuries. They may have been with us in their present form for only 20 years, but the setting up of a small group of Members constituted to gather information, interview witnesses if appropriate, and produce detailed reports is not new to the House.

In their scrutiny work, Select Committees use a variety of working methods. Their work can vary from the holding of a full inquiry, with the gathering of oral and written evidence leading ultimately to a published report, to taking a single evidence session to focus attention on a particular issue. Sometimes the Committees decide to visit people and places, here in the UK or overseas, to discover how problems can be handled or approached in different ways. At any one time, most Select Committees have several subjects under consideration.

Currently, it is up to each Select Committee to decide how to interpret its terms of reference. The Conservatives want to see that independence maintained. I do not think, however, that it comes amiss for the Modernisation Committee to suggest certain core tasks, such as those listed in the motion. Some right hon. and hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), are concerned that that motion will result in the loss of a Committee's discretion as to how it goes about its business. I want to underline what the Leader of the House said by referring my right hon. Friend to the word "illustrative" in the motion, which I hope will reassure him that although the activities mentioned are core tasks of which each Select Committee should take note, they will in no way inhibit the absolute right of a Select Committee to carry out its work as it sees fit.

Mr. Simon Thomas: I support what the right hon. Gentleman has been saying, but will he take on board the fact that at least one Committee—the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, on which I serve—is not a departmental Select Committee, and therefore does not shadow Ministers or legislation from any particular Department? Those core tasks are not quite so appropriate for that Committee. Will he bear in mind that we need to

keep the flexibility of such Committees, which consider the work of all Departments and the sustainable development of all the Government's workings, so that they, too, can operate with the additional resources if necessary?

Mr. Knight: I agree. I refer the hon. Gentleman to page 13 of the Modernisation Committee's first report. Paragraph 33 states

"Inevitably the specific work of the scrutiny committees"—

that is, departmental Select Committees—

"will vary and each should retain the freedom to balance its work in the light of the duties of its Department or in response to emerging issues."

The report makes it clear that the Committee does not seek to take away the current flexibility.

Mr. Pike: Should we not be reminded repeatedly of the many successes that Select Committees have achieved in their present form? Those successes are often underestimated, not just here but in the country as a whole. Is not the report's main purpose to strengthen the Committees, in line with what the Liaison Committee suggested in the last Parliament? Before the general election the Government did not seem prepared to do that, but the Chairman of the Modernisation Committee has gone a long way towards meeting the Liaison Committee's requirements.

Mr. Knight: I agree with the right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Donald Anderson). I think that Select Committee Chairmen should have the right to venture into areas that they consider important within their remit, rather than merely walking in the footprints and the shadow of the Government of the day.

Amendment (d) to the motion on modernisation of the House of Commons, tabled by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), expresses the concerns that exist in some parts of the House about minority representation, and I am a little worried about that.

The representation of minority parties used to be dealt with, quite adequately, through the usual channels. I believe that when my party was in government and I was part of the usual channels, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) undertook, on behalf of the third largest party, to ensure that all minority parties were represented fairly. The Leader of the House touched on that in his speech. I understand that the system has broken down somewhat, in that the current Liberal Democrat Chief Whip, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), has decided that he is not able, or willing, to undertake the task, and it has now been given to the Government Whips Office.

I hope that the hon. Member for Foyle will not need to press his amendment, and that further discussion through the usual channels will alleviate the concerns that clearly exist. I must say I am rather surprised that the Modernisation Committee has two Liberal Democrat members; perhaps they will be prepared to give up one of those places to another minority party.

Pete Wishart: It was less a question of the Liberal Democrats' abandoning that task, and more a question of our discharging them from it. We will vote on this issue, because we have grave concerns about the representation of minority parties. I think it only fair that we should be able to represent ourselves properly in the Committee structure.

Mr. Knight: I hear that the minority parties have no confidence in the Liberal Democrats. I cannot say that I am at all surprised, but I hoped that they would be able to develop a working relationship with the Patronage Secretary. Perhaps as the debate proceeds, they will be prepared to engage in "behind the curtain" discussions in an attempt to resolve the matter.

Lady Hermon (North Down): Rather than writing us off as a minority party, will the right hon. Gentleman—and, indeed, all Members—address a serious issue? I refer to the representation of the people of Northern Ireland. The Labour party, regrettably in my opinion, does not even operate in Northern Ireland, so no Northern Ireland Labour Member will be returned to the House. Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates regularly lose their deposits at Northern Ireland elections. The Ulster Unionist party is the largest party in Northern Ireland, and represents the majority of people there. Surely to goodness it should be represented on Select Committees, which is a good reason for increasing their size. This should not be a minority party argument; the people of Northern Ireland need to be represented.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Lady has gone well beyond an intervention.

Mr. Knight: I shall not risk being ruled out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by getting involved in the politics of Northern Ireland, but I do believe that minority parties should be properly represented. Increasing the size of the Committees is one way of doing that, but the point that I was trying to make is that other methods exist. One is to ensure that the Liberal Democrats are not claiming two places on the Committee when the minority parties perhaps ought to have one of them. I hope that the matter can be looked at again.

The Leader of the House has tabled proposals to set up a Committee of Nomination, to allow Select Committees to change their size after having been established, and to introduce term limits on the service of Select Committee Chairmen. The setting up of a Committee of Nomination gives rise to two issues, the first of which is whether we really need to make any changes. If the answer is yes, we then need to decide what form those changes should take. I have always been unconvinced of the need for change, and as the Modernisation Committee is aware, I have remained an agnostic on this issue throughout its deliberations. I take the view contrary to that expressed by some Labour Members, particularly the hon. Member for Walsall, North (David Winnick). The current nomination system works rather well, and it is a gross distortion to say that it is totally discredited.

The Committee of Selection has existed for more than 20 years. In that time it has twice taken decisions that could rightly be criticised, and which it perhaps should not have sought to implement. The first instance involved a member of my party, and the second and more recent one involved two members of the Labour party. However, in my experience the Whips' influence on the Committee of Selection is not malign. The Whips Offices of all major parties have a vested interest in keeping their

[Mr. Knight]

parliamentary colleagues happy. In my experience, if they feel that an injustice has been done, some attempt is usually made in another arena to right the perceived wrong.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I am slightly perplexed by the right hon. Gentleman's last point. As recently as 12 February last year, the official Opposition used a Supply day to table a motion in support of the Liaison Committee's report, "Shifting the Balance", on the basis that they were dissatisfied with the way in which such matters operated, and that they wanted an independent mechanism. Perhaps he can explain why his view has changed in the space of a year.

Mr. Knight: My view has remained constant since 1983, when I first became a Member of this House. I have not changed my opinion at all. As the hon. Gentleman knows, Members often support a Committee's report when they agree with more than 50 per cent. of its contents. The fact that they support it does not necessarily mean that they agree with every paragraph and word.

Mr. John Taylor (Solihull): I should point out to the House that, like my right hon. Friend, I have participated in every meeting of the Modernisation Committee, and he made his position clear in at least three such meetings. With regard to change, he is something of an agnostic and is tolerably satisfied with the status quo. Because we are a smallish minority, we have tended to take a consensual view.

Mr. Knight: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's protection.

Dr. Ladyman: I am trying to understand the advice that the right hon. Gentleman is giving the House, and I think that I agree with him on the point that he is making. I like the current system, and the parliamentary Labour party now has a mechanism, free of the Whips, for deciding whom we put forward. However, the right hon. Gentleman advised us to support the motion on modernisation of the House of Commons, which approves the report hook, line and sinker, including the principle of changing the mechanism for selecting members of Select Committees. The first motion on Select Committees deals with the detail. If the right hon. Gentleman is against the principle, he should surely advise the House to vote against the modernisation motion.

Mr. Knight: No, that is not the case. We have separate motions on the Order Paper and I have dealt with my views on the first of them. I am now addressing the specifics of setting up the Committee of Nomination, from which arise two questions. First, does the House wish to bring about change? I am not convinced that the present system has failed us. I am tolerably satisfied with it, so I do not seek any change. However, as a member of a Select Committee on which the majority of members wished to bring about change, I was faced with a second question. Did I leave the debate and allow the other members to carry on in my absence, or did I play a full and constructive part in the debate about change without advocating it myself? I chose the latter course of action.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): The right hon. Gentleman made a couple of points about the old Committee of Selection. First, he said that in his experience it had made only two wrong decisions. Surely the problem with the Committee was that it never made any decisions at all. The second, allied point he made was that it was not a corrupted body because the Whips on it had a vested interest in keeping their own punters happy. However, is it not true that in most cases Whips used the power of appointment to Select Committees to control their Members, not to keep them happy? In those circumstances, what sort of a court of appeal was the Committee on Selection?

Mr. Knight: The Committee made two decisions that were clearly wrong, and which offended many hon. Members. Those were the two matters that I mentioned earlier. I did not say that the Committee made only two errors of judgment. I pointed out those two glaring mistakes, but two in 23 years is not a bad record. I do not accept, either, that the Committee of Selection has always been a Whips' rubber stamp. When I was a member of the Government Whips Office, the Chairman of the Committee, the late Sir Marcus Fox, did not always follow the advice of his party's Whips, and on more than one occasion the Committee made a decision that was not in accordance with the wishes of the Whips. The Committee did show an element of independence, which the hon. and learned Gentleman suggests was lacking.

Mr. John Taylor: Is not it clear—not least from that intervention by a Labour Member—that Conservative Members have a more comfortable relationship with their Whips Office than do Labour Members?

Mr. Knight: There are many parts of my shadow portfolio that I find less agreeable than others, but I do not wish to start speculating about the relationships of Labour Members with their Whips Office. None the less, my hon. Friend makes his point well.

If—I emphasise that word—a majority of Members want a change, the most appropriate way forward is that proposed by the Modernisation Committee. Therefore I do not support the amendments tabled by the hon. Members for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), for South Swindon (Ms Drown) and for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant), and I do not recommend them to my hon. Friends.

In the third motion on Select Committees, the Leader of the House proposes that term limits be introduced for Select Committee Chairmen for the first time, and suggests that each Chairman should serve for a maximum of two Parliaments. I have always regarded term limits for Select Committee Chairmen as desirable, all the more so if we decide to pay Chairmen for their extra work on our behalf. I therefore support the proposal, but as part of a package; I shall urge Opposition Members to support the proposal that Select Committee Chairmen be paid.

Mr. McCabe: I accept the argument about term limits for Select Committee Chairmen, especially if those Chairmen are to be paid. However, is there not also an argument for imposing term limits on members of the Committee of Nomination? The Committee's quorum of seven very powerful people will orchestrate the proceedings of the House. Should there not be a term limit for them?

Mr. Knight: I have no difficulty with that suggestion.

The Leader of the House was good enough to say that he would be prepared to accept amendment (a) to the third motion on Select Committees, which stands in my name and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). The motion would limit the term of a Select Committee Chairman to two Parliaments, but in our system we do not have fixed-term Parliaments. The period covered by two Parliaments could therefore be anything between one year and 10 years.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Does the right hon. Gentleman not think it slightly illogical to say that we should trust Select Committees to appoint their Chairmen and decide their programmes, but we should not trust them to appoint a Chairman for a third term?

Mr. Knight: In many Parliaments around the world it is accepted that people freely elected to be Chairmen of powerful Committees ought to have some limit to their tenure. The United States of America offers an example that confirms my argument rather the hon. Lady's.

To return to my point about the period covered by two Parliaments, I am sure that the House remembers what happened in 1974, when we had two general elections in the same year. That could easily happen again in the future.

I firmly expect that after the next election, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) will be in No. 10 Downing street, where he will remain for many years. However, what if the massive Conservative revival that everyone expects is not quite enough to get him there? What if the arithmetic after the next general election is such that the two main parties have the same number of seats, with the Liberal Democrats holding the balance of power with perhaps three or four seats in total?

In that scenario, two general elections could take place in quick succession, as the outgoing Prime Minister desperately tried to cling to power before the Conservative party ultimately won through. Most attention would focus on the final result, but what about the poor Select Committee Chairmen? They would be condemned to serve for only a fraction of the time that the House could reasonably have expected. That is why amendment (a) would add

"or a continuous period of 8 years, whichever is the greater period."

The amendment is fair and equitable, and I hope that the House will approve it.

Dr. Ladyman: In view of the right hon. Gentleman's rosy predictions about the Conservative party's fortunes, may I suggest that he remember the writings of Horace, who said that the shortness of life prevents us from entertaining far-off hopes? Do his remarks not suggest that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) is correct that the judgment should be left to the Select Committees, and that we should not interfere?

Mr. Knight: No, I do not agree. Eight years is a fair crack of the whip for anyone; any Minister who serves for eight years thinks that he has been very lucky. To give a Select Committee Chairman, however good, a term limit of eight years is reasonable and fair, because it would allow other talented Members, who might otherwise not have the chance, to be considered for that position.

We accept the proposals about the size of Committees. Indeed, the proposition tabled by the Leader of the House is very similar to a suggestion that I made to the Modernisation Committee a few weeks ago.

Our Select Committees have served Parliament and the public well, and I believe that the first motion on Select Committees will make their role even more effective by providing additional resources for specialist support staff. If that enables Parliament to keep the Executive under more effective scrutiny, surely we should all welcome it.

5.1 pm

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): On behalf of the Liaison Committee, may I welcome the undeniable commitment of the Leader of the House in trying to modernise and update the procedures of this House—whether one agrees with every proposal or not? I think my right hon. Friend deserves full credit for that from hon. Members on both sides of the House.

It has been a dramatic few months for those of us who have been involved in scrutiny for many years. For more than 12 years, the Public Accounts Committee saw Chancellor after Chancellor try to get access not just to some but to all the quangos and to open the door that was permanently closed to Government companies. Yet three months ago, after the Sharman committee—which was set up following pressure from the Public Accounts Committee—the Government accepted all those recommendations. The National Audit Office now has full access, as requested by the Public Accounts Committee. The Public Accounts Commission has already invited the Comptroller and Auditor General to submit proposals for examining the quangos and companies regarding extra budget and value for money.

Three weeks ago, as the Leader of the House said, the Liaison Committee had a quite unexpected approach from the Prime Minister; there was a message saying that he would call at 12.30 pm. The Prime Minister asked whether the Liaison Committee would welcome the opportunity to have full and public sessions with him twice a year.

We are still negotiating the details, but I can tell the House that the first session will take place before the summer recess. The Prime Minister will not know the questions in advance. We are looking at times and venues. Because of Prime Minister's Question Time and Members' Monday travel arrangements, it looks as if Tuesday mornings will be an appropriate time. Because of the anticipated extra demand from people to attend and the size of the Liaison Committee, we are looking into the possibility of holding the hearings in the Boothroyd Room in Portcullis House.

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): My right hon. Friend has referred to the size of the Liaison Committee. He mentioned to me earlier that he has investigated the number of seats in the Boothroyd Room. I think that there are 27 seats, whereas there are 34 members of the Liaison Committee. Bearing in mind the objections of the Leader of the House to my amendment, will the Liaison Committee consider a self-denying ordinance whereby only departmental Committee Chairs, my right hon.

[Mr. Chris Bryant]

Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) and the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee would take evidence?

Mr. Williams: There are 27 chairs in the horseshoe, so only 27 Members would be able to question the witness, but members of the Liaison Committee get on well together. At our meeting on Thursday, we shall consider that point, among other practical, logistical issues. We shall also discuss how to use our time to the best advantage of the Committee, the House and the Prime Minister.

To some extent, the proposals of the Modernisation Committee have to be taken in conjunction with the consultative document issued by the Leader of the House and currently under consideration by the Committee. Throughout its consideration of the proposals, the Liaison Committee has used the same criterion—effectiveness: whether the proposals would add to or diminish the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny. All Members work on the premise that without accountability there can be no democracy and that—in the way that the House works—without Committees there is no meaningful accountability.

The Committee especially welcomes pre-legislative scrutiny, which will not only produce a major change in the way in which the House holds the Government to account but will enable it to participate in the evolution of policy before Bills are finally drawn up. That is a dramatic advance and we must take that proposal into account, especially as regards the roll-over of Bills where change is long overdue. It is illogical that a Bill can progress through almost all its stages, but must then be reintroduced in the next Session. The roll-over of Bills will remove the buffers—the time limits that give the business managers the excuse to curtail discussion. Pre-legislative scrutiny and the roll-over facility will considerably enhance the powers of Back Benchers.

As regards back-up resources, I told members of the Liaison Committee that I could not believe that there had never been any pragmatic analysis or assessment of the resources needed to operate a full Committee system. That is why I suggested that we brought in the National Audit Office to make an objective assessment of the structure and resources that were needed. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for accepting that suggestion.

We welcome the review of the powers of Committees to call witnesses, as well as the opportunities offered for Sub-Committees. My right hon. Friend said that Committees would increasingly have to turn their attention to financial scrutiny and many of them may choose to do so by means of Sub-Committees. I have held discussions with almost all the Chairmen and have been most impressed with the open-mindedness of their approach to dealing with the challenges offered by the proposals.

However, a one-size-fits-all formula does not make sense. The estimates requirement envisaged in the core duties is not relevant for Committees dealing with devolved matters—the Scottish Affairs Committee or the Welsh Affairs Committee. In fairness, we must remember that the core duties as listed are illustrative and that the Liaison Committee is asked to turn them into practicality. I assure the House that it is the wish of the Committee's Chairman that we do that effectively.

I know that there are doubts about the format of the Committee of Nomination. However, other Members have made the point that it will be more independent than the system that it is replacing. We should give that Committee fair wind to see whether it works effectively. The composition of the Committee will be a matter for the House.

The Liaison Committee's reservations related mainly to the size of Committees. The membership of many Committees will increase by a third, so I wish to make the point that I made to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House when he appeared before us the other day. The Chairmen of the Committees have no vested interest in keeping the Committees small if Committees will be more effective if they have more members. The Chairman of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will, no doubt, describe his experience of trying to run a large Committee and the problems involved with that. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) has expressed her opinions and I hope that she will describe the problems that arise with the size of the Committee that she has to handle.

The Chairmen of the Committees came to an almost unanimous conclusion on the size of the Committees and they did so in pursuit of the fundamental criterion of whether the proposals will enhance or diminish Committees' ability to hold Ministers to account. The Chairmen thought that enforced enlargement would diminish rather than enhance Committees' ability to do that. That is why they took the stand they did.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Will my right hon. Friend consider the wider view and the effectiveness of our democratic institutions? My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House told us that 286 Back Benchers did not serve on any Select Committee. Is that not a dreadful waste of talent? Even if all those Back Benchers were uninterested—I know that that is not the case; many of them want to serve on a Committee—do they not have a democratic duty to contribute? Is that not more important than the ease of managing 15 Committee members rather than 11?

Mr. Williams: I think that is wrong. Tails on seats is not the basic requirement. The basic requirement of a democratic system is to hold the Executive firmly to account. Nothing should undermine that. The problem has been the House's inability to hold Governments to account. We must not damage a system that is working just to get people involved in Committees or to give them the opportunity to say that they are members of Committees.

Pete Wishart: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Williams: I am coming to the end of my remarks.

I have been a Back Bencher for many years and I have been a Front Bencher for many years. Whether I have or have not been serving on Committees, I have never found it particularly difficult to keep myself gainfully occupied

as a Member of the House. Perhaps one or two Members should use a little more imagination in their approach to the time they think is wasted at the moment.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for meeting us this week and for the detailed discussions that we had. I also thank him for responding positively to those discussions and for the flexibility that he has shown in the proposals before us.

5.14 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I join the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) and the Chairman of the Liaison Committee in paying tribute to the leadership that the Leader of the House has given to the Modernisation Committee. I have been on the Committee since its inception at the beginning of the previous Parliament. I can honestly say that the momentum that we now have and the consensus that has now been built up between the parties has not been matched at any other moment in the Committee's short life. That is partly down to the Leader of the House, and it is partly down to the demands that the House has placed on the Committee. We have begun this exercise—or indeed our wider exercise of working out how to make Parliament more effective in scrutinising and holding the Government to account—not because we think that it is a nice idea or a good thing to do or because it gives us a warm feeling but because the House has given us that responsibility. That is why the report is very timely.

Of course this is a matter for the House. I should say that my colleagues will have a free vote, but I am interested to find that there is basically consensus among my colleagues on most of the issues before us this evening, with one important exception, to which I shall return later.

The origins of the report were, of course, the events of last summer, as other hon. Members have said.

Mr. Sheerman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: I have hardly started, but of course I shall give way.

Mr. Sheerman: In fairness, those us who have served on the Liaison Committee even for a short time would have to say that the content of the Committee's two reports, much of which is attributable to the now Lord Sheldon, have to be part of the reason why we are discussing this important topic today. I very much admire the work that the Leader of the House has done, but Lord Sheldon was a moving force in making the Liaison Committee a campaigning Committee to change the business of the House.

Mr. Tyler: I was just about to make that point. We have built on the work that had already been undertaken, but we would not have done so but for the fact that the Government Whips ignored—let us be honest about it—all the signs that the House had already given that hon. Members were no longer prepared to put up with the incestuous way in which Select Committees were appointed. The point that I want to make is that, if it had not been for last summer's incident, the Liaison Committee's work, frankly, would have gone by the board.

It has already been said that attempts have been made under previous Governments to nobble Select Committees, to ensure that trouble makers were kept off and trustees were put on, but it would be fair to say that the Conservative party has tended to be more disciplined, or perhaps more devious, than the Labour party was last summer. Whichever it was, the fact of the matter is that all this has now come out into the open.

I now make my confession: I served on the Committee of Selection for four years. I was, ex officio, a member of that Committee, and I can tell the House—if I am breaking some dreadful convention, I shall no doubt be locked up in the Tower—that most of our meetings took less three minutes. On one occasion, when I was in the Chair as the senior member, a meeting took half a minute. That is not a proper way to take important decisions.

The right hon. Member for East Yorkshire referred to a previous regime in that Committee when he said that some of the Whips' nominations were turned down. I think that he will agree that they were not nominations to Select Committees; they were nominations to Standing Committees. There is all the difference in the world between serving on a Select Committee and having that responsibility for scrutinising the Government, perhaps for a whole Parliament, and serving on a Committee that considers a specific Bill. So the House should be fully aware that I know of no one—outside the usual channels—who wants to return to that regime.

We must be very careful this evening that we do not untangle the whole package by pulling it to bits. If we do that, the only winners will be the two main Whips Offices. I have to exclude my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell)—he is not here at the moment—because my party has been excluded from those discussions all too often in the past.

The consensus is that we have to make some improvements, but let us recognise the fact that the improvements will be experimental by their very nature. Everything that we do in the House is evolutionary—we can return to the issue if the proposals do not work sufficiently well—but we must make progress tonight; otherwise we shall be in real difficulty.

I have no great problem with the proposals for the new Committee of Nomination, except to say that the amendments are excessively complicated. We may well have to consider the issue after the next election. If the two Opposition parties, whichever of the current three they may be, were extremely similar in size, perhaps differing by one or two Members, the arithmetic clearly would not work; nor would it work if—let us suppose that this could happen—women made up 60 per cent. of the House after the next general election, as these gender balance arrangements would be obviously nonsensical. Let us be clear: the proposal is for this Parliament, but we must establish the principle that the House makes the decision rather than having it made for it by Government Whips in collusion with the main Opposition party Whips.

I must say to the Chairman of the Liaison Committee in all sincerity that I am somewhat suspicious of the way in which the Committee approached the issue of numbers. It represents the establishment, the insiders, the people who have got there. As the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) said, we are in danger of wasting good talent

[Mr. Tyler]

in the House if we automatically assume that, just because it is easier to manage 11 people, it is not possible for 15 to do an even better job.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I wish that the hon. Gentleman would do us the honour of accepting that, if the Committee one is chairing has 17 members, as is frequently the case, it is not fair to any of the members concerned. They do not have the opportunity to ask enough supplementary questions or to pick up a point made by another member, and it simply becomes a question of the Chair trying to get everybody in. That is not how a really effective Committee should work. Unless there is a basis for the objection, under all these rules, I will never sit on another Select Committee. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that what I say about Select Committees is governed by that. It is not possible to chair an investigative Committee effectively if the number of members goes beyond 15.

Mr. Tyler: I entirely understand the hon. Lady's point. As she says, however, the problem comes when the number of members goes beyond 15. No one suggests in the document that we are discussing that the number should go beyond 15. That is now entirely a matter for the Committee to decide. I think that I am right that some of the best work that the hon. Lady's Committee did in the last Parliament was done in Sub-Committees. It is important that there are enough members to sit on those Sub-Committees. There is also the issue of full representation—let us not dodge that. We must try to make sure that Select Committees are fully representative of the House as a whole.

Mr. Kidney: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for mentioning my constituency, which is why I want to speak. There are enough places on Select Committees for about 40 per cent. of Members of the House. Does the hon. Gentleman recall that, in Canada, nearly all Back Benchers serve on a Committee; in Australia two thirds of Members do so; and in New Zealand 80 per cent. of Members do so? Is not the Committee's recommendation to add 50 Members modest in the light of that information?

Mr. Tyler: In my view, it is. If we are to undertake the kind of responsibilities that the Committee wishes to place on Select Committees—the Liaison Committee wishes to do so, and several Chairmen of Select Committees have already taken the point that our list is illustrative and needs to be developed further—there will be a need for more Sub-Committee work. In relation to financial matters—or, dare I say it?—going abroad, it is not necessary for the whole Committee to go to, say, Australia. It is perfectly possible for three or four members, suitably representative, to do a proper job and come back with a report. If that is why the Liaison Committee is apprehensive about an increase in numbers, I suggest that it is in its own hands to exert a little self-discipline.

The only substantial issue on which I disagree with the majority on the Liaison Committee and on the Modernisation Committee is that we should somehow pick out the Chairmen of Select Committees as worthy of special treatment in terms of additional salary. I am not persuaded of that. I shall return to the point, but I have already heard the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) make the point that we do not have difficulty in recruiting very good people to be Chairmen of Select Committees. The difficulty is in being properly resourced to do that job, not in attracting candidates. The hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) is a good example. He took the ministerial biscuit for a few months, but he decided that he could achieve more by coming back to the House and chairing a very influential Select Committee. We have no difficulty in getting recruits; incidentally, we do have difficulty in getting people to go on the Chairmen's Panel, so perhaps the argument would be more persuasive in that regard.

Apart from those who are in the Chair or have ministerial office, Members of Parliament are here to serve their constituents. We all have different ways of doing that. I have personal crusades in which I believe passionately that have nothing to do with my constituency. I also have a responsibility to my party. Above all, however, I am here as a Member of Parliament for my constituency and as a member of this national assembly. In that context, I find it difficult to justify singling out Chairs of Select Committees as special people who need to be provided with a new career path. All that Members who sit as Back Benchers on the House of Commons Commission get are knocks; they do not get plaudits or the opportunity to lead a Select Committee. Why should we not pay them? If it comes to it, why should we pay the pairing Whip for the Conservative party when pairing is almost out of the window?

Mr. Greg Knight: Can the hon. Gentleman clarify what he is saying? Is he saying that he is against the motion because it proposes payment only for Select Committee Chairmen and that he would support it if it was more widely drawn; or is he against additional payment for any Member of Parliament who is not a Minister?

Mr. Tyler: I would have supported the right hon. Gentleman's amendment, because it is fair to consider the issue in the round. Some Members give great service to the House and do not get anything like the kudos or the plaudits attaching to Select Committee Chairs. However, as the right hon. Gentleman's amendment has not been selected, I will vote for the motion that stipulates that we should not pay more to Chairs of Select Committees.

On the controversial amendments, I believe that an illustrative list is helpful, as the Chairman of the Liaison Committee acknowledged. I hope that the Chairman of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), will not press his amendment to a vote.

On the amendments to add new Members to the Committee of Nomination, I have misgivings about the format of the arrangements. The additional newer members would be nominated not by the parties, but by their Chairs. That is a new form of patronage which the Modernisation Committee tried to avoid. I think that the suggestion is a little incestuous and I would have preferred to stick with the original proposal of the Modernisation Committee.

On those Members who are lucky enough to be elected Chairs of Select Committees, the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight)

is logical. Eight years or two Parliaments, whichever is the longer, gives someone a good run at the job. There are plenty of volunteers to take over. On the two-Parliament rule, however, I was briefly in the House in 1974 with a small majority, which makes a nonsense of that suggestion.

The exclusion of the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee, the Environmental Audit Committee, the Human Rights Committee and, no doubt, others from the interrogation of the Prime Minister or, indeed, anyone else in such circumstances, would be illogical, so I oppose the amendment to motion 10, dealing with the Liaison Committee.

The proposals offer a one-off opportunity to give new strength to the Select Committee system. The Committees have been in place for a long time and ways in which they can improve their performance have evolved, especially with regard to their accountability to the House. What we have not done is to analyse carefully the best way to ensure that they are representative of the House. That is why we must take the opportunity for Back Benchers in particular, of all parties, to regain control.

There is, of course, an obligation within parties to ensure that a proper democratic procedure is followed for the nominations to the Committee of Nomination. There is also an obligation on those who think that the system is not working adequately to use the Committee of Nomination.

Mr. McCabe: If the essence of the Nomination Committee is that it must decide whether the right people have been nominated and make changes if it does not like the party choices, why is there any obligation on parties to ensure that the right people are chosen? The reality is that we are wresting power not only from the Whips but from Back Benchers, and giving it to a Committee of seven people who will decide for the rest of us.

Mr. Tyler: No, I am bound to say that I think that the hon. Gentleman has not read carefully how the procedure will work. I understand his concern, but this procedure will be conducted very much within the parties. I cannot speak for his party but I can speak for mine, and it is incredibly democratic—some of my colleagues think that it is far too democratic. If the nomination procedure does not fulfil all the expectations of individual members of my party in this House, there will soon be a revolution.

Mr. McCabe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way again?

Mr. Tyler: No, not again. I accept that the procedure places a great obligation on the party and on the Committee of Nomination. As I pointed out in discussions on the proposals in the Modernisation Committee, the additions to Committees will be easy enough; it is the subtractions that will cause difficulty. We can all imagine circumstances in which the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) makes a wonderful case for being on a particular Committee, but when the Committee of Nomination is asked to remove somebody to make a space for him, that may cause some difficulty.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: No, I am about to complete my speech and other Members want to speak.

We can put the system on trial for this Parliament, and I believe that it will prove to be worthy of that test. It will fulfil Members' expectations far better than does the Committee of Selection from which we have suffered in the past. Obviously, an important responsibility will be placed on individual Members, on their parties, on the Committee of Nomination and indeed on the House, because as has been said several times, in the end the recommendations will return to the House, and I have not the slightest doubt, after the episode last summer, that if the House feels that a new oligarchy has taken over from the Whips which is equally under the thumb of the party managers, it will rebel. This is the best possible chance to break out of that stranglehold. As I confessed earlier, I am a former member not of the usual channels but of the unusual channels, and I am convinced that they cannot do this job properly.

5.31 pm

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): I echo the tributes that have already been paid to the work of the Modernisation Committee and to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. Today we have an opportunity to reinvigorate the Select Committee process and to re-establish its primacy in the role of non-partisan scrutiny of the Executive, which is fundamental in a free society and a democratic system. The Select Committees have performed that role with some weaknesses.

I remember many years ago serving on the Health Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). I am not sure how he slipped through the previous system.

Mr. Tom Clarke: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Mr. Lloyd: On the point about the hon. Member for Macclesfield? Yes, of course.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is the essence of courtesy, so I am not surprised that he gives way. I recall that when I was a member of the Health Committee, there was an attempt to prevent the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) from chairing the Committee. In fact, he was an excellent Chairman. The result was that the Whips removed him from the Committee. If we are to have a Committee of Nomination to make the final decision, as against what I thought the House had decided last time round, how can such abuses be prevented?

Mr. Lloyd: I, too, recall the role played by the hon. Member for Macclesfield, although I do not want this to turn into his obituary. I must point out that it is necessary for Select Committees to have an independent voice and for Chairmen to command respect in the Committee.

My starting principle is that Committee membership is not something casually to be given away. It is important that the membership is of the highest possible quality. Members of Committees must be determined to fulfil the role of independent scrutiny of the Government of the day, without fear or favour, irrespective of their party. That is a difficult challenge for the Government. It was difficult for the previous Government, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) points out that at that time there were successful attempts to

[Mr. Lloyd]

nobble the hon. Member for Macclesfield. That was wrong, and it would be equally wrong if the present Government, whom of course I support, sought to nobble the present Select Committee system.

We know that if Select Committees are to command respect, they must be seen to be independent. Whatever the role of the Whips and the perception of the use of Select Committee places for patronage in the past, the fact that such accusations can be made and believed more widely is a good reason to ensure that this Parliament can say that it is clear of that charge. That is why, in general terms, I endorse the Modernisation Committee's approach of having an independent Committee of Nomination, which will command respect in all parts of the House.

Last year, the House did itself no favours in the row about my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Donald Anderson). Parliament got it right in the end when it insisted that they should be reinstated to their Committees. I concede to Opposition Members that Parliament worked in that case.

I strongly agree with the Modernisation Committee that the whole Chamber cannot be responsible for the process of nomination; there needs to be an intermediate process. On a point similar to that made by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), the parliamentary Labour party now has a procedure that guarantees that the party as a whole, with all its influences—from time to time including, dare I say it, pressure from the Whips Office—decides on the names going forward on behalf of Labour Members. I trust that that will also apply to the Conservative party, although I am not certain. Perhaps Opposition Members will make that clear later.

It is important that there is a sense of independence. We accept that the Government have an in-built majority on Select Committees, but those members of the Committee must be seen to command the respect of their own parliamentary party. The process established by the parliamentary Labour party ensures that that is the case. However, we need a tiebreaker mechanism—the court of appeal that has been referred to. That court of appeal needs to be independent; the present system is not, and can no longer command respect. The Modernisation Committee has suggested a sensible step in the right direction. I am sure that Parliament could have come up with many variations on the proposals, and it could still do so if these do not work.

I am grateful to the Leader of the House for considering the amendments in my name and that in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant). The criticism of the proposed Committee of Nomination is that it would seem to put power and control into the hands of the old lags, and there is a danger that they would view only those of a similar generation as suitable for inclusion in the Select Committee process. There is considerable merit in trying to recognise the contribution of hon. Members with fewer years on these Benches. Some people make contributions of enormous worth almost on entry into Parliament, while others take a little longer. There is no reason why the Committee of Nomination should not recognise the talent of recently elected Members.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and am sorry for being unavoidably late. Does he accept that every Member of Parliament, including those who do not serve on Select Committees, can act as an effective scrutineer of the Executive through activities in Westminster Hall, introducing ten-minute Bills, tabling parliamentary questions and building all-party groups? The House should recognise that every Member has a role to play and we should not be too preoccupied with the role of Select Committees in the scrutiny process.

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend makes an intelligent and valuable point which certainly commands support among Labour Members. We ought to strengthen Parliament's role in scrutinising the Executive. Select Committees are an important part, but not the only part, of that process. We should not seek to diminish their role, because they are often at the cutting edge of scrutiny, at least of Departments. We should therefore try to maintain and even increase their influence. My amendments make common-sense proposals and the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda is also sensible, because it allows for the fact that all Members, including newly elected ones, may make a contribution. If a Committee membership is rolled over a Parliament, it would be illogical to bar Members with several years' experience. Together, the amendments would greatly improve the Committee of Nomination, and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for endorsing their spirit and practical effect.

Briefly, on the role of Committee Chairmen and the question of payment, I was intrigued by the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) that we engage in economic bargaining to attract the best people to serve as members and Chairmen of Select Committees. I do not espouse that philosophy in other walks of life, so I am not sure that I should espouse it in the House. Indeed, if we reversed the argument and said that ministerial office was open to competitive bidding—we would take on as Ministers people prepared to undercut others—there would be no shortage of candidates and people who wield the knife behind their colleagues' backs would continue to do so. Members who join the Government or Opposition Front Bench do not do so for the salary. Similarly, some extraordinarily good Select Committee Chairmen have taken on the role with no thought whatever of economic reward. I shall therefore resist my hon. Friend's proposal unless I hear a more convincing argument about the money.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman has not mentioned them, but I am sure that he is aware of at least two other aspects of the argument, including, first, the issue of a career structure or path. I am sure that I do not need to point out that many people think that it is important to try to identify a distinctive career path other than the ministerial one. Secondly, the Modernisation Committee may be aiming at the wrong target: the Chairmen's Panel might be a much better candidate if we wish to acknowledge largely unsung and unseen heavy additional responsibilities and time commitments in the House, as its members undertake such duties for no extra pay.

Mr. Lloyd: As someone who, for reasons I do not fully understand, strayed from his initial career path, I agree that there are more ways of serving our constituents than climbing the ministerial ladder. If we are deluded into

thinking that only by creating special payments can we introduce an alternative career path, we shall structure Parliament in an undesirable way. It is nonsense to suggest that a good MP is a good amateur. Nowadays, that is not an accolade, but we certainly have many demands on our time and are asked to perform a range of duties. We ought to encourage involvement in all those duties, and chairing a Select Committee is an important part of that. We should thank colleagues for undertaking that role but, on balance, it does not need financial reward.

I have some sympathy with the suggestion that we may be looking at the wrong group of people. I am not sure whether I am comfortable with special payments for extra work, as we could get into a work measurement system; after my advice bureau on a Saturday morning, I would produce, for fear that my bonus payments would be reduced, a time sheet to demonstrate that my commitment was as great as anybody else's. I therefore need further persuasion that the concept of special payment in the parliamentary system has genuine merit.

I know that many hon. Members want to contribute to our important debate, so I shall conclude. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) said, parliamentary scrutiny of the Executive is fundamental: it is the reason why we are here. The Select Committees are at the cutting edge of scrutiny, so we have got to make them work. The Modernisation Committee report is a serious contribution to achieving that, and those concerned deserve congratulations.

5.46 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am pleased to contribute to our debate. I pay tribute to the Leader of the House for his leadership of the Modernisation Committee in this Parliament. He always seeks to achieve consensus, which is helpful in dealing with the matters under consideration. It is also beneficial that Members on both sides of the House are singing from the same hymn sheet and supporting the motions that he has included on the Order Paper.

I am wearing several hats in this debate. Not only am I a member of the Modernisation Committee but, because of my chairmanship of the Procedure Committee, I serve on the Liaison Committee, and have worked closely with its Chairman, the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams). I commend him again for his ground-breaking initiatives that will be of immense benefit to the House, both in holding the Government of the day to account and scrutinising legislation and Government policy. I am referring in particular to the Prime Minister's acceptance of an unwritten request, albeit one clearly in the offing, to appear before what may be described as the Chairmen's select committee—the Liaison Committee.

The report is long overdue. My name has been mentioned in our debate several times, but I do not wear the same rose-coloured spectacles as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) or my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor). I remind the House that both my colleagues have been members of the mafia, meaning the Whips Office or the usual channels, as they are affectionately known. I wanted to take the appointment of members of Select Committees out of the hands of the Whips long before my experience in 1992.

I remind the House, especially my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire, that the Conservative Whips Office, in connivance with the then Chairman of the Committee of Selection, said that there was a rule that a Conservative Member should not serve on a Select Committee for more than three Parliaments. Of course, they said so to prevent my reappointment, but that dragged two distinguished Members—Sir John Wheeler and Terence Higgins—into the same net, which caused a great deal of unhappiness.

One such incident is more than enough, which is why I share the Government view that we need a new system of appointment. I therefore warmly welcome, as a package, the motions before us today. I shall support a majority of the motions on which the House is to vote. I strongly support the original motion relating to the Committee of Nomination but, like the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), I have some reservations about the amendment proposed by the hon. Members for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) and for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant). That adds broader membership in certain respects, but overall it does not help the nominations panel. I understand why it has been tabled and I shall not vote against it.

The Leader of the House said that he would accept the amendments and I will go along with that, as I believe that they are part of a package. We need that package, so I shall throw my support behind it. I believe that it is good for the House and that, with no disrespect to the current Chairman of the Committee of Selection, the nominations panel will do a good job of ensuring that the right people, with experience and all the necessary commitment, which I believe is vital to an active member of a Select Committee, are appointed.

Mr. Bryant: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, despite the fact that he does not accept the premise of my amendment. He has referred several times to experience. I tabled my amendment because in the original motion setting up the Committee of Nomination, there seemed to be an overvaluing of experience only in the House. I therefore tabled a permissive amendment.

Mr. Winterton: The hon. Gentleman makes a point. I said that I would not oppose the amendments to the original motion that have been accepted by the Leader of the House. However, having been in the House for quite a long time, although as a Back Bencher for all those 31 years in this place, I believe that it is necessary for the members of the Committee of Nomination to know the Members when appointments to Select Committees are made.

I accept that I may be influenced by my own experience. I must tell the hon. Member for Rhondda that when I entered the House, it was very rare indeed for Members to be appointed to a Select Committee in their first term in the House. It was fairly rare even in the second term of office. Now it is much more commonplace. That is one of the reasons why, after some consideration, I have decided to support the motion, as amended.

I accept that the composition of the House has changed dramatically, and I am referring not just to the huge number of new Members who arrived in 1997 and the fairly substantial number who arrived in 2001. I say to the hon. Ladies on the Labour Benches that there has been a fairly substantial shift in gender balance in the House, and it is appropriate to take account of those changes. For that

[Mr. Winterton]

reason, I am prepared to support the Leader of my House—or rather, the House, although after all the years that I have been here, it is almost becoming my house.

I have been reading the debate that took place in 1992, when I had the experience to which I referred. Some very distinguished Members took part. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) intervened and made it clear that in his view, it was wrong for members of Select Committees to be appointed, as it were, at the whim of the Whips. That is how it was done then. Since then the Labour party has dramatically changed the way in which it puts forward the names of Labour Members for appointment to Select Committees. My party has not done that, but there is considerable discussion within the parliamentary party. Individual Members will be able to communicate with the Committee of Nomination and to put their own name forward, if they wish. Of course, the Whips will put forward, on behalf of the Labour party and the Back-Bench Labour party, the official Labour nominations.

In the 1992 debate, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said:

"More important issues are at stake, however. Although the amendments are linked to certain names, they are not about the hon. Member for Macclesfield. His name features, but we are dealing with more important questions than his fate. I hope that hon. Members will vote not on the basis of whether the hon. Gentleman is liked or disliked, popular or unpopular, but on the basis of the debate that they will have heard about the role of Select Committees and their development in our constitution."

That is extremely important.

Similarly, during that debate, the then hon. Member for Worthing, now Lord Higgins in another place, said:

"It is important that these matters should not be handled in such a way"—

he was referring to what had happened in 1992. He continued:

"Instead, they should be dealt with on an all-party basis. I hope that, in the light of the debate, we shall consider what should best be done in future. At present, it is wrong to suggest that there is a rule which has determined decisions. As I have said, these matters should not be handled in such a way."

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), who is present, also intervened in that debate and said:

"a ludicrous claim has been made that a rule exists when it does not".—[*Official Report*, 13 July 1992; Vol. 211, c. 918-23.]

To me, it is wrong that we should perpetuate what happened on that occasion.

I see the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) in his place. I pay tribute to the work that he has done, with many colleagues from all parts of the House, in Parliament First—a group which, I think, wants to re-establish the sovereignty and integrity of the House. I know that he strongly supported the report produced in the last Parliament. There were in fact two reports, but I am referring to the better known one from the Liaison Committee, "Shifting the Balance"—that is, from the Executive back to Parliament.

Having stated that I intend to support the major recommendations on which we will decide tonight, I turn to the question of payment. I suppose that I would be a beneficiary, whatever formula is adopted, so it is appropriate to declare that. I have the pleasure of being a member of the Chairmen's Panel.

If we are to encourage the most able people to participate in matters relating to the House, not merely to seek to become Ministers and to do all that that requires, we need an alternative career structure. Here I depart from the views expressed by the hon. Member for Manchester, Central. The payment of Chairmen of Select Committees and perhaps, in due course, additional remuneration for those who spend considerable amounts of time chairing Standing Committees, Westminster Hall and occasionally the House would recognise such service to the House. That service prevents hon. Members from undertaking other tasks and jobs, including other jobs outside the House, from which they could obtain additional remuneration. Bearing it in mind that people's final pensions are based on their salaries, there is good reason to consider the matter seriously.

The Leader of the House has acted responsibly. He has not put a firm proposal before the House. He has presented the House with options, so that on a free vote the House can indicate what it thinks and reach a decision. I hope that the House will decide that there will be remuneration, and the matter can then be submitted to the Review Body on Senior Salaries.

In my view, this is a very important debate. As I said, I wish that it had taken place earlier. We need to restore the integrity of this place and to give hon. Members who are committed to this House and its institutions the opportunity to do a good job.

I should like to refer to one other matter: the core tasks that were a major feature of the speech of the Leader of the House. I say to hon. Members that those tasks are very important if Select Committees are to do the job that they are there to do. To my mind, the inquiries undertaken by the Procedure Committee, of which I am Chairman, show that the House's scrutiny of estimates and expenditure is inadequate. Until we take those tasks seriously, we will not be able to hold the Government of the day to account as I believe we should.

Once again, this is a very important debate and I congratulate the Leader of the House on all the work that he has done and the leadership that he has provided. I also congratulate all the members of the Modernisation Committee, who have participated fully to a man and woman in the many lengthy sittings that we have had. To say that we arrived at our conclusions lightly and without proper consideration would be to deny the very hard work that has been put in by every man and woman who serves on the Committee.

I believe that we would do well for this House and its future by voting for the recommendations.

6.1 pm

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I should like to be brief. I want to say a word about the Prime Minister and then to use that word to make a larger point.

The word about the Prime Minister is as follows. The Select Committee system in its modern form was developed 20 years ago, and as has rightly been pointed out, that was only the latest instalment—although it was an important one—in the operation of Select Committees. There was a gap in that system, and that gap was the

Prime Minister—a point that was put to me forcefully on many occasions by the great Professor Peter Hennessy, who was responsible for persuading John Major when he was Prime Minister to publish the ministerial code, as it became. Indeed, I sometimes think that Peter Hennessy is the only thing approximating to a constitution that this country has. He forcefully suggested to me that the gap had to be remedied.

We on the Public Administration Committee began to try to provide that remedy. I began a correspondence with the Prime Minister—it has been published in our reports—in which I tried to persuade him that it would be right for him to account directly to the House just as a departmental Minister would. We tried a number of stratagems and identified certain matters for which only he was responsible, pointing out that if he did not account for them, nobody could. The ministerial code was the obvious example, but as No. 10 began to expand and new Departments began to arrive, many people in government were responsible only to the Prime Minister and could be accountable to the House only through him.

When I made those points in our correspondence, the Prime Minister would reply that all the conventions were against what was proposed. I was told that Prime Ministers did not do that sort of thing and did not come to the House of Commons to appear before Select Committees. Of course, that was wrong, as Prime Ministers used to do so. The subsequent convention has developed only since the war. Indeed, it really began only because when the new Select Committee system started after 1979, Mrs. Thatcher did not want to appear before the Defence Committee in the Westland inquiry. If one scratches a convention, one will always find expediency. On consideration, the great weight of convention seemed to disappear. Ramsay MacDonald appeared before a Select Committee, as did Neville Chamberlain. What this House has forgotten are the powers that it used to have.

When I had exhausted my correspondence with the Prime Minister on one front, I went to the Liaison Committee and asked why we did not invite the Prime Minister to come to the House annually to account for the Government's annual report. Again, the same reply came back, saying that Prime Ministers did not do that sort of thing and that all the conventions were against it. Of course, the little tailspin was the removal of the annual report itself.

Against that background, let us notch up the achievement for this House in the Prime Minister's agreement to come and give an account to Select Committees of what he does in terms of his own responsibilities and those of government as a whole. However, in doing so, let us also be aware of the wider significance of that victory, which is that the House is not going into new territory, but reclaiming territory that it used to occupy.

I put it to the House that that is the fundamental point. This House used to be more powerful than it is now. The story of the past century is of this House losing power to the Executive. Either we as a House of Commons want to reclaim some of that power or we do not. When we talk about modernising Parliament, I get rather uneasy, as modernisation can mean two different things. It can mean allowing the Executive to have an easier life and to get their business through in a more straightforward way, as well as tidying up some of the untidy bits of how this House operates, including things that I like, such as ensuring that we get home earlier at night. Those are important matters, but let us not believe for a second that they go to the heart of the constitutional issue, which is that there has been a drift of power away from Parliament and towards the Executive as party discipline has tightened in the past century or so.

We have to decide either that that is how politics now is, play our part in that system, become its slavish adherents in one way or another and find eloquent ways of justifying it, or that that shift has to be reversed. That is the point about the report "Shifting the Balance".

David Winnick: Did not Parliament reclaim the ground because the parliamentary Labour party refused to accept the recommendation that two of our colleagues who had served as Select Committee Chairmen should not be reappointed? Is it not because the parliamentary party made it perfectly clear in the Chamber that we were not willing to put up with that and voted against it that the recommendation is before us today?

Tony Wright: Indeed. I am grateful for that observation, as those events showed that this institution had to reach a certain point before it became clear to everyone that we could go no further down that road. We must be honest with ourselves about that and hope that people outside are not listening. The fact is that we had to decide whether we wanted our instruments of scrutiny, the Select Committees, to be owned by this House or by the Executive. That was the choice that was put to the House by the Liaison Committee in its report. It was a very clear choice as to whether we wanted to continue with a system in which the Chairmen of Select Committees were selected by the Minister whose Department they were supposed to be scrutinise. We had to decide whether those appointments were the prizes of patronage or whether the Chairmen were to act as the instruments of scrutiny and independence on the House's behalf.

Mr. Forth: On that theme, is the hon. Gentleman satisfied that a system in which Select Committees always have a majority of Government Members is necessarily the best way of providing for effective parliamentary scrutiny?

Tony Wright: I am not sure that I am as troubled by that as the right hon. Gentleman would like me to be. Having had the experience of chairing a Select Committee, I find that it is possible, almost like an oasis inside this institution, to work on a different cross-party basis, whereby some of the old antagonisms that exist in this Chamber begin to slide away. That is why many of us give such attention to Select Committees—we know that they offer a way of working and of dealing with issues that differs from the knockabout, custard pie approach that we take in here.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Is not the hon. Gentleman overlooking the fact that his chairmanship of a Select Committee is by virtue of his membership of the parliamentary Labour party? Moreover, in his admirable efforts to close the gap of prime ministerial accountability through the Liaison Committee, is not he ignoring the fact that of 27 members of minority parties in this House, not a single one chairs a Select Committee, and they will

[Mr. Alex Salmond]

therefore have no access to the welcome system of prime ministerial accountability that he has helped to introduce? Does he see that as an anomaly?

Tony Wright: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I do not want to revisit the question of minority party representation, because I hope that that will be helped by the new arrangements.

On his first point, perhaps one should not confess too much on these occasions, but when I expressed an interest in chairing a Select Committee instead of being a Parliamentary Private Secretary to a Cabinet Minister, I was told—I had better not say by whom—that that would not be tolerated by the Whips, that it would not be acceptable to No. 10, and that I should forget all about it. Change came about only because members of that Select Committee said, not that they particularly wanted me, but that they would not have someone foisted upon them. Unless we build independence into the system, I am afraid that we shall have the continuation of the system that we know exists now. To echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (David Winnick), that system required the turning of the worm. We had reached a point beyond which we could not continue any longer. When one looks back at the history of Select Committees, one sees the way in which they were once able to send for persons and papers and properly to interrogate the Executive through Ministers, and it becomes clear that they have to relearn those techniques. We are not about to go somewhere that we have never been before—we are reclaiming a small bit of territory that we should never have lost.

As Select Committees, we have much more to do. We have not yet begun to get hold of the real centres of power outside this House. If we really want the House and the Committee system to be the apex of accountability, we must get hold of all those regulators who now determine so much about real life in this country. We must get hold of areas that we have hardly begun to get hold of if we want to put this place at the centre of the nation's affairs again.

Mr. Bryant: Some things have changed over the past 100 years, not least the advent of television, which means that when the Prime Minister appears before the Liaison Committee of 34 members the whole country will see exactly what the establishment of the House of Commons looks like. Is my hon. Friend worried that a Committee of 34 will find it difficult to undertake that act of scrutiny, and does he agree that it would be better done by a smaller Committee?

Tony Wright: I do indeed share that view. I have expressed it in the relevant quarters, and I hope that the issue will be resolved. If we get it right, it will do the House of Commons some good.

There is a mismatch between how we do politics in here and how the country expects politics to be done. Unless we can make these arrangements come together, the reputation and status of this House will not only not be restored, but decline further. I have been pessimistic on this front over the past 10 years, and this is the first time that I can say with honesty that we may just have turned the corner. Under the leadership of the Leader of the House, the House may have begun to understand that we can no longer go on as we have in the past.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): It is generous of the hon. Gentleman to give way. As I will not be able to speak in the debate, I want to return him to the point made by my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House about the illogicality of his position. The hon. Gentleman is worried about the independence of the Chairman, but he should also be worried about the independence of the entire Committee. It is not only the inquisition of Ministers that goes on in a Committee, but the line-by-line scrutiny of reports. If the Government of the day has a majority on that Committee, it is likely that the end character and content of such reports will be biased towards the Government.

Tony Wright: I think that I dealt with that point. It is simply not my experience that Select Committees work like that. Indeed, one of the joys of Select Committees is that they do not.

This is the kind of modernisation that deserves the name. It is the kind of modernisation that begins to shift the balance and to point the House in the right direction. I just hope—if I can put it this way—that the dark forces that inhabit this place do not want to prevent this package of reforms from continuing. It is a package—all the bits connect. If we put them together we can begin to see a future for this House that connects us to politics as it should be and to what people outside expect of us. If we do not get it right this time, I am afraid that this House may fall further in public affection and repute.

6.15 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I very much welcome the spirit of the Modernisation Committee's report and largely accept its conclusions. It is particularly important because, over the years, as we must all be aware, scrutiny has migrated from this Chamber, which has become largely theatre. If scrutiny is to exist, it must be conducted elsewhere in the institution.

I welcome the initiative of the Leader of the House. I remember sitting in the Liaison Committee under his predecessor thinking that a fairly Stalinist attitude was being displayed towards us, so I welcome the glasnost that he has brought to the debate. I shall not ask him to react to that, because it would break the solidarity that he would wish to express with his predecessor.

I have reservations on three matters, some of which the Leader of the House has partly dealt with: first, the notion of a separate Back-Bench career path; secondly, the core tasks; and, thirdly, the size of the Committee.

Like most of my colleagues, I cannot say that I get terribly excited about the way in which Members of Parliament are chosen for Select Committees. I served on and chaired the Select Committee on Agriculture and now chair the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I have never had the feeling that my colleagues are being nobbled, and I have spent part of my time trying to tone down Labour Members' hostile comments about their own Government. I cannot get quite as exercised about that issue as many people do.

I do, however, become exercised about the very concept of the separate career path because it gives rise to one or two problems, the first of which is the fact that

we are trying to graft some of the characteristics of Congress on to a parliamentary system. The United States has powerful congressional committees because of the principle of the separation of powers. Those committees can approve nominations, generate and hone legislation and bargain with the Executive. We can do none of those things, and we should not pretend that we can assimilate them into the concept of Parliament and Government in this House. There may be a case for taking the Executive out of the House. In the context of longer-term evolution, it might be desirable to move more entirely towards a congressional habit of mind in the interests of proper scrutiny—especially given the problems identified by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) as regards the Executive and presidential forms of government that we have now. However, that is not the proposition before us, and I would not wish to overplay its role or the expectations within it.

On paid Chairmen, there is a balance in this place, and its political role could be compromised if Select Committee Chairmen, and they alone, were chosen for receipt of a particular bonus. I hope that my Front Benchers will not take this as a plea for a job, but members of the shadow Cabinet have an infinitely more difficult role than any Select Committee Chairman. Getting the information to hold the Government to account on the basis of the resources available to an Opposition demands an enormous commitment of time and energy. Frankly, it is a much more demanding role than that which I fulfil. If we give Select Committee Chairmen additional money but ask hon. Members to choose between doing the hewing of wood and drawing of water on the Front Bench and becoming a grandee through running a Select Committee—I went from being a Back Bencher to a grandee without an intermediate stage—a serious dilemma will arise.

I also have some reservations about the proposed collegiate nature of Select Committees. I chair a Committee of 17 members, and I look forward to reducing its membership to 15, if the rules permit that. However, the Committee is friendly and largely based on trust—taking people's word and trying to work together. I am worried about what will happen if we introduce gentlemen and players into that system.

If the matter goes before the Review Body on Senior Salaries, I hope that it will be examined in the wider context of hon. Members' motivation. Frankly, an informed, energetic Opposition constitutes the best form of scrutiny that a parliamentary system can provide.

I have some doubts about core tasks. However, in the light of the reassurances that the Leader of the House gave, I shall not press my amendment.

The remit of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee runs from global warming to tuberculosis in cattle, nuclear waste to fisheries management, BSE to bathing beaches and CAP reform to Covent Garden—a heavy remit. We have to deal with five Ministers; six agencies, including the Rural Payments Agency, which pays out billions of pounds in CAP support; 20 executive quangos, including the Environment Agency, English Nature and the Countryside Commission to list only some of the biggest; 31 advisory quangos; two public corporations; five tribunals, and seven other advisory bodies. We can commit ourselves to interrogate them all in a Parliament, but if we do that we set ourselves a series of possibly fruitless tasks that will act as a deterrent to many hon. Members who want to serve on the Committee.

In the statement on House of Lords reform yesterday, the Leader of the House said that we had to start by thinking about what hon. Members want the House of Lords to do. What do we want a Select Committee to do? Let us begin with the tasks. There are three basic jobs. First, Select Committees provide a forum for debating issues of immediate importance when Parliament must be capable of responding quickly to events but cannot provide the detailed scrutiny anywhere else. In Select Committees, detailed and, if necessary, prolonged interrogation can take place. They also have the power to summon witnesses. The Chairman of the Select Committee on Education and Skills cited the example of individual learning accounts. I could cite a series of cases from my Committee—for example, flooding. We had to respond to that because of public expectation that Parliament is capable of dealing with something that goes bump in the night.

Secondly, we need to scrutinise policy, including quangos, continually. On the whole, shorter, sharper reports that maintain their relevance are better than long, discursive reports. However, the subject of genetically modified foods continues to be considered in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. The same applies to organic food, nuclear waste and flood defence. We should keep reverting to and niggling at some subjects. That is the key; we must revert to issues time and again, if only for one-day sessions, and ascertain developments since we last met, such as the Government's response and whether anything in the firmament has changed. That takes time, energy and application, including much staff time. The shorter the reports, and the greater their number, the greater the demands on staff time.

Select Committees must provide a forum for ideas. I would have called that blue sky thinking if Lord Birt and the Prime Minister had not given the expression such a bad name. Governments come into office with a litany of new ideas that they have culled from think tanks and universities, and are good at applying them in their first years. Governments' abiding problem is the continuing ability to assimilate new ideas rather than simply sticking to their agendas. Part of the role of Select Committees is to bring ideas together where they can be ventilated and, if necessary, conflict to create a dialectic. That can be used to tackle the way in which the country is governed.

I do not want to make the tasks so prescriptive that that function cannot continue. They must not exclude free-range thinking or lay down methodologies; even seeing all the relevant Ministers in the course of a Parliament is a good idea, but not as a mechanistic obligation. I fear that that will prove a disincentive to Committee members.

We must also bear in mind the capacity to deliver. My Committee does not have permanent Sub-Committees. We have several Sub-Committees of short duration that are chaired by different members so that everyone has an opportunity to chair and share the load. The main Committee is about to embark on an inquiry entitled, "What the blazes is DEFRA for?" Once we have worked that out, we will consider whether it is engineered to do the job. The purpose of the Department is central, by any definition of core tasks. We also currently have two

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Sub-Committees. That is a great burden on members' time and entails an enormous amount of work by the staff. If we want the Committees to be successful, the reports must be published quickly. There is no point in waiting three weeks for the end of a Sub-Committee before examining proposals.

If I may make a special plea, the remuneration that we offer specialist advisers is not always sufficient to get the quality of people that we want. We tend to get academics and those for whom advising a Select Committee will look good on a CV, but not people from the private sector, who want more effective consultancy rates.

The Leader of the House and other colleagues said that Select Committees would sit for longer and have many Sub-Committees. If so, perhaps we should consider the other commitments that Members of Parliament make, which we have recently multiplied. For example, we have invented longer sittings in Westminster Hall. I consistently lose members of my Committee because they have a debate in Westminster Hall or want to take part in one. We want to serve on Standing Committees that consider Bills. I do not want to divorce myself from the normal legislative process at the heart of Parliament. I want to be able to serve on a Bill Committee. However, that means that Select Committees lose Members who are recruited for Bill Committees.

The changed hours that are envisaged for the Chamber will create a greater clash between time in the Chamber and that spent Upstairs. The same core of Members usually do the lion's share of the work on Sub-Committees. If we are to multiply them and their functions, we must review some of the other demands, including those that the Chamber imposes on us.

I am grateful for the fact that the Committees will have a chance to determine their size—within limits. I am not sure about the relevance for a Committee such as mine, which already has 17 members. Some colleagues argue that it is better to have more members and give them all a chance, and that that will mean that the jobs are done better. However, the Committee's essential role is scrutiny. We can scrutinise only if we can pursue lines of argument as they arise—if the ferrets can be sent after the rabbits when they appear, to use a metaphor that will appeal to the Leader of the House.

When matters crop up in questioning, they must be pursued. I do not like the formalistic approach to a Committee, whereby all members have an allocation of questions that they ask in turn. I believe in a more informal arrangement that allows people to butt in. However, that must be effective. A large Committee will not have the power to do the job that it is allowed to do. There is therefore conflict and tension between effective scrutiny and the ability to cover the waterfront or to satisfy everyone's aspirations. In that case, we must decide what matters most; in our case, it is the ability to scrutinise.

I am not especially worried about selection methods. I find that the problem is attendance rather than nobbling. There are always difficulties with attendance. That is apparent if one examines the attendance lists. A Committee of the whole House has the same problems because of the enormous demands on hon. Members' time.

I make one request to the Leader of the House. It is rare for a Minister to refuse to appear before a Select Committee, but it is common for a Minister to claim that it is difficult to find a suitable date. We do not want to make matters difficult for Ministers, who have commitments in the Council of Ministers or international forums. However, I should like it to be a general rule of ministerial conduct or performance that a summons to a Select Committee, which will always be couched in courteous terms—the Select Committee exists to have a conversation more than anything else to glean information from people—should be tantamount to speaking in a debate in the House. That would save us all a great deal of unnecessary hassle.

The report on which we shall vote tonight is extremely constructive. I agree with the concept that the House is merely reclaiming some of its traditional powers. We still have a long way to go, but I cannot see a better way of doing this than by reinforcing the powers of the scrutiny Select Committees. Let us not, however, be naïve and assume that there is a "with one bound Jack was free" solution. We must be careful that, in altering this particular piece of the mechanism, we do not cause a dislocation across the functioning of the House that we would live to regret.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Many Members are seeking to catch my eye. I appeal for shorter speeches so that as many of them as possible can contribute.

6.30 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I have been in the House for 15 years and I regret to say that, during that time, apart from the ending of all-night sittings, there have been very few serious attempts at modernisation. I contrast that with the jobs that I have had outside the House, which never lasted more than seven years, and usually only about three. During that time, when I ran whole departments or organisations, there was always massive change. We always wanted to develop and move on. My frustration in this place, having been here for 15 years and seen so little change, has, therefore, been acute.

That has changed only since my joining my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House on the Modernisation Committee. I pay tribute to him and to his enormous vision, energy and commitment in pursuing the modernisation of this institution. We are expecting to embark on a huge agenda, as was made clear in the memorandum that he provided on a previous occasion. Today, we are tackling only a very small part of that agenda.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) on his excellent speech today, in which he demonstrated clearly just how modest these proposals are. Despite that, the weight of tradition in this place, and some vested interests, have already led to the watering down of some of the proposals in our report, resulting in the proposals that we shall vote on tonight.

The first message that I have for my colleagues is: "If you are a moderniser, and if you want this process to continue, vote for the whole package that has been

presented by my right hon. Friend. It has been constructed with considerable difficulty, it hangs together and it paves the way for greater modernisation."

What is wrong with the present system? We have heard from many others tonight, but I want to quote Lord Sheldon when he appeared before our Select Committee. He said:

"The Executive, via the Whips, ought not to select those members of the Select Committees who will be examining the Executive. That is crucial."

He is right. The present system is not only wrong in principle; the process has lacked transparency and denied disappointed Members any right of appeal. The events of last summer served to highlight grievances, and Parliament put things right and challenged the Executive. In doing so, however, we did not provide a mechanism for a permanent solution to the underlying problems.

The proposals of the Modernisation Committee provide a court of appeal and enhance transparency, while leaving the process of producing the party lists for the Select Committees in the hands of the parties themselves. In the Labour party, as my right hon. Friend has pointed out, we have already chosen a better method, which is designed to provide greater transparency and fairness in the internal party process. Nothing that comes before the House tonight will change that, except that everyone will know that there is a court of appeal and another scrutiny system, and that, in extremis, a Member could appeal to the Committee of Nomination. I believe that the very existence of the Committee of Nomination means that it will probably never be used, because of the great influence that it will have simply by being there and by affecting the way in which the parties behave. Even if Labour Members think that we have got everything right, surely we ought to care about Opposition Members.

The composition of the Committee of Nomination, as proposed by the Modernisation Committee, has drawn many unfavourable comments: not many have been clearly voiced in the Chamber, but I can assure hon. Members that, out in the corridors, they certainly have been. They always begin with the words, "Those old . . . " I shall say no more. We now have some new, younger—we presume—people being added to the Modernisation Committee, and we all accept the proposals that are now before us, because we have accepted the amendments. We will, therefore, have 12 Members on the Committee, and they will reflect the different ages and the diversity in the House.

My only regret is that, when the amendment was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), it was not made clear that, of the two Government additions, one should be a woman and the other a man. There is a gender imbalance on the Chairmen's Panel, and it could be addressed by the new amendments. I hope that, if the proposals are passed tonight, the spirit of that will be understood by those who make the appointments. People should look not at personalities, however, but at the independence that will be brought to the Committee of Nomination under the leadership of the Chairman of Ways and Means. This is an extremely modest proposal, but it returns to Parliament what is rightly Parliament's: the power of decision over matters of parliamentary scrutiny.

Our report seeks to address several other problems with the present system, including the size of the Committees. I frequently go to meetings at which I meet colleagues from other European Parliaments and institutions. They always ask me at the outset, "Which Committee are you on?" There is an assumption in many Parliaments—this is now also true of the Scottish Parliament—that every Member will be on a Committee and be part of the scrutiny process, and that they will all have a place. By comparison, our scrutiny system is grossly underdeveloped, and our report seeks to address some of those problems.

In defending the present means of selection and appointment, some new Members have told me that they think it works extremely well and that it is the most interesting part of their job. I am sure that it is, but, by defending the status quo, they deny other new Members coming to the House the opportunity to serve. There should be an increase in the numbers, although I do not agree that that should be achieved in the way that our amendment now suggests. It should have been mandatory. The report recommended that there should be 15 members, and that is what we should have had. At least we should go some way towards that tonight, however, by giving discretion to Committees.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) talked about his Committee of 17 members. While saying that he would like it to be somewhat smaller, however, he also complained about the work load, and the complexities arising from not having full attendance. Any of us should be able to chair a Committee of 15. The Modernisation Committee—a completely cross-party Committee—has had 15 members and has been brilliantly chaired and, if I may say so, has worked extremely well. I agree with what the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) said about that tonight.

Mr. Curry: This is not a question of the ability to chair a Committee. It is a question of the ability to ensure that the Committee spends its time doing the job that it is supposed to do, in effectively pursuing its witnesses. There is a difference between a management problem and a parliamentary political problem.

Joan Ruddock: I chair the New Deal for Communities board, which is far more diverse than any parliamentary Committee, and has 21 members. I believe that there is a skill involved in enabling people in such circumstances. As the right hon. Gentleman suggested, it does not always have to be Buggins's turn. Sometimes the member who is pursuing a point is the one who should be called more often. I accept that, but the fundamental principle here involves the opportunity for many more Members to serve on Select Committees. Because we have absences and conflicts of interest, and because people have to be in other places, having 15 members is a way of making a good Committee and enabling it to work.

There has been talk of costs, but, frankly, this is about scrutiny, which is what we are here to do, and that has to be paid for. It has been suggested that if membership of the Foreign Affairs Committee were larger, it would have people travelling all over the world on freebies. All those things can be sorted out. People have distinct interests, even within a Select Committee, and not everyone has to do everything or go everywhere at the same time.

Mrs. Dunwoody: It is terribly important to understand that, if a Select Committee is divided into a number of small Sub-Committees—or even quite large ones—the

[Mrs. Dunwoody]

other members of that Committee are excluded from considering not only the evidence but the conclusions. I hope that my hon. Friend will not go down the road of assuming that constantly fragmenting a bigger Committee gets a better result. That is not the case, and it actually defeats their purpose.

Joan Ruddock: I bow to my hon. Friend's experience, but I think that these matters can be worked out. I think that, because Sub-Committees concentrate more on specific issues, they sometimes add more to the whole. I do not think there is a complete choice and we are not offering a complete prescription, but I do think the numbers need to be increased.

Donald Anderson *rose—*

Joan Ruddock: I am trying to observe your strictures, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I cannot do so if I give way again.

The report says that the parties—in effect, the Government—will still determine which party chairs which Committee. I believe that chairmanships should rotate, although the Modernisation Committee has not considered that.

Last year, as events demonstrated, the usual channels sought to determine who would chair Committees. Even according to new proposals, and with improved methods of party selection, chairmanship could still be predetermined simply on the grounds of previous tenure and the fact that someone had done a good job. Experience shows that people can remain Chairs for three, four or even five Parliaments. They may continue to produce exemplary work, but I strongly believe that there are others with equal talents who must be given an opportunity to offer those talents. I think that one term, or five years, of a Parliament is sufficient for anyone to occupy the Chair, and it is certainly fairest if payment is involved.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) *rose—*

Joan Ruddock: I have no time to give way.

I believe that there should be a limit, and I think that the Committee's proposal of eight years is both modest and generous.

Finally, let me put down a marker. One matter was not raised in the Committee, but I think it will need to be raised in the future. The House has environmental and financial audit, but what does not exist for all Departments, Government institutions, quangos and so forth is any auditing of equality. We need an equality Select Committee to consider issues of gender, race and disability. Ours is a fundamentally unequal society, and even now our Government have not been able to address all the inequalities.

That is for another day, however. I appeal to my colleagues to support the whole package presented by the Modernisation Committee, both because of its intrinsic value and because it represents the start of real modernisation. The opportunity will not occur again in the near future.

6.42 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I shall observe your injunction, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and try to speak with exceptional brevity.

There has been a transformation in mood and tone since a similar debate during the last Parliament, less than a year ago. Many who are present now have taken part in debates on "Shifting the Balance", and will note that transformation. There are many reasons for it—the pioneering work of the Liaison Committee, the personality of the new Leader of the House, but also, I think, the growing appetite of Back Benchers for the reclaiming of some of the power they have lost. That, I believe, is why this is a much more consensual, constructive debate than its predecessors.

The steam escaped at the beginning of this Parliament, at the end of July, during the debate on the Committee of Selection. What happened in 1992 gave that Committee the yellow card, and what happened in July this year gave it the red card. The system was bust, there was no way the House would accept it, and those outside who take an interest in the House would have been astounded if a discredited system had remained.

My Select Committee was not one of the those for which payments were proposed, and I do not want to be paid, but I think Chairmen of investigative committees should be paid. I take the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) and the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) about the risk of damage to cohesion and integrity if Committee Chairmen were paid, but I do not agree. I think that if the House decided that the hon. Lady and my right hon. Friend should be paid, their Committees would work every bit as effectively as they do now. I do not think integrity or cohesion would be damaged if the House decided it was in the interest of building an alternative career structure for Chairmen to be paid.

I do not, however, buy the argument that that generosity should be extended to the shadow Cabinet. What we are trying to do is offer an alternative career path. The advantage for members of the shadow Cabinet is that one day they will be paid as Ministers. It would confuse the issue to start paying them on the back of the argument for remunerating Select Committee Chairmen.

Nor am I persuaded by the eight-year rule. If we are trying to offer an alternative career, why should we place an eight-year restriction on that career when there is no eight-year restriction on a ministerial term? Are we really saying that, had the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) not taken the Queen's shilling, he should not have been eligible to chair the Home Affairs Select Committee? Should a young man be cut off in his prime? The key question, surely, is this: which member of the Select Committee would best chair it, and best hold the Executive to account? We should ask not how long the Chairman has done his job, but whether he is the best at it.

Mr. Greg Knight: Can my right hon. Friend tell us how many Ministers of the Crown have served for more than eight years since the second world war?

Sir George Young: I plead guilty, and I would have been very distressed if after eight years John Major had said "I am very sorry, George, but you have had your eight years; that's it".

The key question for the Prime Minister is the question I have just posed: who is best able to discharge the portfolio? My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was a Minister for some 18 years. He would say that he was just warming up at the end of that period, and ready for more challenges.

I want to make two final points, the first of which is about the size of Committees. I understand the argument that every Member should have an opportunity to display his or her talents by serving on a Select Committee, and I understand the argument about representation of minority parties, but I do not think that those are the key questions. The key question, in this context, is this: at what size can a Select Committee operate most effectively? What is the right size to enable it to hold the Executive to account? I think Committees should have about 11 or 13 members. The more members are added, the greater the diminishing returns. Each time the membership is increased from five to seven, from seven to nine and from nine to 11, value is added and the value of the extra member is significant, but as soon as it is increased from 11 or from 13 the diminishing returns begin.

I accept the arguments of nearly all members of the Liaison Committee. They argue that they can do their job more effectively with a smaller Committee. There is another point, which has not been mentioned: if more people are appointed to a Select Committee, they are not doing nothing else. It is not a nil sum game. If more people are asked to spend more time on Select Committees, they will probably spend less time in Westminster Hall and on Standing Committees.

My last point is about Prime Minister's Question Time, which I think is a disaster area. It is the worst possible way of holding the Prime Minister to account. It is most unusual to get any information out of the Prime Minister, but, even worse, Question Time gives people an entirely wrong impression of what politics is about. They assume that the House of Commons is always like that. That is one reason why people are switched off politics: they assume that that is what we are like. I think that there is an appetite for a less adversarial, more constructive, more strategic approach to questioning the Prime Minister.

I do not envy my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) his task of chairing the Liaison Committee, but I am sure he will do it well. Perhaps the House will learn from what the Committee does, and the format of Prime Minister's Question Time on the Floor of the House may change if the House discovers that there is a better way of holding the Government to account.

Yes, the balance is shifting; but the momentum needs to be maintained if the House is to return to what should be its position.

6.49 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Although many of the Committee's proposals are good—more resources for Select Committees, the debating of reports, and so forth—I have severe reservations about two or three aspects of them. I shall begin with the question of Committee size, as that is where the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) left off.

Arguing that the size of Committees should be increased to provide more people with more jobs is not very attractive reasoning. It would not make Committees more effective; indeed, evidence from the Liaison Committee and the comments that we have heard today have overwhelmingly demonstrated the opposite. Not only would there be less participation by each Committee member, and therefore less time to pursue particular lines of inquiry, but it is less likely that unanimity would be reached. One of the great strengths of the Select Committee system is the ability to produce unanimous cross-party reports. The greater the number of members, the greater the risk of party political division, and the less cogent the reports would be.

The first solution is to ensure that existing members of Select Committees actually turn up. If they fail to turn up without good reason, they should be replaced. That is the answer to the quorum question, and I am pleased that the Modernisation Committee report deals with it to some degree.

Another solution is to consider the configuration of existing Committees. We have heard about the great work load of some of the bigger Committees. If the work of some groups is sufficiently discrete, they could perhaps be divided into full Select Committees in their own right, rather than being split into Sub-Committees. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) may have a view on whether transport should have a full Select Committee in its own right. The creation of giant Departments is perhaps linked to the current anomaly, as well as to some of the transport problems that we face.

We have considered the creation of new Select Committees. Some Government Departments do not have their own Select Committees. For example, the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Law Officers' Department are lumped in with the Home Office for Select Committee purposes, and it is clear that they do not get the scrutiny that they deserve. Perhaps we should consider establishing a separate Committee to scrutinise those Departments. The same is true of the Cabinet Office; if we genuinely want to achieve joined-up government, perhaps we should establish a Committee that examines it per se.

We already have cross-departmental Committees such as the Joint Committee on Human Rights, the Science and Technology Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) that we should perhaps establish a Select Committee on equality that can examine such issues across government. In establishing whether the configuration of Committees is right, perhaps we could also create the necessary additional jobs and improve the effectiveness of the scrutiny of Government, rather than simply providing more jobs on existing Committees, thereby potentially weakening their effectiveness.

My other main reservation concerns the Committee of Nomination. I agree with the approach adopted by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight). Do we need it, and if so, why? The argument in favour of the Committee of Nomination is that it would ensure fair play and provide a court of appeal, but in what way? Such decisions will be taken by the parties, and it has been accepted that parties will produce their own lists, much as they already do. We seem to have overlooked the fact that since last summer's spat the Labour party has reformed its procedures, thereby almost certainly ensuring that such problems will not arise again.

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

My concern is that complaints already heard in the parliamentary Labour party, and, ultimately, on the Floor of the House, could be heard in yet another forum. We are told that that would happen only in exceptional circumstances, but three such circumstances have occurred already. The danger is that we will create a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Today's proposals certainly do not recognise the changes that the parliamentary Labour party, at least, has already made to its procedures.

I am worried about the possibility that we would be creating a whinger's charter. People who could not convince their own colleagues that they ought to be put on a particular Select Committee would be able to run and tell tales to a group of more senior, unelected Committee members—who, as the Liberal Democrats have pointed out, would have the power not only to accommodate the whinger, but to remove someone who did enjoy the confidence of the party in question. Their acquiring such power would be a natural consequence of the proposal.

The report says that we must come up with a structure that enjoys the confidence of both sides of the House. It is bad enough that a minority of Opposition Members could decide on Government appointments. For example, they would have the power to examine the Labour party's papers, demand explanations of our party's decisions and overturn recommendations. Do the Opposition seriously want a Committee with a Government majority—albeit one that might operate in a non-party political way—to take decisions on their appointments? That surely cannot be good for scrutiny. In fact, it would give a Committee with a Government majority the right to get rid of Opposition appointees and replace them with people more to its liking, which would give rise to potential for great mischief.

Mr. Salter: Will my hon. Friend clarify one important point? The premise of his argument is the retention of the existing Committee of Selection, which is dominated by Whips, and which in the past has been known to meet for some three minutes, or even, in certain cases, 30 seconds. Does he not realise that that process is discredited? Does he not further realise that the House of Commons as a whole would have the power to overturn the recommendations of the Committee of Nomination, just as it can overturn those of the Committee of Selection? In relation to the powers vested in this House and its individual Members, the proposed process is in no way different.

Mr. Dismore: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but he has overlooked the fact that since the problems arose last year, the parliamentary Labour party has reformed its system—although I cannot speak for the other parties. Of course the right already exists to take such matters to the House of Commons. In effect, my hon. Friend is trying to replace one set of people with another.

As for the configuration of the Committee of Selection, an amendment has been accepted that marginally improves matters. However, in effect, existing members of the Committee owe their membership to the principle of Buggins's turn. If the proposed Committee were established today, most of its male members would have been elected between 1959 and 1983. There might be one or two new Members as well, but such a membership would certainly not represent the balance of interests in the House. Nor would they have the knowledge, strengths and special interests of hon. Members as a whole.

A series of complicated amendments has been synthesised into one to deal with that problem, but it has not worked. When I entered Parliament in 1997 I knew a few of my intake, but I knew nothing about the vast majority of the others, and I certainly knew very little about those who had been Members for a long time—excluding what one read in the newspapers, or heard on "Today In Parliament." Moreover, the media give a poor impression of what people are really like. The 1992 intake did not know much about the 1997 intake, and the 1997 intake knew practically nothing about the 2001 intake. We can tinker at the margins by trying to create places for Members from recent intakes, but that will not address the issue of knowing the strengths and weaknesses of Members throughout the House. I am therefore concerned about the concept of the Committee of Nomination and the mechanics of its operation.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Dismore: No, because I am drawing my remarks to a close.

I am concerned by the suggestion that the Chairman should be chosen by the Committee itself. I question whether, when the chairmanship of a Select Committee has been allocated to the Opposition, it is right for the Government members of the Committee to be able to choose the Chairman. According to that principle, the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, would not have chosen our current Chairman—he is a good Chairman—because he is the only Liberal Democrat member of it. The suggestion is therefore rather nonsensical.

I agree that there should be a time limit on the length of service of Select Committee Chairmen, and what has been offered is a reasonable compromise in that respect. However, I want an assurance that we will not be subjected to musical chairs. Where a given Committee is reconfigured as a Department is restructured, the opportunity could arise for someone who has already served two terms to be parachuted in for a third term on a different Select Committee. The principle should be, "Two strikes and you're out", to make room for other people with an equal right to serve in that capacity.

6.59 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend—if I may call him that—the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who sits on the Work and Pensions Committee with me. I enjoy working with him, and as he says, the Committee operates on the basis of consensus. The idea of consensus on a Select Committee is an important point, which I am picking up from the excellent speech by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright). He was right to say that people's perception of this place is of confrontational, custard-pie politics.

The work of Select Committees, if they are operating properly, follows from the evidence presented to all their members. They draw conclusions based on the evidence

presented to them. It can be difficult for members from the governing party, but if the evidence is produced they will say, "Yes, there are problems that the Government need to address." That has certainly been my experience. That is the essence of the work of Select Committees, and we need to promote that ethic and change the way in which we work in the House. Otherwise we will continue to fall in the esteem of the public, and that is a matter of great concern for the whole democratic process.

I share the enthusiasm for the tone of the debate and the proposals. I have not seen such an opportunity for change in my time in the House, which began in 1983. Other hon. Members have explained all the elements of the changes earlier in the debate, so I shall not go into those, but I should point out that the Leader of the House has played a key role in the process. The weight of his presence on the Modernisation Committee and on the House of Commons Commission has unlocked doors in a way that I have never seen before. With his authority, he has been able to confront the collective power of the Whips in a way that Leaders of the House in the past—although I say nothing against them—have perhaps not been able to do. The present Leader of the House has used his position to begin a process of change.

The hon. Member for Hendon raised detailed points of concern. He is a thoughtful man, and we would be right to consider his views, but I hope that colleagues will see the proposals as the start of a long journey. A process of evolution could shift the balance, in the way that the Liaison Committee started to identify in the last Parliament.

When we are trying to shift the balance, we should continually remind ourselves of the weight balanced against us. The total sum of money spent by central Government in the fiscal year 2001–02 was £394 billion. The total sum spent by the House on all aspects of scrutiny was £7.7 million. According to my calculations, that is 0.002 per cent. of the total sum spent by the Government. The Public Accounts Committee has control over the National Audit Office, which has 750 staff, and the House has only 150 professionals in its staff complement to support the scrutiny work of Members of Parliament. Moreover, the disproportion has been worsening.

As part of the package of changes, we need to think about how we can shift the balance. I come back to the role that the Leader of the House has played in the process. As a member of the House of Commons Commission, I can confirm that the Commission has signed up to the project. Its members have already started thinking about funding for a central unit. We cannot do anything until the disposition of the House is known after the Divisions tonight, but if it is the will of the House, it would be possible to have in place a central unit, with 18 new members of staff, by autumn 2003. That would mean the expenditure of some £850,000. I have been a Member of Parliament for nearly 20 years and a member of the Commission for six or seven years, but I have never before known it possible to devote such sums to the House of Commons' work of scrutiny.

Not only the core unit would be funded; the Internal Review Service, with the help of the NAO, is already working on plans for additional support for each Committee's office, in addition to the core unit. The right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) has also played a distinguished and important role in that process. The Commission has already committed itself to trying to assist the political process that has been started, within reason and subject to the budget for the next three-year expenditure plan. Of course there is not enough money to do everything that we would like to do, but in the past 18 months there has been a sea change in the willingness of the House authorities to assist the process, and we should seize that opportunity with both hands.

Mr. Sheerman: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the resources represent a wonderful opportunity for the Select Committee system, and we must thank many people for that. However, does he agree that the Select Committee system will be on trial? If in the end people still think that Select Committees are a little ghetto into which some hon. Members disappear and never communicate with the rest of the House, we will have failed. We have to ensure that we are worthy to be given the resources, and worthy of the confidence of the House.

Mr. Kirkwood: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I fear that the list of core tasks mentioned in the motion may become prescriptive, but it at least gives us a measure by which, over a Parliament, we can test the effectiveness of the work that we do. We will indeed need to demonstrate that the changes have made a difference to the effectiveness of the Select Committees.

The proposal to provide salaries for the Chairmen of Select Committees is the right approach, because an alternative career structure within the current system is an essential third part of the package, along with a core unit and adequate staff for each Committee. We need professional Chairmen, especially for Committees such as the Work and Pensions Committee, whose work is becoming ever more technical. It needs a specialist, who spends two, three, or even three and a half days a week on the work. We need to provide the career structure and money that will make that work worth while. For the first time ever, we have an opportunity to bring that about.

I enjoy working with my colleagues on the Work and Pensions Committee—there are 11 of us—in a spirit of consensus. However, I fear the difficulty of trying to achieve that consensus with 15 members. On Wednesday we heard from three different groups of witnesses, with two people representing each group. It was difficult even for the number of Committee members who were present—we always have a good turn-out—to cross-examine six people meaningfully, but with 15 members it would have been impossible. People would have been dissatisfied and demotivated.

As the hon. Member for Hendon pointed out, smaller memberships are necessary to produce powerful consensual reports, because people have the opportunity to get to know each other well enough. I am worried by the proposals to increase the size of Select Committees, although—I would say this, because I am member of one of them—I accept the need to try to ensure that the views of minority parties are reflected on Select Committees.

The hon. Member for Hendon thinks deeply about these issues, but I disagree with his point about the Committee of Nomination. It is an essential part of the package. I served for five years, without time off for good behaviour, on the Committee of Selection. It is difficult for the Government to ensure that all the Standing Committees, including those on delegated legislation, are properly put

[Mr. Kirkwood]

together, but that is different from the important work that the Committee does in trying to find people to sit on Select Committees.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) about the Nomination Committee. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is a misconception that the Committee needs to be concerned about the identity of individual Select Committee members? Its task is not to replace one Select Committee member with another, but to guard against the abuse of process and the corruption that has been evident for far too long in its predecessor.

Mr. Kirkwood: I agree.

We should try the Committee of Nomination process for the rest of this Parliament. If there are difficulties and it does not work, we can revisit the matter, but it is important to try it. I agree with those who say that it may be a long time before the opportunity arises again.

7.10 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): A very senior member of the civil service recently gave a lecture at which he was asked for his opinion of the role of Parliament as a scrutinising organ. He replied that Parliament did not scrutinise, as the press fulfilled that function. Parliament would have to find another role, he said.

We should take that observation on board. The Chamber has lost many powers to demand answers from Members of Parliament, and many other aspects have been eroded. Much of what we assumed was accepted practice is no longer so. People do not think that it matters that statements are made not to the House of Commons first, but to fit in with press deadlines. They do not think that it matters that, when asked to appear as witnesses before a Select Committee, people can respond that they are Members of the other place or that they have a problem and cannot attend.

For the first time, my Select Committee produced a report about the need for Treasury Ministers to appear before it. Those Ministers have a political role now, over and above the involvement in negotiations about cash that they have always had. We have not even had a reply from the Government.

The House tonight is debating the urgent need for reforms to the system, and what those reforms should be. We must learn the fundamental lesson that every hon. Member is responsible for holding the Executive to account. We must be able to demonstrate to our voters that, in a democratic system, we are serious about asking difficult and often uncomfortable questions. We are not here to be always popular.

I speak as someone who has made a career out of not being popular. When I first came here, the House was fiercely sexist, and now it is ageist. Neither quality has done me much good, so it appears that my political timing has been wrong on all counts.

Select Committees are vital when it comes to finding out what the Government are doing, and why, and what they intend for the future. The system must have proper staffing. The House may not appreciate how much work is done by the Clerks and the specialist advisers. Select Committees are not even able to ask for economic models from the Government such as were produced by the Treasury for public-private partnership proposals. We do not have access to vital bits of information. Select Committees need to have much bigger staff, with much better pay and resources.

I oppose the proposal to pay Chairmen, however. Select Committees work because all members are equal and must work together. I am determined that all members should be able to comment on any report that my Select Committee produces, because they have all contributed to it. It has been said that the only way to get good-quality people to work on Select Committees is to establish an alternative career structure and pay Chairmen, but I believe that that undermines the role of Select Committees.

It is sad that Labour Members are prepared to say that the worth of people can be judged only by what they earn. We should remember how paramedics have had to crawl into damaged train carriages in the past few days. We should ask ourselves whether we as a nation have our priorities right, given the vast sums of money earned by people in the media or other careers. Their work may be useful and entertaining, but they are not vital services. I do not agree that we will get the quality that we deserve only if we pay Select Committee chairmen extra.

That is nonsensical, and it plays into the hands of those who say that Members of Parliament fulfil their true worth only when they disappear into the junior ranks of Government. Many hon. Members become invisible once they do that. They do not take serious decisions or change anything, yet they seem to think that that is the only way they can progress.

All Members of Parliament are here to use their judgment and abilities. We earn a very reasonable salary, and the need to give ourselves extra carrots on top of that raises questions about our political and moral judgment.

Select Committees work because members hear evidence and reach an agreed report. They listen to witnesses and ask questions. That is the basis of the conclusions that they reach. It has been proposed that increasing the membership of Select Committees so that smaller groups can be formed and sent off here and there will improve the quality of scrutiny. That is nonsense. I assure the House that when half the membership of a Select Committee produces a report, the other half—who have not read the evidence, or listened to it—are often full of the confidence of ignorance. They are very happy to tell those who have been active in producing a report that their conclusions are wrong and should be rewritten.

That is not a constructive way to produce useful reports for Parliament. The task of Select Committees is to reply to Parliament, not to Government. We will be in considerable danger if we lose that function.

Modern government is complex and covers many different roles. Many unaccountable methods are employed to get decisions through the system. I am not talking about a Cabinet Office with three different sections and innumerable committees chaired by people who are not elected. I am talking about the business of government, and about the numbers of Departments that have their own quangos, sub-committees and arrangements.

The House has still not grasped the extent of the problem. We have lost the ability to demand that the Government remember that they are answerable to hon. Members because we are elected. Until we take back that power, progress will remain limited.

The report is important. It was produced mainly by men, so it is not perfect, but it has a great deal to offer. However, I remind the House that Select Committees are an opportunity and a responsibility. More than that, they are our hope for the future. If we mess up the chance to make them really effective, what hon. Members do elsewhere will not matter. Everything will be a matter of presentation, and the general public will rapidly cotton on to how unimportant that renders us.

7.18 pm

Pete Wishart (North Tayside): I add the congratulations of the Scottish National party to those already extended to the Modernisation Committee, which has produced a thorough and robust report under the stewardship of the Leader of the House.

We very much welcome the broad thrust of the report and support the Committee in its efforts to strengthen and extend the role of Select Committees. We also agree with the Leader of the House that the measures would improve the scrutiny provided by Select Committees and would add to their ability to hold the Executive to account.

I also welcome the remarks about pre-legislative scrutiny. That has been a positive experience in the past, and I know that the Leader of the House was impressed when he visited the Scottish Parliament last year and saw how the committee structure there was focused on delivering pre-legislative scrutiny.

We contend that Select Committees should reflect, as far as possible, all shades of opinion in the House. The Government should go the extra mile and ensure that all the political parties here are represented properly in the House's institutions. We therefore support the increase in the number of members of Select Committees. I hope that the House will support our amendment this evening and that the minority parties will gain extra places.

Under the current situation, the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru have no membership of a non-regional departmental Committee. That is unacceptable—we are effectively barred from further scrutiny of important Departments that still have a major remit in relation to some of the constituents whom we are here to represent.

We support the Prime Minister's announcement that he will appear in front of the Liaison Committee. However, it means that once again, we in the minority parties are effectively shut out, as we have no membership of the Liaison Committee. The arithmetic of the House traditionally works against minority parties because of the thresholds required to obtain a place. A body that is 34-strong means that we should be entitled to a place, but the Liaison Committee is composed solely of Chairs of Committees, and we have difficulty in securing a place on a Committee, far less one of the chairmanships. The three main parties will have the opportunity further to scrutinise the work of the Prime Minister while the minority parties will not. That is one more example of how the House can be seen as unrepresentative and not including all shades of opinion.

I am disappointed that the Liaison Committee has come out against increasing the number of members on Select Committees. What would it do to try to increase the number of members of minority parties on Select Committees? I looked carefully at its response to the Modernisation Committee report and found no mention of the minority parties. I found its objection to increasing the size of Select Committees pretty unconvincing and, in parts, feeble.

The Liaison Committee doubts whether there will be enough Members to fill the increased number of places on Select Committees. Only some 40 per cent. of Members serve on Select Committees, whereas 100 per cent. of Bundestag Members serve on Select Committees of that Parliament. Members of the Scottish Parliament serve on at least two Committees. It is argued that Members might not be found to serve on Select Committees. What do right hon. and hon. Members think we are in this place for if not to provide effective scrutiny of the Government?

I think that the real reason why the Liaison Committee has come out so strongly against the increase in numbers is that its members are in real danger of becoming a self-preserving Select Committee élite. I caution it against pursuing that route; it should become a Committee of the whole House.

Right hon. and hon. Members have said, mainly from sedentary positions, that minority parties do not have places on Select Committee because our numbers are so small. We are indeed minority parties, in terms of the basic arithmetic of the House.

Lady Hermon: May I ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on the unique position of Northern Ireland? This Government—and I am very pleased that it was this Government—entered into the Belfast agreement and guaranteed the constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom unless and until a majority of people voted otherwise. Surely, then, it is essential, in fulfilling the obligations of that agreement, that the main nationalist parties—the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Ulster Unionist party—are represented in this House in all its aspects, including Select Committees?

Pete Wishart: The hon. Lady makes a very good point which demonstrates why minority parties should be included in the membership of Select Committees. Let us start to unravel what we mean by minority parties. I represent the Scottish National party—the principal Opposition party in the Scottish Parliament and the second party of Scotland which is quickly becoming established as the first party. My hon. Friends in Plaid Cymru are the second party and the principal Opposition party of the National Assembly for Wales. The right hon. and hon. Members who sit on the Benches behind me, along with SDLP Members, are the effective Government of Northern Ireland. We have a massive constituency—we represent millions of people. Because of the electoral system and the way in which votes are cast, we unfortunately do not have the number of Members that our votes deserve, but we hope that that will change in the not-too-distant future.

I think that all right hon. and hon. Members will agree that the House must represent all shades of opinion in the country. Indeed, the House should make every effort to ensure that that happens. The Scottish Parliament includes single Members of three minority parties. They have been given Select Committee places way beyond what the basic arithmetic would suggest. That is a good example, which the House would do well to follow.

[Pete Wishart]

Our amendment would include the leaders of all the minority parties—or if not the leaders, the Whips. That is a significant achievement. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members consider that when they vote tonight, because we will certainly push the amendment to a vote.

We also tabled an amendment to include a minority party member in the new Committee of Nomination, but unfortunately it was not selected. We believe it important that a voice from the minority parties should at least be given the opportunity to put the case for minority representation on Select Committees. We might not be successful, but at least we should be given the opportunity to put the case.

After the breakdown of our relationship with the Liberal Democrats—an arrangement that all minority parties found unsatisfactory—the minority parties came together. We now deal directly with the Government—an arrangement that has proved very satisfactory. We agree among ourselves who should be nominated for Committee places and present the names weekly to the Government, who then put our case at the Committee of Selection. Although that has been a satisfactory arrangement, it is no substitute for putting our case directly. However, I must say that our new arrangements with the Government and, indeed, the Opposition Whips have been useful, constructive and even friendly. The Government have put our case well and we have managed to secure most of the places that we have sought. Sometimes I wonder where the Whips' fearsome reputation comes from: I found them the most congenial bunch of gentlemen, with whom it has been a pleasure to work.

We reject the composition of the Committee of Nomination not only because we will continue to be frozen out but because it is the same old story. Having seven members of the Chairmen's Panel is fair enough, as the Chairmen's Panel is the first port of call in finding people to fill the new Committee. However, the Committee will also consist of the four most senior members of the governing party, the two most senior members of the principal Opposition party, and one member of the Liberal Democrats. It sounds like the same old arithmetic.

Mr. Salmond: The same old gang.

Pete Wishart: The same old gang, as my hon. Friend says.

In addition, the Committee will include the most senior Government Back Bencher and the most senior Opposition Back Bencher. That looks like our best way in: if, by sheer willpower, we could outlive everybody else on the Opposition Benches, we might secure a place on the Committee of Nomination. I will be inquiring daily as to the well-being and health of my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan and doing all that I can to persuade him to remain in this House so that we can secure our place on the Committee of Nomination.

All the places on the Committee will once again be taken by the three mainstream United Kingdom parties, and the minority parties will be shut out. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will agree that it is important that all opinions are represented in the Committees and structures of the House, and that they will support our amendment.

7.27 pm

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) and I are not pressing the amendments in our name in favour of those tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) and for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant).

There is a controversy over how we move forward on the Committee of Nomination, and real lessons can be learned from this debate. The House is finally beginning to accept that longevity of Members in this place should not count. All MPs—all Back Benchers—should be equal in this place. The attitude has been that every year people spend here adds to their wisdom so that their views count more than those of others. We frequently see such people called to speak first in debates and at Question Time, but there is no basis for that. There were great talents in the 2001 intake of MPs, just as there were in earlier intakes. The views of the 2001 intake and others are equally valid; I see them as equally intelligent. Their constituents deserve to be heard just as much as the constituents of Members who have been in this place longer.

The longevity rules have created a bias against young people, yet we hear increasingly that young people are not involved in democracy. If young people do not believe that they have an equal say in this House, that will continue.

The system also creates a bias against marginal constituencies because, by their very nature, the Members who represent them will have spent less time here. Their constituents—the people in constituencies where there has been more of a political debate—will not be heard so much, whereas constituencies where the votes have been weighed for centuries will continue to have a louder voice.

Parliament has changed too slowly in the past and is still changing too slowly. We need to change dramatically if we are to catch up and bring the British public with us. When I discussed my amendment with colleagues, the pervasive view was that perhaps the 1997 intake should be considered, but not the 2001 intake—because "They won't know how Parliament works." However, it is the job of colleagues and Officers of the House to ensure that even if a Member has been here only for a day they can play a full part as a Back Bencher; they can make sensible judgments. In relation to the Committee of Nomination, Members from the 2001 intake could bring the freshest and most independent views.

I regret that the gender balance allowed for in the Modernisation Committee's original report is no longer included. We could now end up with a Committee of 11 men and only two women. If we want women to be more interested in politics and more willing to come forward, we need to ensure that they are more visible.

We must make dramatic moves forward, although I share the consensus expressed in the House today. We are moving further and faster than we have done in the past. I congratulate the Leader of the House on listening to Back Benchers and look forward to further developments.

7.31 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): In the three minutes allowed me, I want to make two points. First, the most fundamental change for Parliament in the long run will come from the fact that the Prime Minister will start to

appear before Select Committees. I have long supported that proposal; in fact, I first discussed it a long time ago with John Major when he was Prime Minister. He was not enthusiastic about the idea.

I am pleased that the current Prime Minister has grasped the fact that there is something in it for him and that scrutiny is not a zero-sum game. I would add only that the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) is not quite right to suggest that we can rely on precedent. Between the wars, Prime Ministers made only four such appearances; four times in 20 years is not remotely enough.

Mr. Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyrie: I do not have time.

My second point is that at the heart of the Select Committee system must be the quality of and the respect accorded to the Chairmen. Chairmen should be elected by secret ballot by the whole House. We should first go through the normal horse trading to decide which Committees go to which party and then nominations should go forward from us for election to Select Committee chairmanships. I support most of the proposals in the report, and that is the only major proposal of mine that has not appeared even as a point for further discussion.

That proposal would fundamentally alter the position of Select Committee Chairmen. If they were elected, they would have a position of great authority in the House and that would bring them far greater media attention. More than any other measure, that would tilt the balance between the Executive and the legislature. The Leader of the House has done a marvellous job so far and I warmly commend him. I hope that I do not damage his career by saying that. He has done a remarkable job and I urge him to reconsider this proposal.

7.33 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): It was my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) who touched on the fundamental issue, although it has not been fully articulated for reasons that I well understand: it is the anomaly that has existed since the Select Committee system was set up in its present form more than 20 years ago and attempted, valiantly, to replicate the congressional system in this country while rather conveniently ignoring the fact that a legislature that gives birth to and sustains the Executive also attempts to hold that Executive to account.

That fundamental anomaly underlies the difficulty that we have been skirting around all day. It is reflected in the fact, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) has just touched on, that the chairmanships of Select Committees are divvied up, or shared out, on the basis of party in the House; and that memberships of Select Committees, as I pointed out to the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright), are apportioned on the basis of party representation in the legislature. Perhaps it is no wonder that ever since 1979 we have not only struggled to identify a role for Select Committees vis-à-vis the Executive but have been asking ourselves why the Executive—or the usual channels, or whatever—are constantly seen to interfere and intervene in the working of Select Committees.

Although the proposals are a valiant attempt to deal with that difficulty, it will only be superficial until we have the courage to address that fundamental paradox and anomaly. We must not skirt over the problems arising from the fact that Select Committees have a majority of Government Members. I do not want to dwell on the matter, but the House will remember a recent episode when key members of the Select Committee on the Treasury were absent and the Committee produced a report that was not convenient to the Government.

The hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) let the cat out of the bag when he said, in essence, that it was all very well when Select Committees could operate on the basis of consensus, but that if that was ever threatened—in other words if a Committee got a bit political—the Government majority would ensure that a report was passed that was not critical of the Government. That was the gist of his remarks and it rather gave the lie to the problem and the attitude regrettably held by many Members.

The hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), like the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), touched on the odd fact that the problem experienced by the House last year over the treatment of the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and the right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Donald Anderson) was, in the end, sorted out by the House. That challenges the whole thrust of the Modernisation Committee's argument and underpins the proposals that the Leader of the House and the Committee are recommending to the House.

The truth is that in many ways, which have been described by many right hon. and hon. Members during the debate, the existing system has served the House pretty well over the years. When that problem arose last year, it was dealt with by the House of Commons; it did not require some elaborate construct of the kind proposed today—with all the peculiarities of gender and intake balance, seniority and new Members with which we have struggled throughout the debate.

Is the game worth the candle? Is the system sufficiently broke that we feel have to fix it? Is the proposed construct the right answer?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the House of Commons was able to remedy that serious wrong because it was an absolutely gross example of the corruption that we have been talking about today? The measures are attempting to catch the smaller corruptions.

Mr. Forth: I do not think that I share the hon. and learned Gentleman's use of the word "corruption" in any sense at all. The system is as it is; most of us understand it pretty well and we found a way of dealing with the problem. It may not have been pleasant for the powers that be—or the powers of darkness, if we want to describe them thus—but in the end the problem was resolved.

The proposals offer a series of elaborate answers to a problem that does not require the solution that is before the House. As I think the Leader of the House implied when he opened the debate, the motions are not some sort of take or leave it. A series of propositions has been put to the House with which, obviously, some Members will agree and others will disagree. I welcome the fact that the House will be able to form its view on each issue—

[Mr. Forth]

whether it be the size of Committees, the composition of the Committee of Nomination or whatever. We shall vote as we think fit, having—some of us—listened to the debate. We shall then move on from that.

A heartening variety of views were expressed during the debate and I welcome that. Although my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) offered some guidance to my right hon. and hon. Friends, they will all vote as they choose. I am glad to know that Government Members will do the same. I am not convinced that the problem is as it was identified, and I am certainly not convinced that the solution is one that we need follow.

7.39 pm

Mr. Robin Cook: I am disappointed that the amendment of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) calling for parity for the Opposition with the Government on Select Committees was not selected. As the danger in it does not now arise, I must point out that I was almost tempted to accept it if only for the entertainment value of watching the Opposition struggling to fill all the extra places on Select Committees when they cannot even fill the present places that they have without drafting in Front Benchers to replace Back Benchers.

My reply can be brief, because I have heard little in the debate that criticises the Modernisation Committee's report. I am sometimes told that some Members are unhappy with the proposals, but I can only point out that, during the debate, one Back Bencher opposed the proposals and 13 others supported most elements of the Committee's report. In fact, most of them supported all the elements in the report. I am very grateful for the generous words about me and the Modernisation Committee that Members have uttered in the debate, but I must warn them that I am a professional politician. I much prefer their votes in the Lobby to their kind words in the Chamber.

It is a fair summary of the debate to say that the House has welcomed the report. The amendment of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) is regarded as improving the Committee of Nomination and the House will accept the compromise on Committee size that we have put forward today.

Refreshingly, the House has dwelt very little on the question of extra pay for the Chairs of the Select Committees. I do not know how that vote will go, but I hope that tomorrow's press—perhaps even tomorrow's "Today" programme—will not report that the debate was about an increase in remuneration, but was a serious and thoughtful discussion about how the House best discharges its duty of scrutiny through the Select Committees.

The package will greatly strengthen the Select Committees. It will give them more resources, more focus and more transparency. However, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright) were right. It is a package and it risks falling apart if it is picked apart piece by piece. In that context, I wish to say a word about what was said in the debate—not in speeches, but in interventions—about the Committee of Nomination. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) twice asked why we should replace 410 Labour Members of Parliament with a Committee of seven. That is a fundamental misconception of the role of the Committee of Nomination.

The Committee of Nomination will not replace the party process; it will replace the Committee of Selection, which, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall memorably pointed out, normally meets for 30 seconds to three minutes. That is not adequate time for the free and independent play of thoughts. The Committee of Nomination will not interfere with the party process. I helped to write the new process for the Labour party, and I am proud of that process. I am confident that its democracy and transparency will produce the right outcome.

There is a paradox in the view of some of my colleagues. They are also proud of that process and are confident about its democracy, but they appear worried that anyone else should cast an investigative eye over the outcome. I am not frightened of the Committee of Nomination. It is right that Parliament should have the right to see that fair play is done in the party process. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends not to be frightened either, but welcome the fact that the Committee will reinforce the standing of Select Committees and make it clear that nomination is independent of the control of party or Executive machine. As a result, the Select Committees of the House will carry greater legitimacy, command greater confidence and bring greater authority to their task of scrutiny.

It being four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Questions necessary to dispose of the business to be concluded at that hour, pursuant to Order [13 May.]*

Amendment proposed: (d), in line 5, after 'House', insert

'welcomes the proposal to increase the size of Select Committees; believes that the Select Committees must represent all shades of opinion in the House and therefore calls for some of these new places to be reserved for the minority parties;'.—*[Mr. Wishart.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 50, Noes 352.

Division No. 236] **[7.44 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard	Heath, David
Barrett, John	Hermon, Lady
Brake, Tom	Holmes, Paul
Breed, Colin	Keetch, Paul
Bruce, Malcolm	Kirkwood, Archy
Burnett, John	Leigh, Edward
Callon, Mrs Patsy	Llwyd, Elfyn
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*	Mackinlay, Andrew
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*	McWilliam, John
Cohen, Harry	Oaten, Mark
Corbyn, Jeremy	Öpik, Lembit
Dalyell, Tam	Price, Adam
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*	Pugh, Dr John
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*	Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Ewing, Annabelle	Rendel, David
Fisher, Mark	Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*	Salmond, Alex
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*	Sanders, Adrian
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*	Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Harvey, Nick	Stunell, Andrew
	Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*

Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Heppell and
Mr. Fraser Kemp.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allen, Graham
Amess, David
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chaytor, David
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan Smith, Rt Hon Iain
Durrwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fox, Dr Liam
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gale, Roger
Gapes, Mike
Garnier, Edward
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hendry, Charles
Hinchliffe, David
Hoban, Mark
Hodge, Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hunter, Andrew
Iddon, Dr Brian
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Key, Robert
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Laws, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, Oliver
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Tony
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Luff, Peter
Luke, Iain
Lyons, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malins, Humfrey
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miliband, David
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Oliver, Bill
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Ottaway, Richard
Owen, Albert
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Picking, Anne
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Ruane, Chris

Ruddock, Joan
Ruffley, David
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Squire, Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverhton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Waterson, Nigel
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilshire, David
Winnick, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ivor Caplin and
Mr. Ian Pearson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves the First Report of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons relating to Select Committees, House of Commons Paper No 221-I, and in particular welcomes its commitment to more specialist and support staff for select committees; is of the view that the package as a whole will strengthen the scrutiny role of the House; and invites the Liaison Committee to establish common objectives for select committees, taking into account the illustrative model set out in paragraph 34 of that report, namely

to consider major policy initiatives

to consider the Government's response to major emerging issues

to propose changes where evidence persuades the Committee that present policy requires amendment

to conduct pre-legislative scrutiny of draft bills

to examine and report on main Estimates, annual expenditure plans and annual resource accounts

to monitor performance against targets in the public service agreements

to take evidence from each Minister at least annually

to take evidence from independent regulators and inspectorates

to consider the reports of Executive Agencies

to consider, and if appropriate report on, major appointments by a Secretary of State or other senior ministers

to examine treaties within their subject areas.

SELECT COMMITTEES (No. 1)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That—

(1) the following Standing Order (Committee of Nomination) be made:

"(1) There shall be a select committee, called the Committee of Nomination, to propose to the House the membership of all select committees other than the Committee of Nomination itself and any other select committee for which the House makes other provision.

(2) The committee shall consist of nine members nominated by the Chairman of Ways and Means, who shall be the following:

(a) the most senior woman member of the Chairmen's Panel belonging to the Government party, and the three other most senior members of the Panel belonging to that party;

(b) the most senior woman member of the Panel belonging to the party to which the Leader of the Opposition belongs, and the other most senior member of the Panel belonging to that party;

(c) the most senior member of the Panel belonging to the second largest opposition party;

(d) the most senior Member of the House belonging to the Government party but not being a Minister of the Crown; and

(e) the most senior Member of the House not belonging to the Government party who is not a front-bench spokesman for his party.

(3) Where a Member who would otherwise be a member of the Committee of Nomination is unwilling to serve, the next most senior Member in the relevant category shall be nominated.

(4) In sub-paragraphs (a) to (c) of paragraph (2) of this order, seniority shall consist of length of continuous service as a member of the Chairmen's Panel (other than as Chairman or Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means), and in sub-paragraphs (d) and (e) of that paragraph, seniority shall consist of length of continuous service as a Member of the House.

(5) The Chairman of Ways and Means, or in his absence a Deputy Chairman, shall be chairman of the committee, but shall not vote.

(6) The Chairman of Ways and Means shall report the membership of the committee to the House.

(7) The quorum of the committee shall be seven when the committee is nominating select committees at the commencement of a Parliament and otherwise four, in either case including the chairman.

(8) The committee shall have power to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House and to report from time to time.";

(2) Standing Order No. 121 (Nomination of select committees) be amended as follows:

Line 9, leave out paragraph (2) and add—

"(2) Unless the House otherwise orders, no motion shall be made for the nomination of members of select committees, or for their discharge, unless—

(a) notice of the motion has been given at least two sitting days previously; and

(b) the motion is made on behalf of the Committee of Nomination by one of its members.

(3) Unless the House otherwise orders, all Members nominated to a select committee shall continue to be members of that committee for the remainder of the Parliament (or for the period of existence of the committee, if that is a shorter period).";

(3) Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business) be amended, as follows:

Line 16, leave out from "committees)" to "which" in line 20; and

(4) Standing Orders be amended, as follows:

Standing Order No. 139 (Select Committee on Broadcasting)

Line 29, leave out paragraph (6);

Standing Order No. 140 (Joint Committee on Consolidation, &c., Bills)

Line 37, leave out paragraph (4);

Standing Order No. 141 (Deregulation and Regulatory Reform Committee)

Line 98, leave out paragraph (10);

Standing Order No. 142 (Domestic Committees)

Line 37, leave out paragraph (7);

Standing Order No. 143 (European Scrutiny Committee)

Line 80, leave out paragraph (13);

Standing Order No. 144 (Finance and Services Committee)

Line 29, leave out paragraph (5);

Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee)

Line 27, leave out paragraph (4);

Standing Order No. 146 (Select Committee on Public Administration)

Line 20, leave out paragraph (3);

Standing Order No. 147 (Procedure Committee)

Line 11, leave out paragraph (4);

Standing Order No. 148 (Committee of Public Accounts)

Line 10, leave out paragraph (2);

Standing Order No. 149 (Committee on Standards and Privileges)

Line 26, leave out paragraph (3);

Standing Order No. 151 (Statutory Instruments (Joint Committee))

Line 126, leave out paragraph (11);

Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments)

Line 34, leave out paragraph (5);

Standing Order No. 152A (Environmental Audit Committee)

Line 10, leave out paragraph (3);

Standing Order No. 152B (Human rights (joint committee))

Line 41, leave out paragraph (6);

Standing Order No. 152C (Tax simplification (joint committee))

Line 15, leave out paragraph (4).—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

Amendment made: (a), in line 7, leave out 'nine' and insert 'thirteen'.—*[Mr. Lloyd.]*

Amendment proposed: (d), in line 20, at end add 'and

(f) two Members belonging to the Government party, one belonging to the party to which the Leader of the Opposition belongs, and one belonging to the second largest opposition party, in each case first elected to the House in the previous Parliament and proposed by the chairman of the relevant party.'.—*[Mr. Lloyd.]*

Amendment made to the proposed amendment: (h), in line 4, after second 'the', insert 'current or'.—*[Mr. Bryant.]*

Amendment, as amended, agreed to.

Amendment made: (e), in line 21, after '(3)', insert 'In sub-paragraphs (a) to (c) of paragraph (2) of this order.'.—*[Mr. Lloyd.]*

Main Question, as amended, put:—

The House divided: Ayes 195, Noes 209.

Division No. 237] **[8 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Bacon, Richard
Baird, Vera
Barrett, John
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunt, Crispin
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Francis, Dr Hywel
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gilroy, Linda
Goodman, Paul
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Holmes, Paul
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Irranca–Davies, Huw
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keetch, Paul
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laws, David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Lyons, John
McCafferty, Chris
McDonnell, John
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Miliband, David
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Morgan, Julie
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Picking, Anne
Pike, Peter
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr John
Purchase, Ken
Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*

Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Heppell and
Mr. Fraser Kemp.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bailey, Adrian
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Bellingham, Henry
Benton, Joe
Bercow, John
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Burgon, Colin
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cruddas, Jon
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, Rt Hon Iain
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Evans, Nigel
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Gapes, Mike
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goggins, Paul
Gray, James
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Hope, Phil
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hunter, Andrew
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Key, Robert
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Laxton, Bob
Leigh, Edward
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Luke, Iain
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Malins, Humfrey
Mann, John
Martlew, Eric
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morley, Elliot
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Olner, Bill
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'bry)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Ruane, Chris
Ruffley, David
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shaw, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steinberg, Gerry
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Ward, Ms Claire
Waterson, Nigel
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Wilson, Brian
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ivor Caplin and
Mr. Ian Pearson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for Government Whips to stand outside the Lobby—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I cannot hear the hon. Gentleman's point of order.

Mr. Prentice: On a free vote, is it in order for the Government Whips to point to the No Lobby saying "PLP this way"?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I would hope that hon. Members would be able to make up their own mind.

PAYMENT FOR CHAIRMEN

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House considers that there should be no differences in remuneration among Members who are not Ministers of the Crown beyond those already authorised.—*[Stephen Twigg.]*

The House divided: Ayes 175, Noes 197.

Division No. 238] **[8.13 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Afness, David
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Caton, Martin
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ewing, Annabelle
Fallon, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Flint, Caroline
Foulkes, George
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hermon, Lady
Hinchliffe, David
Hoban, Mark
Hope, Phil
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Khabra, Piara S
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Ian
Luke, Iain
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malins, Humfrey
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Morgan, Julie
Munn, Ms Meg
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Ottaway, Richard
Owen, Albert
Pickthall, Colin
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr John
Quinn, Lawrie
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Touhig, Don
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Heppell and
Mr. Fraser Kemp.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allen, Graham
Atherton, Ms Candy
Bacon, Richard
Bailey, Adrian
Barker, Gregory
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bercow, John
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brennan, Kevin
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnham, Andy
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corston, Jean
Cranston, Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan Smith, Rt Hon Iain
Efford, Clive
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Loma
Flight, Howarth
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Hodge, Margaret
Holmes, Paul
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard

Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Key, Robert
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Laws, David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Letwin, Oliver
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell–Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McCafferty, Chris
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Miliband, David
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Julie
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam
Purnell, James
Randall, John
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ruddock, Joan
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Squire, Rachel
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Swayne, Desmond
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Waterson, Nigel
Willetts, David
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wray, James
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ivor Caplin and
Mr. Ian Pearson.

Question accordingly negatived.

PAYMENT FOR CHAIRMEN

Motion made and Question put,

That, in the opinion of this House, the Review Body on Senior Salaries should be invited to consider what additional remuneration is appropriate for chairmen of select committees.—[*Mr. Robin Cook.*]

The House divided: Ayes 199, Noes 158.

Division No. 239] **[8.25 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Bacon, Richard
Bailey, Adrian
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bercow, John
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith *(Withington)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brennan, Kevin
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnham, Andy
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Coffey, Ms Ann
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corston, Jean
Cranston, Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cummings, John
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
David, Wayne
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flight, Howard
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Irranca–Davies, Huw
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Key, Robert
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Laws, David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell–Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Luff, Peter
McCafferty, Chris
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Martlew, Eric
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Miliband, David
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Randall, John
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*

Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Squire, Rachel
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Swayne, Desmond
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Waterson, Nigel
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Heppell and
Mr. Fraser Kemp.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Caton, Martin
Challen, Colin
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Cleiland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ewing, Annabelle
Farrelly, Paul
Flint, Caroline
Foulkes, George
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hoban, Mark
Holmes, Paul
Hope, Phil
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Khabra, Piara S
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Luke, Iain
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malleber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Munn, Ms Meg
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Oliner, Bill
Ottaway, Richard
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Ryan, Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Wishart, Pete
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ivor Caplin and
Mr. Ian Pearson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

SELECT COMMITTEES (No. 3)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 137A (Select committees: power to work with other committees) be amended as follows:

Line 12, leave out "and";

Line 15, at end insert—"and

(d) to agree in the choice of a chairman for any concurrent meetings."; and

(2) the following Standing Order (Term limits for chairmen of select committees) be made:

"Unless the House otherwise orders, no select committee may choose as its chairman any Member who has served as chairman of that committee for the two previous Parliaments."—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

Amendment made: (a), in line 11, at end add

'or a continuous period of 8 years, whichever is the greater period.'.—*[Mr. Greg Knight.]*

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

TAX LAW REWRITE

Motion made and Question put,

That the following changes to Standing Orders be made:

Standing Order No. 60 (Tax simplification bills)

Title, leave out 'simplification' and insert 'law rewrite'

Lines 1, 9, 15, 22, 24, 29, leave out 'simplification' and insert 'law rewrite'

Standing Order No 63 (Committal of bills)

Line 2, leave out 'simplification' and insert 'law rewrite'

Standing Order No. 152C (Tax simplification (Joint Committee))

Title, leave out 'simplification' and insert 'law rewrite'

Line 4, leave out 'simplification' and insert 'law rewrite' (in both places)—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

Question agreed to.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS

Motion made and Question put,

That the following amendments to Standing Orders be made:

Standing Order No. 151 [Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments]

Line 19, leave out 'and'

Line 19, leave out "of Schedule 1 to the Northern Ireland Act 1974" and insert "(1) of the Schedule to the Northern Ireland Act 2000".

Line 20, leave out "under section 1 of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 or"

Line 24, after 'Act', insert 'and any remedial order or draft remedial order under Schedule 2 to the Human Rights Act 1998'.—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

Question agreed to.

LIAISON COMMITTEE: POWER TO TAKE EVIDENCE

Motion made and Question proposed,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 12, at end insert '(1A) The Committee may also hear evidence from the Prime Minister on matters of public policy'.—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

Amendment proposed: (a), in line 3, at end add

', but such meetings shall only be attended by the Chairman of the Liaison Committee and the Chairmen of Select Committees appointed under S.O. Nos. 146 and 152.'.—*[Mr. Bryant.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 78, Noes 261.

Division No. 240] **[8.38 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Begg, Miss Anne
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blunt, Crispin
Brennan, Kevin
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Challen, Colin
Clapham, Michael
Coaker, Vernon
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Doran, Frank
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Fallon, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hinchliffe, David
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lloyd, Tony
McCafferty, Chris
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKechin, Ann
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malleber, Judy
Marris, Rob
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Mole, Chris
Morgan, Julie
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Pearson, Ian
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purnell, James
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr Rudi
White, Brian

Tellers for the Ayes:
Angela Smith and
Dan Norris.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Amess, David
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Bacon, Richard
Barrett, John
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Hilary
Bercow, John
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Donohoe, Brian H
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flight, Howard
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Grieve, Dominic
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendrick, Mark
Hendry, Charles
Heppell, John
Hoban, Mark
Hodge, Margaret
Holmes, Paul
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Illsley, Eric
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Kidney, David

King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Laws, David
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Luff, Peter
Luke, Iain
Lyons, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Malins, Humfrey
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Miliband, David
Moffatt, Laura
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murrison, Dr Andrew
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Oliver, Bill
Opik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Owen, Albert
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Picking, Anne
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Price, Adam
Pugh, Dr John
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Randall, John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ross, Ernie
Ruane, Chris
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Squire, Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Wray, James
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and
Mr. Phil Woolas.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

REGULATORY REFORM

Motion made, and Question put,

That the following amendments to Standing Orders be made:

Standing Order No. 141 (Deregulation and Regulatory Reform Committee)

Title, leave out "Deregulation and"

Line 22, leave out "Deregulation and"

Line 5, leave out from "section" to "6" in line 7.

Line 7, leave out "(the 2001 Act)"

Line 10, leave out "1994 Act or section 1 of the 2001"

Line 14, leave out "2001"

Line 14, at end insert "(except those not made by a Minister of the Crown)".

Line 58, leave out lines 58 to 60

Standing Order No. 18 (Consideration of draft deregulation etc orders)

Title, leave out "Deregulation, etc" and insert "regulatory reform"

Line 1, leave out "Deregulation and"

Line 4, leave out from "House" to "under" in line 6.

Standing Order No. 98 (Scottish Grand Committee (delegated legislation))

Line 14, leave out "deregulation order or"

Standing Order No. 115 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (delegated legislation))

Line 15, leave out "deregulation order or"

Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation)

Line 13, leave out "deregulation order or"—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

Question agreed to.

POWER TO EXCHANGE PAPERS WITH DEVOLVED LEGISLATURES

Motion made, and Question put,

That Standing Order No. 137A (Select committees: power to work with other committees) be amended as follows:

Line 6, after "Parliament" insert "or to the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales or the Northern Ireland Assembly or to any of their Committees"

Line 10, leave out "such"

Line 11, after "sub-committee" insert "of either House of Parliament".—*[Mr. Robin Cook.]*

Question agreed to.

Code of Conduct

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That—

(1) this House approves the Ninth Report from the Committee on Standards and Privileges, (House of Commons Paper No. 763), *A new Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules*;

(2) the Resolution of the House of 6th November 1995 relating to Conduct of Members shall be amended, at the end by adding the words 'or any approach, whether oral or in writing, to Ministers or servants of the Crown';

(3) the Resolution of the House of 6th November 1995 relating to Employment Agreements shall be redesignated 'Agreements for the Provision of Services;' and shall be amended, as follows:

(a) by leaving out the words 'up to £1,000, £1,000–£5,000, £5,000–£10,000' in each of paragraphs (1), (2) and (3) and inserting the words 'up to £5,000, £5,001–£10,000';

(b) after the word 'inspection' in each of paragraphs (1), (2) and (3), by inserting the words 'and reproduction';

(c) at the end, by adding the words—

'Provided that the requirement to deposit a copy of an agreement with the Commissioner shall not apply—

(a) if the fees or benefits payable do not exceed one per cent. of the current parliamentary salary; nor

(b) in the case of media work (but in that case the Member shall deposit a statement of the fees or benefits payable in the bands specified above)';

(4) the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members (House of Commons Paper No. 688 (1995–96)) shall be amended as proposed in Annex 2 to the Report; and

(5) the registration forms submitted for the next published Register of Members' interests shall comply with the new rules on the registration of Members' interests; and any requirement under the new rules to register an interest which is not registrable now shall come into force on the publication of the next Register.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

8.51 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I invite the House to endorse the new code of conduct and guide to the rules on the conduct of Members that the Standards and Privileges Committee has drawn up. I am grateful to the Leader of the House for finding time to resolve this matter so soon after the publication of our report.

The last time that I spoke as Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee was the debate in February when we appointed Philip Mawer as the new Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Mr. Mawer has now taken up his appointment, made an excellent start and is fully in command of his role. He is working the full three days a week for which he was appointed, and if his duties require him to do more, more will be done. He has already dealt with several complaints and the Committee entirely endorsed the conclusions that he reached in the one case that he brought to us. However, I do not want to place too much emphasis on investigations. I hope that Mr. Mawer will continue to develop a new strategy that gives priority to advice and prevention, of which clear guidance is a key component; that is where the revised code of conduct and guide to the rules come in.

The changes that we have proposed are intended to simplify and clarify the guidance that is provided for Members; to alleviate unnecessary burdens without compromising the transparency and effectiveness of the system; and, where practicable, to align the House's rules more closely with those of the Electoral Commission. The new code and guide have gone through a lengthy gestation period. The former Committee began the work of revision more than two years ago, and it introduced many of the detailed changes shortly before the last election, but the two most radical changes are the work of the new Committee and are recommended in this report.

The first change relates to the advocacy rule, which bans Members from paid lobbying. As the rule stands, a Member may not initiate a parliamentary proceeding—for example, by tabling a question or applying for an Adjournment debate—that relates specifically and directly to the affairs of a body, or of a wider group, in which the Member has a pecuniary interest. The rule was introduced with the best of intentions, but in practice it has imposed unreasonable and unnecessary restrictions on Members' parliamentary activities.

When the new Committee was established at the beginning of this Parliament, we became aware of a degree of feeling, both inside and outside the House, about the rule's restrictive effects. Shortly before Christmas, we published a consultation paper seeking views on two possible options for relaxing the rule. We decided to adopt the recommendation from the Committee on Standards in Public Life to the effect that the rules on initiation should be relaxed and brought into line with the more lenient rules on participation in a proceeding initiated by another Member. If the House agrees to this change, from now on the only restriction on Members' freedom of action will be that they must not seek to confer benefit exclusively on a body in which they have a pecuniary interest. That interest must, of course, be properly registered and declared.

I believe that the change will be welcomed especially in the context of travel overseas. Hon. Members have a duty to keep themselves informed about what is going on in the wider world. Often the only way to do that is when foreign Governments or other organisations outside the House pay for the travel. From now on, hon. Members who travel abroad at someone else's expense will be able to make full use in the House of what they have learned. They will not face difficulties in tabling questions or introducing Adjournment debates that are relevant to their visit. That will help them and, I believe, the House.

Our second fundamental reform is that there should be a realistic de minimis threshold for the registration of interests. We do not want the Register of Members' Interests to be cluttered with low-value entries; nor do we want the complaints process to be brought into disrepute by allegations of failure to register relatively insignificant interests.

The solution that we propose is to take such items out of the scope of registration altogether by setting a threshold of 1 per cent. of the parliamentary salary. At present, that amounts to about £550. Below that threshold, interests would not have to be registered. That means that hon. Members need no longer register gifts or hospitality that are worth less than £550. However, benefits from a single source that individually are worth less than £550 should be registered if, cumulatively, they amount to more than 1 per cent. of salary in a calendar year.

The change in the rule also means that earned income, including directorships, needs to be registered only if it exceeds 1 per cent. of salary. The requirement to deposit

an agreement with the commissioner if an hon. Member is providing parliamentary services of any kind will also be dropped if the remuneration does not exceed 1 per cent. of salary.

Finally, I shall refer briefly to some of the detailed changes to the rules that we are proposing. Hon. Members will see that these are highlighted in red type in the proposed new guide and code that is printed as an annexe to the report.

The rules relating to sponsorship have been revised substantially and now cover donations to constituency associations that are linked to an hon. Member's candidacy or membership of the House, as well as other support that an hon. Member receives in his capacity as a Member of the House, with a threshold of £1,000. That takes account of the changed nature of trade union sponsorship, and of the reporting requirements of the Electoral Commission.

In common with other one-off benefits, such as gifts and hospitality, donations to constituency associations will be removed from the Register of Members' Interests after a year. Such donations will be registerable only if they are expressly tied to the hon. Member by name—an example might be contributions to an hon. Member's fighting fund—or are donations that have been solicited for the party by the hon. Member. Donations to constituency associations that are not linked to the hon. Member but which are an expression of general political support will not have to be registered.

We have clarified the circumstances in which land and property, including houses, that is rented out may need to be registered. There are new rules on the registration of shareholdings. A shareholding wil be registerable in future if it amounts to more than 15 per cent. of the company's share capital, rather then 1 per cent. A shareholding of 15 per cent. or less will be registerable if it is worth more than an hon. Member's parliamentary salary.

Until now, the threshold for registration has been a nominal value of £25,000, but the nominal value often bears no relation to the real value. The Committee believes that it is not unreasonable to require hon. Members to revalue their large shareholdings once each year for the purposes of the register. After all, an hon. Member is likely to have few holdings that are registerable, and the end of the tax year is a convenient time to check what they are worth.

The rules covering political journalism, speaking engagements and other forms of media work connected to membership of the House have been greatly simplified. The requirement to deposit an employment agreement, which in many cases simply did not fit the relationship between the hon. Member and the outside body, has been dropped altogether. However, hon. Members will still have to declare in the register their income from this source, in the appropriate band.

The new Committee is working alongside Philip Mawer, the new commissioner, with this new strategy, a new code of conduct and a new register. I appreciate that it is less than a year since hon. Members had to fill in their registration forms at the start of this Parliament, but if we are going to have a new register it will be in everyone's interest to have one that reflects the new rules as soon as possible.

Shortly after the forthcoming recess, the commissioner will write to every hon. Member. He will send a copy of the new code and guide, a registration form and details of the seminars arranged to explain the new rules to hon. Members. There will also be guidance about how to complete the registration form. Hon. Members will be asked to return their forms before the summer recess, so that the new register can be published in the autumn.

The registration form should be completed in accordance with the new rules, so hon. Members will be able to delete from their current entries the minor benefits that fall below the 1 per cent. threshold. However, I hope that the House will look especially carefully at the new rules on sponsorships and shareholdings, which have been changed, and also on land and property, on which the guidance has been clarified.

If the House agrees to the motion, the new code and guide will come into force and the relaxation of the advocacy rule and the higher thresholds for the registration of benefits will apply immediately. However, any requirement under the new rules to register an interest that is not registrable under the current rules—for example, with some shareholdings—will not come into force until the new register is published, so all Members will have a reasonable period in which to ensure that their entries comply with the new rules.

I strongly encourage any Member who may be in any doubt about how the new rules will apply to him or her to seek the advice of either the Standards Commissioner or the Registrar of Members' Interests, who will be glad to help.

I believe that the changes that we have recommended will give the House clearer, simpler rules that are, in some respects, less onerous for Members to comply with, but still rigorous and consistent with the fundamental principles that the House adopted when it implemented the Nolan reforms in 1995–96. We have, of course, asked the Wicks committee for its comments on what is proposed.

My committee will keep all these changes actively under review. I ask the House to support the changes.

9.1 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Stephen Twigg): I am sure that the whole House will join me in welcoming the report from the Committee on Standards and Privileges and thanking the Committee and all its members for their work.

Last year, the House agreed with the Committee on Standards in Public Life that a senior Opposition Member should be Chair of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. The impartiality of that Committee is clearly very important, and I am pleased that it is so clearly demonstrated in this report. I cannot imagine a person better fitted for the post than the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young).

The report and the consultation papers on which it is based speak for themselves. We need to ensure that we uphold the highest standards and that our work is not hampered by rules that inadvertently prohibit legitimate parliamentary activity. We should not forget that the purpose of having a code in the first place is to make sure that our standards are high; it is not a substitute for, or a shelter from, the criminal law. It is important that

[Mr. Stephen Twigg]

Members have the freedoms needed to operate effectively. The main freedom that we have is the freedom of speech necessary to enable us to pursue matters in the House or through its Committees. In the United Kingdom, our immunity extends only as far as formal proceedings in Parliament. The Committee on Standards and Privileges has made it clear that it expects the commissioner to refer any cases where it appears that a Member may have broken the law to the police. It has added that if the commissioner failed to call in the police, it would do so. I am sure that we all welcome that. If we always remembered that, and took pains to make it clear, it might ensure that some of the wider public debate on standards kept a proper sense of perspective.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, the most important change proposed today is the reform of the advocacy rule. This is not a thoughtless change aimed at making life easier for MPs. Our current rules have been widely criticised, not only in the House but by knowledgeable outsiders, for being overly stringent. It has become apparent that although the broad thrust of the rule is correct, and it is right to have a blanket prohibition on what the Committee graphically describes as

"lobbying for consideration or reward"

its very breadth has caused some problems. That was well illustrated by the controversy surrounding the appointment of the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) to the Opposition Front Bench, but it has also been picked up by the non-parliamentary Committee on Standards in Public Life when reviewing its earlier work.

The advocacy rule is an important safeguard, but as the Neill committee, as it then was, noted, when it operates too stringently it can prevent Members from dealing with precisely the subjects about which we are most knowledgeable. The proposed new rules should ensure that lobbying for reward or consideration remains completely banned, yet allow Members to deal with matters of genuine and general interest.

The introduction of a system for rectifying minor or inadvertent failures to register is also welcome, as is the Committee's willingness to censure those who come forward with frivolous or partisan complaints.

I also welcome the right hon. Gentleman's remarks to the Wicks committee last week, when he said that he and his Committee wished to do more on education, prevention and advice-giving. I am sure that that will help us all.

We must, as a House, try to uphold the highest standards. We must deal severely with those who knowingly fail to do so, but we must also accept that none of us is infallible and ensure that the system operates in a way that punishes the seriously guilty while helping the merely misguided to do better next time. I am convinced that these proposals will assist us in that, and I commend them to the House.

9.5 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I very much agree with the Minister's remarks, both in their content and context. I welcome the report produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) and his Committee. Let the House not underestimate the difficulty of the work of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. The Committee strives to strike a tricky balance between the desire of many to see the application of the strictest possible standards to the House and those who want standards that are sensible, workable and, indeed, comprehensible to Members themselves.

The code of conduct—vital and central as it is—should never be seen as set in stone, as some permanent oracle; it must be flexible and something to which we can return from time to time, and the Committee is right to have done so. In the previous Parliament, the Committee struggled with both the advocacy rule and the limits on gifts and hospitality and found it difficult to reach a conclusion. I very much welcome the fact that the new Committee, under my right hon. Friend, has managed to pick its way through the thicket and emerge with sensible, practical and balanced proposals on those matters.

I always thought that it was—and still is—ridiculous to suggest that Members of Parliament can be suborned or bribed by trivial gifts and hospitality. The suggested new limits are a move in the right direction and refute that suggestion.

I simply want to acknowledge the work of the Committee and to recommend to my colleagues and to the House that we adopt the proposals, but that we continue to monitor them closely to ensure that they reassure the public and us that we are adhering to proper standards and that we shall continue to do so.

9.6 pm

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I am not entirely comfortable with the proposals—I have some reservations.

I fully accept that the overwhelming majority of hon. Members—if not all of us—would not consciously be influenced by the chance of a free trip from a particular Government or interest group. However, human nature being what it is, it is much more difficult—despite one's intentions—not to be influenced by the warmth, hospitality and kindness that is offered when one goes abroad at the invitation of a Government. That is manifestly true and can occur almost unconsciously.

We are going about the problem in the wrong way, however. Parliament should not say—as it is saying—that we cannot get full travel budgets for Members of Parliament from the public purse—

Mr. Forth: What?

Andrew Mackinlay: If the right hon. Gentleman can contain himself, I shall finish my point.

Our travel budget is not comparable to that of similar legislatures in other countries, where the facility is at the discretion of the Member and he or she can travel unhindered—independent of a host Government. Our system is deficient in that respect.

When the right hon. Gentleman intervened, perhaps the fact had crossed his mind that recently we agreed a provision that allowed MPs to visit European Union states, or EU applicant states, up to three times a year, provided that they touched base with the Parliament of that state. The provision is confined to those countries.

Mr. Forth: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Mackinlay: I promise that I shall give way when I have completed this point.

That provision offers an adequate travel budget for Members who want to learn more about the EU or its applicant states, but it does not allow us to visit Israel, Palestine, the People's Republic of China, the Koreas or the United States of America; it applies only to EU countries or EU applicants. We should have allowed an extension of that provision, with stringent ground rules, so that any hon. Member could make such visits—perhaps up to three times a year. If we had, we would not need to relax the advocacy rule. We could visit any country in the world at the invitation of a Government or interest group without breaching the advocacy rule.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman may be surprised to learn that I rather agree with him. However, why did he not table an amendment to the motion that was on the Order Paper the other day to make this point and to allow the House to vote on it? Why did he allow that restrictive measure that he is criticising, on grounds with which I rather agree, to pass through the House unamended and without even a vote?

Andrew Mackinlay: I beat my breast three times—mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. One often wishes that one had amended a motion. However, I regret that personal circumstances have meant that I have not been around as much as I would have wanted in the past couple of weeks. I accept the right hon. Gentleman's admonishment and that is why I said in carefully crafted terms that I wished to express my reservations about this motion.

I do not suppose that this will be the end of the tale. I hope and imagine that we will revisit the issue. The compelling case for not restricting hon. Members to visiting European Union or accession countries just three times a year should be reconsidered. If we do that, I hope that we will also reconsider the relaxation of the advocacy rule. In my view, it is not the right way to go about the problem.

I also wish to make another confession. In the past, I was one of those who often included things in the register that now appear in the category of frivolous. I did not register those things in a frivolous way, but as an open declaration. For example, I put down the fact that I was the honorary patron of Tilbury Town football club, but my local newspaper, the *Evening Echo*, described me as a director of the club. As much as I love the club, it is not the most sexy place in the world or the most wonderful football club. It is wonderful to me, but its immediate prospects of reaching the premiership are not enormous. I made a declaration, but it was trivialised.

I raise that point because I listened to the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee and it struck me that we should all be very sensible and not register such things in future. The previous form invited us to declare non-pecuniary interests, and we declared them for a variety of reasons. For example, we could show our pride in our association with a particular organisation or to show our breadth of interests. However, the guidance and instructions that we are about to receive should make it clear that we are registering our pecuniary interests and not the wider interests that can often be malevolently twisted or inadvertently confused for pecuniary interests.

I hope that the Chairman of the Committee will take that point on board. What was an invitation hitherto to make a wide declaration of one's enthusiasm and support for various organisations should now go. Perhaps there should be a separate document to show the scope of one's enthusiasms for organisations. We should not muddy the waters by making such declarations in the register of pecuniary interests.

9.13 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I do not intend to follow the argument of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) in great detail, but I have some sympathy for the points that he has just made. When I was the Liberal Democrat spokesman on food, I received a large Wensleydale cheese. As that was not a major event attracting much publicity, I thought that the best way to advertise the fact that the home of Wallace and Gromit was alive and well and producing excellent cheese was to declare the fact in the Register of Members' Interests. Unfortunately, the gift was not considered a sufficient financial inducement, so I was prevented from declaring it—but the hon. Gentleman is right. We must take the register seriously. If we allow it to be used in a frivolous way, we will debase the whole exercise.

The point that I wanted to make was about timing. The report is workmanlike, and I give full credit to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) and his Committee. It is always difficult to know the right moment to produce a review. However, I suggest that this is an odd moment to produce one, because the right hon. Gentleman himself, the Leader of the House, the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) all gave evidence—either last week or at the beginning of this week—to the Wicks committee. It is considering the whole strategy of how we regulate ourselves—or, indeed, whether we should regulate ourselves at all. This is an odd moment to introduce the proposals not just for debate but for decision, given that those discussions will continue for several weeks, and possibly for months.

I accept that timing is a problem. Clearly, there was a need to make our rules compatible with those of the Electoral Commission. That probably could not wait. I hope that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire will respond briefly to the debate and will tell us whether there really is an imperative.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I listened carefully to the impressive evidence that the hon. Gentleman gave to the Wicks committee last Wednesday. I was there throughout the day and I got the impression from its members' line of questioning that they had already made up their minds against self-regulation. Was that his impression?

Mr. Tyler: The Father of the House has an advantage over me: he sat there right through the whole day—in fact, two days. I did not, but all those to whom I have spoken who gave evidence certainly seem to have gained that impression. I hope that it is not right, and that the committee is reaching its view unprejudiced by any presumption of whether it would be right to change the basis on which we in the House regulate our conduct. However, if that impression is true, it is even more peculiar that we should be taking steps today to review the rules, however peripheral they may be.

[Mr. Tyler]

In fact, the rules are not peripheral. I give credit to the Standards and Privileges Committee and its Chairman, because tidying up the question of advocacy is central to that Committee's role and to the way in which we operate in the House. Reference has already been made to the fact that real experience and expertise were being effectively excluded from the workings of the House by the way in which the advocacy rule was interpreted. That is critical to the work of the House.

If we are preventing people from bringing their knowledge and experience to the work of Parliament, that is a serious issue. It is not peripheral, nor is it peripheral to deal with such provisions, which the Chairman of the Committee properly describes as being de minimis. De minimis, by its very nature, is a relative term. If we are to have a de minimis provision, I hope that it will remove some of the overload on the register and the investigative system. That is extremely important.

My concern is simply about timing. I wonder whether this is the right moment even to clarify, let alone to relax, the remit of the Standards and Privileges Committee and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, as we are being reviewed by the Wicks committee.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): As a member of the Standards and Privileges Committee I accept the hon. Gentleman's point about timing. In a sense, there is never a right time. Ideally, it would have been good for the new Parliament to have started a year ago with a new set of rules. The proposals have been made partly because a body of evidence and experience has built up and led us to believe that the time is right, and partly because it is probably not a bad idea to coincide with the beginning of the new commissioner's term. So all sorts of features are involved. In addition, Wicks is not concentrating on the issues before us tonight; he is considering the structures rather than the content of the rules, certainly at present.

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that very helpful intervention, but I think that he would agree that the structure and the tactics—the details of which we are concerned with this evening—interrelate at the very least.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire said in his introduction that such matters would be kept under review. He also said that he had made a submission to the Committee on Standards in Public Life—the Wicks committee. I must accept that that is probably our best way forward at this stage. It would be rather absurd to leave things hanging in the air for several months until the completion of the Wicks committee's review.

I hope that we are making it clear this evening—perhaps the right hon. Gentleman would make it clear himself—that the proposals are provisional and transitional and that Parliament still has to face the big issues. Incidentally, it is important not just to have compatibility with the Electoral Commission; I hope that we will have compatibility with the House of Lords, too, in due course. However the other place is reformed in future, it would be ridiculous if one set of rules applied here and quite another applied at the other end of the building. Again, the right hon. Gentleman may like to address that point.

Given assurances, which I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be prepared to give, that the proposals for review, and—it must be said—for relaxation, are being made only for the time being, and that he and his Committee will be prepared to enter into a dialogue with the House as well as with the Wicks committee in due course, I am prepared to accept them. Without those assurances, however, I would be bound to say that I find the timing most inappropriate.

9.20 pm

David Winnick (Walsall, North): If I register a slight note of dissent it is because I would not wish it to be felt that all of us necessarily agree with the recommendations of the Standards and Privileges Committee. I shall not, like my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), try to force a vote. No purpose would be served by that. The matter is not of such substance that a vote would be justified. I am somewhat uneasy, however, so it is only right and proper that, as a Member of the House, I should say so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said in his intervention that the Committee on Standards in Public Life might come to the view that self-regulation should come to an end. I do not know what recommendations it will make—my hon. Friend may have far better knowledge of that than I do—but if it does recommend that, it will be our fault. I do not want to recount all that happened in relation to the dismissal, as I would describe it, of the last Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, but my view is that that led to a number of questions being raised in the minds of a good many people involved with integrity and honesty in public life, not only in Parliament.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Will my hon. Friend accept that the previous parliamentary commissioner was given a virtually impossible job, and that the new parliamentary commissioner may have a more sensible job as a result?

David Winnick: I have made it clear both in debate and in correspondence that I wish the new parliamentary commissioner well. I genuinely mean that. He is in no way responsible for what happened previously, and it would be quite wrong to hold what happened to Mrs. Filkin against him in any way whatever. I want to put that clearly on record.

I also have great respect for the members and Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee. Self-regulation is always difficult. Passing judgment on one's colleagues, especially if they are in one's own party, is a job that not many would wish to do, but it is part and parcel of self-regulation. After all, in the medical profession, for example, if a member of a General Medical Council panel discussing a disciplinary case knew the person against whom the complaint was being made, we can rest assured that that panel member would not take part in those proceedings.

As for the proposals in front of us, I have reservations about the fact that a sum of £550 will not have to be declared if we agree to the report. Members may say, "What is £550 these days?" As has been pointed out, it is 1 per cent. of our salary. To many people outside, however—certainly to many of my constituents—£550 is quite a large sum. If the argument is, "We don't want to litter the register with smaller sums," I understand that.

I hope that I will not be misunderstood—there is always a danger of sounding pious—but I would say, "Why accept gifts to the value of £550?" I do not want to give the impression that I am showered with gifts all the time in my constituency or elsewhere, but like most Members, I may be kindly offered a box of chocolates, for example, because of casework that I have done. Clearly, although I would not want to enter that gift in the register, I would explain that I much appreciate what is being offered and I accept it, but that, without wishing to be discourteous, I will give the gift—as would most if not all Members—to the local hospital. The important thing is not to be under any obligation. One could ask what obligation a Member would be under for £550, but that sum still seems too large to me.

9.25 pm

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Some people think that Members of Parliament should have no outside earnings, and to them the debate might seem beside the point. Although such a rule is not proposed, if it were, it would be impractical. For example, what would happen to a writer or a farmer? Are those people seriously suggesting that the only people who should come into the House of Commons are those who have no continuing interests that they want to maintain? I remember that when Peter Thurnham was out of work, he set up an engineering firm to give him a living. To ask such a person to give up his family-owned firm to become a Member of Parliament strikes me as wrong. Although we need a code of conduct that regulates hon. Members' outside interests, it is also true that many of our non-remunerated interests may cost us quite a lot, and bias us in favour of a particular interest or organisation far more than the possibility of receiving £550, or twice that sum.

The only part of the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) that I would rephrase is the idea that giving advice is a new strategy. It is clear from the second commissioner's words and work that she gave a great deal of advice not only to members of the public who had queries about the behaviour of Members of Parliament and possible complaints, but to Members of Parliament who approached her. The registrar also gave advice to Members of Parliament who requested it.

It was plain from one or two of the cases considered by the Standards and Privileges Committee that if the behaviour of a Member of Parliament could be judged to contradict the code of practice or the requirements of the register, a complaint would not be upheld had he or she taken the advice of the commissioner or the registrar. I am glad that the third commissioner is following that strategy. Sir Gordon Downey created that principle when he was the first commissioner, and he would have wanted it maintained.

Now is not the time to re-run our debate about the appointment of Philip Mawer as commissioner. I note the remarks of the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), but if the House is arguing for a continuation of self-regulation, we should make a change that we regard as sensible, on which we have consulted and received the advice of the Wicks committee, despite the fact that the committee's review is still taking place—not only because it is right in itself, but because the issues that the committee is considering go further than the changes to the code of conduct and the advocacy rule. If experience shows that we are right and the Committee on Standards in Public Life is, in our view, wrong, and we maintain our independent regulation, with an independent commissioner to help us, it is important that the committee does not, for example, recommend that we bring in outsiders for a tribunal, including lawyers, because we have already rejected that proposal. It is important that we avoid such repetition.

When the Wicks committee interviewed me, I thought that its members approached the subject with open minds. I must tell the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), that I did not get the idea, either on the day before I gave evidence or on the day that I went before the committee, that its members approached the subject with their minds made up. I may be wrong, but that was my impression.

I told the committee that I have the strong view, as my right hon. Friend spelt out, that neither the commissioner nor the Committee on Standards and Privileges considers criminal action. The procedures of the commissioner and the committee would halt were there to be any serious suggestion of even potential criminal charges. That is one of the reasons why I say clearly to the House that there is no question of Members being asked to incriminate themselves when they are asked or required to assist the commissioner in considering a query or complaint, or when they are helping the Committee on Standards and Privileges in its consideration of a commissioner's report and possible further action.

If there is no crime, there is no incrimination. There is the House of Commons obligation to co-operate with the process from beginning to end, by fulfilling the requirements of the register, which we shall adapt this evening, and by answering questions from the commissioner, whether or not the Member concerned thinks that the commissioner has the right to ask those questions. "Answer the questions" is the best advice that the House can give to any Member involved. The experience of some of our colleagues who have had questions raised, who have co-operated and adjusted their register entry and, in some cases, apologised for getting things wrong—or for not getting them quite right—is that the House, the general public and their constituents have not made much of a fuss about it. We all have to learn from that experience.

Mr. Dalyell: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that it is his view that there should be no judgment or leak until a final judgment is arrived at?

Peter Bottomley: Yes, but I disagree with those who have publicly or privately said that the second commissioner or her office leaked information of that nature. Most of the time, when information came out which should not have done, I believe that it came from the Member complained of or from people around him or her. In a number of examples that has been demonstrated to be true, although in some cases one cannot demonstrate it. I have spent some time listening to journalists, especially those few who have watched the standards process, and not one has suggested to me that any information ever came improperly from the commissioner or her office.

The change in the limit to £550 is reasonably sensible. It could have been half that sum, but I do not think it should be much higher. I am glad that we are to sweep

[Peter Bottomley]

away the rather ridiculous declarations that one has received £25 from a research organisation, which may then have been passed on to a charity. Such declarations of sums up to £500 are misleading and unnecessary. I would advise hon. Members—this is the only part of my behaviour that I commend to others—that if they are to co-operate with a research organisation, it is far better not to take the money, even to give it to a charity. If we want to help a research organisation, we ought to take 15 minutes or even an hour to do so without any money changing hands at all. It is demeaning for Members of Parliament to give the impression that they will co-operate with research in association with, although not quite on condition of, the payment of such sums. That is unnecessary and sends the wrong signals.

I hope that the standards process becomes pretty dull and uninteresting. A number of the higher profile cases in the past were associated with newspaper investigations, or concerned a Member failing to co-operate with the commissioner's inquires and the Committee on Standards and Privileges. There were also other high profile cases that I do not want to go into this evening.

I have a comment to place on the record that I hope the Prime Minister picks up. The incorporation of the Members' code of conduct into the ministerial code, as announced by the Leader of the House when he appeared in front of the Wicks committee, was welcome and overdue. In many senses, it flatly contradicted the Prime Minister's answer to me during oral questions two or three weeks beforehand. I put the point to him, and he said that if there was a complaint about Ministers it should be put to the normal authorities in the normal way. The Prime Minister is the only person who invigilates the ministerial code, and he ought to have known that. I am sorry that on the spur of the moment he gave an answer that displayed his lack of understanding of the importance of what Ministers do.

I add to that this codicil: if Ministers at any time again fail to co-operate as fully as possible, or if officials of a political party fail to do so, as has happened recently, the Prime Minister, as leader both of his party and of the Government, should sack the Minister without question on the first day. That would enable the commissioner to discharge his or her duties even by working only three days a week—Elizabeth Filkin could have done so—and the House would not have had its reputation besmirched by the impression, which I share, that someone who gets close to people close to the Prime Minister is likely to suffer from whispering and direct action. I wish that I did not have to make that accusation in the House.

9.35 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Instant first-day sacking without the opportunity to examine the facts seems a bit reckless. When I interrupted the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), I said that my impression—it was no more than that—from questions asked by the Wicks committee was that perhaps it was against self-regulation. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (David Winnick) is right; none of us can know exactly how it will report, as it will make that decision in the fullness in time. I have just one question for my hon. Friend the Minister, if I can have his attention for a moment. Why are we debating the code of conduct tonight? If I were Sir Nigel Wicks or one of his colleagues, I would be pretty cheesed off about that apparent fait accompli.

In fact, the interrogation conducted by the busy people who serve on the Wicks committee was extremely fascinating, as they asked several questions that had not occurred to many of us who had to try to answer them on the spur on the moment. All credit to them, but can we not keep the subject in cold storage until the committee has reported? We cannot take up the time of the busy, highly pressured members of the Wicks committee when, at the end of the day, they seem to have wasted their time because we have made up our minds anyway.

9.37 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): As the Parliamentary Secretary was kind enough to give me advance warning that he would cite my case, perhaps I should begin by declaring my farming and agricultural interest, as recorded in the Register of Members' Interests, which led to a recommendation of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your role in my case; I also thank the Committee Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) and members of the Committee for looking at the evidence that I submitted, considering it impartially and coming up with recommendations in the report to change the rules on initiation and advocacy.

It is worth putting on the record what happened to me, as it is an example of the way in which a rule drafted too restrictively can have unintended consequences. When the leader of the Opposition asked me to become a Front-Bench spokesman on agriculture, part of his reason for doing so, I believe, was my first-hand knowledge of the farming industry. While I was aware that under the rules on the declaration of Members' interests and advocacy there might be a problem, I had no idea of the scale of the difficulty that would confront me. With that in mind, to prepare for Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions on 18 October 2001, and to be certain that I had complied with the rules correctly, I sought advice on 17 October from David Doig, the then Registrar of Members' Interests. In summary, his advice was that my first oral question would have to be preceded by a full declaration of my interests; let me say straight away that I have no problem whatsoever with making a full and absolute declaration of my interests at every opportunity. Although it was not an absolute requirement in the rules, David Doig strongly recommended—with a general caveat that all farming issues are inter-related—that any subsequent question that I asked, particularly one relating to arable farming, should be accompanied by a similar declaration.

The parallel set of rules, the advocacy rules, stated at that time that

"a Member who has a pecuniary benefit from a body or individual outside Parliament may not initiate any Parliamentary proceeding which relates specifically and directly to the affairs and interests of that body or individual".

As you are aware from my subsequent letter and meeting with you, Mr. Speaker, that would have prevented me at the time from signing any Opposition motion or amendment, proposing or opening any debate or tabling any written question—not just a written question with an

"R" by my name, but any written question. Given that I am not just a farmer but represent a large rural constituency with many farming interests, the rules would effectively have prevented me from asking questions on behalf of my constituents.

In my letter to you, Mr. Speaker, I went on:

"In essence this meant that my job as an Opposition Agriculture Spokesman was unworkable and untenable. I believe the same problem would also apply to any back-bencher from any party."

Mr. Dalyell: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: If I may complete the quote from my letter to the Speaker, I shall happily give way to the hon. Gentleman.

My letter continued:

"It seems that anyone who has had any sort of commercial interest prior to coming into the House and continues to hold that interest as a Member of Parliament would have great difficulty in using the expert knowledge that they have gained, which might be of benefit to their constituents, party and to the function of the House in general.

I consider that the rules are unnecessarily restrictive. There must be a difference between general advocacy of a topic and specific advocacy of a particular interest where a Member stands to benefit, personally or financially; for example, in my case a general advocacy of agriculture as distinct from calling for a specific subsidy that would benefit my business."

I cannot believe that when the rules were drafted, that was the intended consequence. I fully accept that there must be a balance between Members' declaration of interests and public confidence in the integrity of Members of Parliament. However, I do not believe that with that interpretation of the rules as they stood at that time the balance was correct.

I give way to the Father of the House.

Mr. Dalyell: How did the rules put the hon. Gentleman in that position, but allow Michael Jopling to be an Agriculture Minister?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I have pondered that question. I am not sure whether the rules were the same at the time, but that is the advice that I got from the Registrar of Members' Interests concerning the interpretation of the rules in the case of somebody in my position who had a pecuniary interest in farming. I was informed by the registrar that, with the rules as they stood, the same restrictions on initiation and advocacy would have applied to a practising doctor taking a job as a health spokesman, or to a teacher taking a job as an education spokesman.

Mr. Levitt: The hon. Gentleman is performing a service by reminding the House of the reasons behind the change in the rules. I think I am right in saying that the present rules date back to 1996, so they would not have caught the Jopling case. It is also worth putting it on record that the Sheldon case at about this time last year was at the front of our minds when we were formulating the recommendations, which, as the hon. Gentleman said, were prompted by his experience.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that clarification. The position was as I suggested to the Father of the House.

Having put on record what the problem was, I wrote to you, Mr. Speaker, and you kindly asked me to come and see you. We had a full and frank discussion about the matter, and you asked me to write in the same terms to the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee, which I did. The Committee examined the matter, considered my first evidence and my subsequent evidence, and came up with two possibilities. One was the disproportionate benefit rule, and the other the less onerous exclusive benefit rule, which, as the Chairman said, would prevent a Member from seeking to confer a benefit exclusively on a body in which he had or expected to have a pecuniary interest.

I suspect that the House will return to that definition, as its precise meaning is still unclear. In my case, would I fall foul of it if I were to ask from the Front Bench for a subsidy for arable farmers from which I would benefit, even if a large number of my constituents would also benefit and had been asking me to lobby for such a measure? I am not certain about that and I think that the House will need to revisit the subject, although it is clearer than it was. To that extent, I am grateful to the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Why have I raised this subject? A fundamental matter of principle is involved, and it was raised earlier, during the previous debate. What do we want in this House? Do we want to be bumbling amateurs or do we want people to come into the House who have real knowledge of the outside world? I suggest that we want Members to come into the House with real knowledge of the outside world. That serves Parliament and this country well. I do not think that we want professional politicians who do not have experience of the outside world. One of the great strengths of the other place is that whatever it is debating, there are people of nationally—if not internationally—renowned reputation in the field in question. That is what enhances and gives quality to debates in the other place.

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): The word "exclusive" refers to whether an exclusive benefit would be conferred in terms of the interest that the hon. Member in question had found to be personally registrable. It would not apply to a generic group including all arable farmers. That is the difference. There is a paradox that we have not addressed and which I regard as nonsensical: hon. Members could speak against their own interest, but if they had not declared it, they would be in breach of the rules. Even though they had spoken against their interest, they would be in breach of the rules for having spoken about it at all.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for trying to clarify the matter, but let me throw the issue back at him. Suppose I was a member of the National Farmers Union as a farmer with a pecuniary interest in farming, and was advocating a specific topic on which the union had lobbied me and which would confer an "exclusive benefit" on a trade or body, to use the words of the report. Would I fall foul or not?

Mr. Williams *rose—*

Mr. Clifton-Brown: It appears that the right hon. Gentleman is going to tell me

Mr. Williams: If the Member was the sole operator in the trade, the answer would be yes; if he was not the sole operator, the answer would be no.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that clarification. When people get into problems subsequently, they may look back at his words, which might help to provide clarification.

I think that I have adequately described my situation. If the House accepts the report and the change on rules and initiation, it will be doing the country and our constituents a service. I recommend and endorse the change and thank the Chairman and his Committee.

9.48 pm

Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): I am a member of the Standards and Privileges Committee and want briefly to express my support for the recommendations.

The major change that we are recommending relates to the advocacy rule, which the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) has just addressed. In fact, it was his problem that brought clearly to mind the fact that the rule had become unworkable. We propose that the advocacy rule be the rule that was originally recommended by what is now called the Wicks committee—the Committee on Standards in Public Life. We are doing nothing more than adopting the approach of what is now the Wicks committee as a method of ensuring that legitimate parliamentary activity is permitted.

We could sum up the other changes that the report recommends by saying that they attempt to simplify and update the rules in various ways. One effect is to reduce the number of registrable interests by introducing a £550 limit, to which I shall refer shortly. I emphasise that the recommendations will tighten the rules—for example, those that apply to property that hon. Members own. They should therefore consider that carefully. The rules on shareholdings have also been tightened. A new definition brings partners within the scope of the rules, and that definition now refers not only to spouses. The changes do not all constitute relaxation of the rules; some are tightened. We are trying to update the rules—the rule on partners is an example of that—and also to simplify them.

I want to comment on the points that hon. Members made in the debate. First, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) asked why the recommendations were being made now when the Wicks committee is considering the matter. We are examining the substance of the code, whereas the Wicks committee is dealing with the machinery to enforce the registration system and the code of conduct. It is considering a different aspect of the problem. However, I take the point that we do not want to examine such matters often because it is a burden on hon. Members, who have to register their interests. If we constantly change the rules, it places a heavy onus on them. I accept the general point of the hon. Member for North Cornwall that we must keep the matter under review, but not too frequently because that would create confusion.

I always find the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) stimulating. He often makes me go away and think about things. I want to reassure him that the rules contained several financial limits, and we believed, in the interests of simplification, that we should adopt one cut-off point or threshold. We decided on the figure of 1 per cent. of the parliamentary salary. One could argue that it should be 0.5 per cent. or 2 per cent., but we fixed on 1 per cent. as a relatively simple threshold.

My hon. Friend mentioned foreign travel. It is registrable if it falls above the threshold. If the foreign sponsorship involved a total payment of £600 in air fares, accommodation and so on, it would have to be registered. I am not sure that the threshold in that instance will mean that large amounts of foreign travel will not be subject to registration. I believe that they will.

Andrew Mackinlay: With respect, I believe that my hon. and learned Friend misses my point. The rules are unfair to hon. Members who go abroad and register that they have travelled at the invitation of a specific Government because they are interested in the country. The answer is for the House to facilitate adequate travel budgets so that hon. Members can travel unencumbered, unembarrassed and uninfluenced by a host Government. That should be the objective.

Ross Cranston: My hon. Friend anticipates my point: I was about to say that he had made me think about the matter. I agree with him, but that is not in the remit of our Committee. It is a good point, because Members of other legislatures get much more sponsored travel than us. There is a good argument for saying that we should receive more. There is already a limited amount, but perhaps it should cover trips to other parts of the world as well as to the EU.

The hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) made a point about incorporating the code into the ministerial code. There is a good argument for that, and I suspect that it will not be long before that is done. I agree with that point, but, again, it was not in the remit of the report. We were looking at the substance of the rules, and at how they ought to be changed.

Finally, I do not think that we have a purely self-regulatory system.

David Winnick: Before my hon. and learned Friend makes his final point, may I ask him a question relating to free gifts? Would he or his colleagues be in favour of the proposal that Members should send a copy of their annual tax return to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards? Is there any reason why we should not do that? The information would not necessarily go into the public domain; it could be held in private by the Commissioner. What is the argument against that?

Ross Cranston: There are big issues of privacy involved, and I would not go along with my hon. Friend on that proposal. The registration rules are quite clear. I shall read out part of rule 9, because it is important.

"Apart from the specific rules, there is a more general obligation upon Members to keep the overall definition of the Register's purpose in mind when registering their interests."

In other words, if an hon. Member thinks that a gift whose value falls below the threshold could be seen by outsiders as leading to the perception of a conflict of interest, they ought to register it, under the rules. If they thought that something below the value of £550 fell within the general definition of the register's purpose, the onus would be on them to register it. I should have thought that, in most cases, that would not apply, but my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (David Winnick) might take a different view about the very expensive box of chocolates that he receives and, under rule 9, he would be obliged to register it.

As I mentioned, I do not think that we have a purely self-regulatory system. As my hon. Friend the Minister made clear, we are subject, in some cases, to the criminal law. We are subject to outside regulators, in that sense. We are also subject to constant public review by the press and, ultimately, we are accountable to the electorate. The most extreme example of that involved the former Member for Tatton, when the electorate said that his behaviour was not acceptable and that they would therefore not elect him—if that is how we interpret that particular result.

These rules are self-enforcing in the sense that the onus is on all of us to comply with them. If Members adopt a reasonable interpretation of the rules, they should not be subject to criticism. I adopt that view in a fairly legalistic way. If it is quite clear that a particular case does not fall within the rules, I do not think that Members should be subject to criticism on the basis that they should have sought advice and should have registered. I do not think that that is the way to go about it. These are self-enforcing rules, and Members have to read them. Yes, they should seek advice if they are in any doubt, but if they have no doubt, and if their interpretation of the rules is reasonable, they should not be subject to criticism.

On the whole, then, I commend these proposals to the House. We have tidied up the rules and brought them up to date. We have also dealt with the unworkability of the rule in relation to advocacy, which the hon. Member for Cotswold so amply illustrated in his speech. I commend the proposals to the House.

9.59 pm

Sir George Young: By leave of the House, may I say that I am very grateful, on behalf of the Committee, for the kind words that have been said about the report? I should like to reply briefly. I understand that business can go on after 10 o'clock, so if we hit 10 o'clock, I shall not turn into a pumpkin.

I want to say to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) that a number of his hon. Friends have expressed the view to the Committee that the one group of people that is precluded from initiating a debate about a country overseas is often the group that knows most about it because it has recently visited it. That is the reason behind that change. I thought that I heard the hon. Gentleman utter some disobliging remarks about Tilbury football club, in which case, he is a very brave man. Whatever honorary position he is now obliged to declare in the register as an officer of that club may shortly be removed from him. As for minor interests, I think that he will find that the letter from the commissioner will discourage the registration of trivial matters so that what really needs to be registered is registered.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) mentioned timing. Some of the recommendations were made more than a year ago. There is a case for getting on with things when the House or the Select Committee has formed a view, which means that there may never be a right time, but I would be surprised if the Wicks committee took offence at what we are doing tonight.

I say to the hon. Gentleman, and to the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), that I think that the Wicks committee is more interested in the overall structure for maintaining standards of conduct in the House than in the details of the code. When I was examined, it was interested in an appeal process, the composition of the committee, the independence of the commissioner and the seniority of those serving on the committee.

Peter Bottomley: One of the changes made by the House a few months ago was the introduction of the rectification procedure, suggested, I think, by the former commissioner. Under that useful procedure, if a Member thinks his or her entry should be changed, that can be done without the need for a report from the commissioner.

Sir George Young: Many of the changes that we are introducing are welcome. It would have been wrong to postpone them, especially that mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown).

Of course we will keep these matters under review, and of course there will be a dialogue with the Wicks committee. The hon. Member for North Cornwall described the proposals as provisional and transitional. That implies a degree of mortality to which I would not subscribe, but they will be kept under review. It is rather like painting the Forth bridge.

I understand what the hon. Member for Walsall, North (David Winnick) said about limits. In paragraph 2 of the report, we point out that wherever the line is drawn there will be an argument for drawing it somewhere else. But there is a line in regard to gifts, which concerned him, along with the rules on hospitality and earnings. The £125 rule had not been reviewed for some time, and we felt that 1 per cent. was right.

Mr. Levitt: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will confirm that there used to be a number of de minimis rules in different parts of the code. Is it not much more consistent to apply a 1 per cent. threshold to all the different categories?

Sir George Young: Yes. One of our guidelines was a requirement for consistency and clarity.

Mr. Alan Williams: Was not one of the reasons for our switching to a percentage basis the fact that it was self-indexing, and did not need future adjusting?

Sir George Young: There was also the argument that people might not remember the £125 figure, but most know what Members of Parliament are paid and can work out what 1 per cent. of that is.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) said he hoped that our proceedings would be dull. I can only say that they are more dull now that he has left.

Mr. Tyler: It may be rather early to ask this question, but can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, now that he and other Chairmen of Select Committees are apparently to receive additional remuneration, the 1 per cent. will apply to that extra money?

Sir George Young: The 1 per cent. is 1 per cent. of the parliamentary salary. If the hon. Gentleman reads the recommendations of the Modernisation Committee, he will see that my Committee was excluded from the benefit of additional remuneration for its Chairman. That is quite right, and I do not seek such remuneration myself.

[Sir George Young]

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold for making the case so eloquently, and for helping us to make a change to the advocacy rule. That will benefit not just those caught by it but the House, in allowing us to gain from their wisdom.

I hope that some time will elapse before we have to do this again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That—

(1) this House approves the Ninth Report from the Committee on Standards and Privileges, (House of Commons Paper No. 763), *A new Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules*;

(2) the Resolution of the House of 6th November 1995 relating to Conduct of Members shall be amended, at the end, by adding the words 'or any approach, whether oral or in writing, to Ministers or servants of the Crown';

(3) the Resolution of the House of 6th November 1995 relating to Employment Agreements shall be redesignated 'Agreements for the Provision of Services;' and shall be amended, as follows:

(a) by leaving out the words 'up to £1,000, £1,000–£5,000, £5,000–£10,000' in each of paragraphs (1), (2) and (3) and inserting the words 'up to £5,000, £5,001–£10,000';

(b) after the word 'inspection' in each of paragraphs (1), (2) and (3), by inserting the words 'and reproduction';

(c) at the end, by adding the words—

'Provided that the requirement to deposit a copy of an agreement with the Commissioner shall not apply—

(a) if the fees or benefits payable do not exceed one per cent. of the current parliamentary salary; nor

(b) in the case of media work (but in that case the Member shall deposit a statement of the fees or benefits payable in the bands specified above)';

(4) the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members (House of Commons Paper No. 688 (1995–96)) shall be amended as proposed in Annex 2 to the Report; and

(5) the registration forms submitted for the next published Register of Members' interests shall comply with the new rules on the registration of Members' interests; and any requirement under the new rules to register an interest which is not registrable now shall come into force on the publication of the next Register.

Alcohol Abuse (Young People)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Dan Norris.]*

10.5 pm

Jim Sheridan (West Renfrewshire): I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise the issue of binge drinking and its effect on youngsters, and to share with other hon. Members my experiences and concerns.

Binge drinking is a problem with proven links to many of the more serious aspects of antisocial behaviour in our communities. The debate is important because it will consider many issues associated with binge drinking, such as teenage drinking. As we know, our teenagers are tomorrow's policy makers. A recent report on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, by Communities That Care, covered some 14,000 secondary schools throughout England, Scotland and Wales. It stated that the widespread misuse of alcohol among under-age drinkers

"cannot safely be ignored by parents or policy makers."

Alcohol Concern stated that the report

"is the latest in a series of studies indicating that young people are drinking worrying amounts of alcohol".

It adds that drinking among teenagers is linked to antisocial behaviour and the use of other drugs.

The following figures from a survey show the scale of binge drinking among British teenagers. Up to 25 per cent. of 13 and 14-year-olds claim to have downed at least five alcoholic drinks in a single session. That figure rises to 50 per cent. of all 15 and 16-year-olds. Some 27 per cent. of 15 and 16-year-olds reported going on three or more binges in the past month. The survey also found that 9 per cent. of boys and 5 per cent. of 11 and 12-year-old girls describe themselves as regular drinkers. Those figures rise to 39 per cent. of boys and 33 per cent. of girls aged 15 to 16. The majority of children surveyed stated that their parents would think it wrong for them to steal or to use illegal drugs, but the proportion who said that their parents would object to under-age drinking declined significantly.

Mr. John Lyons (Strathkelvin and Bearsden): I should point out to my hon. Friend that most research shows that young people do not regard themselves at as risk from alcohol. According to various surveys in Scotland and the rest of the UK, education for children about alcohol is almost non-existent in some schools. Perhaps some attention can be given to that in this debate.

Jim Sheridan: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I shall deal with education later.

The national picture gives cause for concern, given the association of binge drinking with criminal activities committed by teenage drinkers. Some 10 per cent. of schoolchildren admitted that they had committed burglary, and 25 per cent. of 15 to 16-year-olds admitted to carrying offensive weapons. The report's findings simply replicated the conclusion of earlier reports that British teenagers are more likely to get drunk than their European contemporaries. Some researchers would claim that that is attributable to a more relaxed attitude to alcohol use in Britain.

In a recent case in Stirling, three boys aged between 10 and 12 were admitted to Stirling royal infirmary, suffering from the effects of alcohol. The two boys aged 12 were described as suffering from drowsiness and vomiting. The condition of the 10-year-old boy gave greater cause for concern. His body temperature had to be raised, as it was dangerously low. Coupled with severe vomiting, his condition could have led to cardiac arrest. Police in Stirling are still trying to discover who supplied the boys with alcohol—and therein lies another problem.

Consumer advocates and anti-alcohol groups have recently called for regulations to place stricter controls on the marketing to teenagers of fruit-flavoured alcoholic drinks. Such drinks are known as alcopops and are designed to appeal to the younger drinker. The groups say that the new hard lemonades and other fruit-flavoured malt beverages are primarily targeted at teenage consumers. Alcopop drinks are clearly child-oriented products that are designed to get children to consume alcohol at an early age. The complaint called for an investigation into whether labelling and marketing of fruit-flavoured alcoholic beverages could be construed as unfair marketing practice under law. In response to the complaints, drinks manufacturers and distributors stated:

"It's ridiculous to suggest that the flavour of a drink is what stands between a teen abiding by the law or illegally breaking the law."

The chief executive of the charity Communities That Care recently called for urgent Government action to spearhead a joined-up approach by all agencies to provide support for young people, addressing drinking and other problematic factors that contribute to their lifestyle. A recent World Health Organisation report stated that one in eight deaths among young men in the UK are caused by alcohol abuse. While children in most European countries are given wine with their meals by their parents in an effort to encourage responsible alcohol consumption, most British children cannot wait to reach the legal age to drink in order to emulate the drinking habits of their parents. The report states:

"While we are developing a growing appreciation of wine and food, we are still a nation that does most of its glass raising just before closing time."

Older British drinkers have developed a last drink syndrome, in which they have a ritual that when last orders are called at the bar, they order two drinks or more just to squeeze in a final one for the road. That means that they are attempting to swallow two pints in the time that they would normally only drink half a pint. That quick intake means that they get drunk and stagger out into the night to get involved in brawls and fights in late-night carry-out shops and taxi ranks, leading to more public disorder.

The British Entertainment and Discotheque Association, a representative body for late-night venues with more than 1,000 members across the UK, has been heavily involved in the debate on binge drinking and the impact that alcohol discounting has on the late-night environment in our communities. It is calling for a solution to the problem that still gives operators some freedom to offer promotions while removing the ability to offer the deep discounts and irresponsible promotions that cause so much trouble in our communities.

The British drinker does not know how to drink sensibly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Lyons) said, we need a programme to educate and inform the British public about sensible drinking and the horrific problems associated with binge drinking. To that end, I welcome the current initiative from the Scottish Executive to attempt to provide such a programme for the people of Scotland. I ask that the Government give serious and urgent consideration to a similar programme throughout the UK.

10.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Dr. Kim Howells): I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire (Jim Sheridan) for raising those important issues. As he pointed out, all hon. Members are rightly concerned about the welfare of children, and alcohol abuse by the young is a vitally important issue for every parent. He has spoken eloquently about matters that are causing a great deal of anxiety in all our constituencies.

The protection of our children is one of the key purposes of licensing law and is a primary aim of licensing reform and the modernisation for which I am now responsible as a Minister. I am pleased to have the opportunity to reply to this debate, because we have a very good story to tell of positive steps taken since 1997 to tackle directly the problems associated with under-age drinking.

The issues affect many Departments, as my hon. Friend suggested. They need joined-up government and joined-up thinking. The Home Office is actively addressing alcohol-related crime and drunkenness on the streets involving the young. The Department of Health is concerned about sensible drinking by all of us, but especially by the young. It is developing a national alcohol strategy that will embrace many of the issues that I will mention this evening. The Department for Education and Skills includes alcohol education in the national curriculum as part of general teaching about substance misuse, which is another point that my hon. Friend made. The Department of Trade and Industry regulates the advertising, marketing and packaging of alcoholic beverages, which can be made overly attractive to the young. Customs and Excise is actively seeking to prevent smuggled alcohol being sold on the cheap to kids and adults. In the terrible example that my hon. Friend gave, the alcohol may have come from such a source, because streets in some areas are awash with it. The Treasury has changed the duty rates on mixed drinks made of spirits mixed with soft fruit drinks so that they are now taxed as spirits rather than wine. This will make them more expensive and less accessible to the very young.

We in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are responsible for the licensing laws and the age at which alcohol may be purchased in England and Wales. Moreover, the Scottish Executive and the Northern Ireland Office have a similar role in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Hon. Members will recall that the Government came to power in 1997 promising to tackle the problem of alcopops. It was an issue of great concern to many parents, and a very worrying trend. Working closely with the Portman Group, we called upon producers and suppliers of alcohol to discharge their social responsibilities with regard to the problem of under-age drinking. A range of additional controls within the

[Dr. Kim Howells]

Portman Group's code of practice were introduced and had a significant impact on the merchandising and packaging of alcoholic drinks.

The number of complaints made to the Portman Group's independent panel about the marketing of alcohol to children and its packaging has now dwindled to almost nothing. That is an achievement of which the Portman Group and the Government should be proud.

In 1999, we gave our wholehearted support to the private Member's Bill presented by hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Mr. Truswell), following the tragic death of his 14-year-old constituent, David Knowles. The Licensing (Young Persons) Act 2000 closed a loophole in the main licensing statutes that had allowed some staff in licensed premises to sell alcohol to children without fear of prosecution or conviction. The Act also introduced for the first time a new offence that prevents adults hanging around off-licences from buying alcohol on behalf of minors. We know that there are clear links between that and the sale of other drugs.

In April 2000, the Government included a raft of measures to tackle under-age purchase and consumption of alcohol in the White Paper entitled "Time for Reform." My hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire has urged us to implement these reforms at the first opportunity. Although I know that many in the House would have liked us to move more swiftly on reform generally, we certainly cannot be criticised for any delay on the measures regarding children.

The White Paper proposals will tackle under-age drinking. They were given priority ahead of general reform and were included in the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001. Three crucial measures have been brought into force since last year's general election.

On 1 December last year, the test purchasing of alcohol was put on a statutory footing for the first time in England and Wales, bringing it into line with the arrangements for tobacco. Trading standards officers can now send minors into licensed premises to attempt to buy alcohol. This is a valuable deterrent that has heightened the risk of detection and prosecution for those unscrupulous traders making profit out of causing harm to our children.

The Act also placed a new positive duty on licensees and their staff in England and Wales not to sell alcohol to children. The defences that can be mounted against prosecutions have been amended, and it has been made easier for enforcement agencies to secure convictions. Retailers now know that in the case of any doubt about age they simply should not make the sale.

The Act has also made it easier for local authorities to designate areas in their towns and cities where alcohol may not be consumed publicly, and it has expanded the powers of the police to confiscate alcohol carried by children in those areas.

As I made clear at the outset, licensing law can only be one element of a much wider strategy. Data from research sponsored by the Portman Group strongly suggest that children are obtaining a great deal of cheap alcohol from unlicensed individuals peddling smuggled alcohol. This is a cynical trade, with little regard for the consequences for the young and, indeed, for parents. The Government have stepped up their campaign to defeat the bootleggers, with the Treasury providing more customs officers dedicated to detecting those involved.

Our wider strategy includes the work of the Departments for Education and Skills and of Health and the Portman Group in providing more health education resources for children and parents to learn about sensible drinking. I was shocked to hear my hon. Friend say that some schools in Scotland provide no education about alcohol, and I hope that those schools will realise that that is vital work. A great deal of research shows that most of the alcohol obtained and consumed by minors is provided by their parents, and public education to change some of our entrenched attitudes is essential.

A great deal has been and is being done in the public and private sectors relating to licensing, health and education. However, I emphasise that there are no easy or quick fixes when it comes to under-age drinking. Education, as my hon. Friend suggested, lies at the heart of much of the problem. By the time children are in their teenage years, bad habits will often have been formed. We need to reach them earlier, as we have done with some success—although it is by no means complete success—on tobacco. I acknowledge that there is a great deal more that we can do regarding the general reform of licensing. Our laws are archaic and incomprehensible to many parents.

My hon. Friend talked about binge drinking. When, over the 2001–02 new year period, I managed to get the Regulatory Reform (Special Occasions Licensing) Order 2001 through the House to extend drinking hours to 36 hours, the police informed us that it was the quietest new year's eve they could remember, with the least amount of violence. My hon. Friend is right to point out that although binge drinking may not result in fights inside pubs or even outside those pubs, it certainly results in violence in the fast-food outlets where people steam in when they are thrown out of the pub, usually at the same time and in their hundreds.

Minors cannot purchase alcohol in pubs and nightclubs, but children as young as five can lawfully consume alcohol in pub gardens and some family rooms. Consumption is prohibited only in the area of licensed premises known as "the bar". This also means that children aged over four can, in theory, drink alcohol freely in a licensed restaurant that has no bar. We must not be fooled by the counter from which drinks are supplied in a restaurant—that is often not a bar as understood in the law. These are archaic and complex areas of the law, and it is no wonder that most parents find it all utterly confusing. We intend to sort all this out through the general reform of licensing law, and a Bill will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time permits.

Once again, I thank my hon Friend for raising these important matters for debate and for giving us the opportunity to set out our approach to them. If we do not sort these matters out, I fear for the future of many of our young people and also for the future of communities like the ones in which I and many colleagues here tonight grew up. This problem undermines the social cohesion that has made those communities such remarkable and good places in which to raise children. This is a very serious issue and I hope that I have shown my hon. Friend that the Government are taking it very seriously.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-four minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 15 May 2002

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

MERSEY TUNNELS BILL (*BY ORDER*)

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second Time on Wednesday 22 May.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Poverty Reduction Strategy

1. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of her poverty reduction strategy in reducing poverty. [54737]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): The Government's strategy for reducing global poverty is set out in the 1997 and 2000 White Papers on international development. Our commitment is to mobilise the international system to meet the international development targets and to work to make globalisation work for the poor by making international governance more equitable. These are massive challenges but progress is being made.

Mr. Rendel: The Secretary of State will know that education plays a very important part in the reduction of poverty. What discussions has she had with the International Monetary Fund with a view to including within public spending targets the freeing up of any charges for primary education, so that we can have universal primary education by 2015?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In the countries where we have driven forward and supported local efforts to get progress towards universal primary education—Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania and Rwanda, for example, have made significant progress in recent years—dropping all charges is absolutely key. In very poor countries, when there are charges, poor children are excluded from school. At the recent spring meetings of the World Bank and the IMF, there was an agreement for 10 major countries to work together in the international system to fast-track progress. Our recommendations also included no charging, so we are moving forward.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, recently, the interim chemical review committee of the United Nations Environment Programme recommended that there should be strict international controls on asbestos because of the risk associated with that material? Will she therefore, at the Monterrey conference on financing development, and at the world summit in Johannesburg on sustainable development, press for a ban on the use of asbestos in projects in the developing world as part of a strategy to tackle poverty? The use of asbestos causes ill health, deprivation and poverty.

Clare Short: I confess that I was not aware of that ruling by the United Nations body to which my hon. Friend refers. The Monterrey conference has taken place, but I take very seriously what he said. I went to Sverdlovsk in Russia, where asbestos is still being mined and its extraction and export is still being promoted. I tried to tell its mayor that that is not approved of in our country, and he had never heard of the argument that asbestos is damaging to health. Clearly, therefore, a great deal remains to be done to strengthen international controls. I shall look into the proposals that my hon. Friend has made to see what can be done.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Would the Secretary of State agree that those who suffer most in a corrupt society are the poor, and that her poverty reduction strategies are torpedoed by the poor governance, ineffectiveness and corruption of Governments in the developing world? Will she underline to the House her determination, which I know is strong, to ensure that developing countries' Governments take responsibility for their actions, and that they do not always blame donor countries for their poor actions?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is right that corruption corrodes economic growth, means that resources are misused, and leads to debt problems. The poor pay the price in terms of poverty, suffering and lack of public facilities. Corruption is a two-way street: companies from countries like ours have corrupted, bribed and helped to bring about some of the imploded and corrupt state institutions that exist in some countries. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development convention now makes it a crime to offer a bribe to a public official abroad, and bribes are ceasing to be tax deductible in those OECD countries where, to our disgrace, that used to be the case. Under the poverty reduction strategy, we are giving financial support to Governments to help them with development if they tighten up procurement and management of the public finances. We are therefore putting much more focus on that, and we are getting progress. I agree that that is crucial.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I welcome the way in which the Secretary of State has focused the Department's attention on poverty reduction, and particularly the role that country strategy papers have played in that. With particular reference to the Cameroon

country strategy paper, which has focused on forestry as a key way of bringing people out of poverty in that country, will she comment on the importance of assessing natural resources such as the forest, and the bush meat that it contains, when considering how best to bring some of the poorest communities in west and central Africa out of poverty?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right. Forests are crucial to Cameroon. The country has a long history of terrible corruption, but we have been working on the issue of forestry for some time. Some types of tree are unique to Cameroon and they are of value to the whole international community. We have made progress recently. We have learned from what has happened in Nepal, Cameroon, Indonesia and other places where we support forestry that the way in which to protect the future of the forest is to empower the people who live in the forest and on its resources. In most parts of the world, criminal and corrupt groups misuse the forests. However, when one changes ownership and control of the trees and the animals, people live better and conserve the future of the forest. That is what we are trying to achieve in Cameroon.

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West): Will the Secretary of State outline what can be done in post-conflict countries? Some of the poorest people live in countries where it is most difficult to get aid through to the most needy.

Clare Short: Yes, indeed—although it has to be said that people living under conditions of conflict are even more oppressed and in trouble. We have to do better at resolving conflict. Some 20 per cent. of the population of Africa live under conditions of conflict. Often that conflict is not a war in the classic sense, but reflects the problems found in weak states with rebels and semi-criminal groups. We have to bring such conflicts to an end and start building the institutions of a state so that the economy can be properly managed and that people have a better future. We are doing that in Sierra Leone, where elections took place right across the territory and the conflict is over. However, there is much more to do in Sierra Leone.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman. If we work only in countries where there is an orderly Government to carry out development, the wretched of the earth will not be helped. We must be better at ending conflict and helping build decent institutions in post-conflict failed states, so that the poor of the world have a better chance in life.

Universal Primary Education

2. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): If she will make a statement on progress towards the goal of universal primary education. [54738]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): Recent World Bank analysis indicates that 67 developing countries have achieved universal primary education or are making sound progress. However, 88 countries—34 of them in sub-Saharan Africa—are not on track to achieve this goal. We agreed at the spring meeting of the World Bank in April that 10 countries would be selected for an international effort to fast-track progress. I am very concerned to try to ensure that we should select countries where we face a major challenge, such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, Pakistan and India, and not, as has been suggested, countries such as Uganda, Malawi, Rwanda and Tanzania where we are already making progress.

Fiona Mactaggart: My right hon. Friend has half answered the question that I was about to ask, so I shall push her further on the issue. It is estimated that Africa will have 75 per cent. of the world's out-of-school children in the next decade, so how will she consult the less-favoured countries there that have not made progress until now? How will she involve them in the 10 fast-track programmes? Ensuring that those countries become involved and can construct education plans is the best way to get universal primary education in Africa, which is where it is most needed.

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right. One in five children of the world and half the children in Africa are not in school. Africa is in deep poverty, and the future will be poor if children cannot get to school and improve their lives. It is often said that the only problem is a lack of aid, but there is a lack of will in many countries to prioritise universal primary education. Education resources are spent on higher education for the elite, and there is no primary education for poor children.

We must not only provide money for the reformers—that is the easy part—but push the countries that are not reforming and that are not leading to make progress. For example, Ethiopia, which is terribly poor and very populous, is just beginning to make such progress, and we must back its efforts. Nigeria is the big worry: one in five of all Africans are not making progress, and we certainly need a big effort in Nigeria.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): The Secretary of State knows that the 2015 goal of universal primary education is unlikely to be achieved unless finance for development increases rapidly and substantially. Although I welcome the assurance that the United Kingdom's development assistance will rise from 0.33 per cent. of GNP by 2004, does she not agree that the figure is misleading because it includes all debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries, including the Export Credits Guarantee Department debt that currently stands at £1.1 billion? The actual increase in aid will be much smaller than it seems. Is that not another example of double counting by the Government?

Clare Short: The hon. Lady is half right. There is no subterfuge on the part of the United Kingdom Government. She is aware of the budget increase of £2.2 billion to £3.6 billion, which I hope will rise significantly as a result of the comprehensive spending review. All that money is under my control: it is disbursed by my Department, and there is no double counting. But the OECD development committee is responsible for keeping the international statistics on aid, including what counts as overseas development assistance and how much each country deploys. It has decided that when debt is written off, and half of the debt of the heavily indebted poor countries is ECGD debt or the equivalent, that counts towards overseas development assistance. So the figures for all countries are growing as debt is written off without

extra money being spent on aid. There is no subterfuge in the UK, but the figures look better than the income for disbursal.

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the many schools in this country on calling to the attention of students—this country's future electors—the importance of the drive to ensure that there is universal primary education by 2015? In particular, will she join me in congratulating children from St. George community college in my constituency who came to the House a fortnight ago and met me and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for International Development to press the importance of the drive to educate all the children of the world by 2015?

Clare Short: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the children from St. George community college in her constituency. When I visit schools, I find that our children are globalising themselves. They are looking at the world not in terms of nation states, but in terms of the planet and the interdependence of people, both morally and for the good of the poor. They are aware that if we do not do better on poverty, the future is dangerous for them all.

We have incorporated in the national curriculum the idea of global citizenship because children are entitled to understand the world that they are inheriting and to take some control over its future. We also have twinning schemes between schools in the UK and overseas which are enormously popular. It is moving to see the generosity and curiosity of our children, and their determination to have a more equitable and safe world for the future.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): How confident can the Secretary of State be that British Government aid that is allocated to assist with the provision of primary education, especially in Africa, is not syphoned off improperly as a result of corruption so that it never gets to the children who need educating? She will be aware of the estimate that 75 million Commonwealth children lack basic education. The Government announced a Commonwealth education fund to assist with the aim of educating those children. That is fine in theory, but only £10 million is involved, which works out at 15p per child. Is that anything more than a political gimmick?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is so graceless, and always wrong. First, we have tight systems in place and do not put funding into the budgets of countries to support their primary education systems without helping them with procurement and public sector financial management. The prize of that is that our money is secure and they have better systems for their own resources. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we take enormous care.

Secondly, as ever, the hon. Gentleman has not read his facts properly. Since 1997, the UK Government have committed £650 million to driving forward universal primary education, and we will do more. The Chancellor announced a £10 million scheme to mark the Queen's jubilee—graceless, again, to attack that—to back British non-governmental organisations that work in countries where there is a lack of progress so that we help marginalised children and increase the demand for progress in universal primary education. That is what the £10 million is for.

Mr. Andy Reed (Loughborough): I am sure my right hon. Friend is aware of the importance of the G8 summit in Canada later this year. Will she ensure that she backs the calls by the Canadian Finance Minister for a review of the HIPC initiative so that poverty reduction and educational programmes are put in place, which will free up more money? She is of course aware that, post-11 September, the fall in commodity prices, for example, has made a big difference to debt sustainability in the poorest countries. Will she throw her weight behind the calls to review the HIPC initiative to make it work for the world's poorest?

Clare Short: Those calls come not just from the Canadian Government; the World Bank, the IMF and all of us have been saying not that HIPC should be reviewed but that we must ensure that it is properly funded. It has a formula for debt sustainability which takes account of what a country earns in exports to pay its foreign currency debt. Because of the falling commodity prices, Uganda, for example, has exited because the process is not sustainable and the old formulas do not work. We need an extra £1 billion of resources to get sustainability, and we are working hard on that.

I hope that the argument about the replenishment of the International Development Association facility, the concessional lending arm of the World Bank, results in a grant being allocated which will solve the problem. I am hopeful that that will be done by the time the G8 meets, but I cannot be certain.

Tanzania (Air Traffic Control Equipment)

3. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): If she will make a statement on the IMF and World Bank assessments of the contributions to Tanzania's development of air traffic control equipment supplied from the UK. [54739]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): It is clear that Tanzania needs a civilian air traffic control system to ensure safety in the country's air space. The issue is whether the proposed system meets Tanzania's needs, and represents value for money. The Government of Tanzania and the World Bank await the report of the International Civil Aviation Organisation on whether the BAE system best meets Tanzania's needs.

Dr. Cable: First, may I acknowledge the Secretary of State's role in resisting pressure from the defence industry and from her own colleagues on that project? Will she confirm that at present £80 million of aid to Tanzania is being withheld because of her reservations about the project? Will she explain how the financial promoters, Barclays and BAE Systems, managed to circumvent very strict IMF rules on commercial lending to seriously indebted countries?

Clare Short: I have been looking at the figures for total UK arms sales to Africa. In 1999, the value of those sales was some £60 million, and in 2000 it was £120 million, out of total British arms sales of about £6 billion. We could afford to tighten up our scrutiny of arms sales

to some of the poorest countries, and I hope that as a consequence of the discussions about Tanzania that will happen.

The aid that I have withheld from Tanzania is £10 million. I hope that once we have the report from the International Civil Aviation Organisation, and assuming that Tanzania responds to it in the best way and in the interests of the country and of poor people, we will be able to give it more help to solve its problem.

The hon. Gentleman is right: under the HIPC initiative, countries cannot borrow unless the loan is concessional. Somehow a loan from Barclays Bank, which is funding the project—there is no way that Barclays can provide concessional funding—has been reported to the IMF as being concessional, so the project squeaked through, which is very odd.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Will my right hon. Friend give the House an assurance—so squashing some of the rumours—that the civil aviation air traffic control system will not be used for the control and movement of military aircraft?

Clare Short: We have not seen the new International Civil Aviation Organisation report, but an interim report suggested that the system is dual use. Much of the expense on it is military, and the system does not cover the whole country. Tanzania does not have many military aeroplanes, and that is part of the problem.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Is the Secretary of State optimistic that aid to Tanzania will be resumed relatively soon? Looking forward, does she agree with Dr. Janet Hemingway, the director of the Liverpool school of tropical medicine, who came to speak to the all-party Tanzania group on Monday, that the biggest blight on the people of Tanzania, malaria and HIV/AIDS, is best dealt with by channelling that aid into building many local diagnostic centres and training doctors? For every three doctors trained, only one lives to be in practice because the other two die of AIDS in the meantime.

Clare Short: Tanzania is doing very well. It really is reforming; inflation is down and economic growth is up. It is beginning to move forward on universal primary education and to make schooling free so that many poor children can enter school. Apart from the blight of the BAE system, then, Tanzania is making progress. We are the biggest provider of aid to the country, and we have provided large funds this year. We are holding back the £10 million so that we get a decent outcome once we have the report from the International Civil Aviation Organisation.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman—more children die of malaria in Africa than of any other illness. There is a great deal that we could do. If people slept under impregnated bed nets, that would save a lot of lives and prevent a lot of ill health. We have to build up local systems to deal with malaria and HIV/AIDS, and we must train people to work locally, rather than inciting doctors to leave their country when it has too few of them.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): We have just heard a relatively rosy assessment of Tanzania's economic potential, but I am sure that the Secretary of State accepts that depriving a poor country of £10 million is bound to have an impact. Does she accept that a question hangs over the logic of her decision to withhold aid and thus punish the Tanzanian people for a decision that was sanctioned not only by the Government of Tanzania, but by her own Government?

Clare Short: No, I am afraid the hon. Lady does not yet properly understand development. If countries have weak procurement systems and they purchase projects that do not give value for money and are not beneficial to their country, they undermine their economic development.

One of the consequences and benefits of the argument is that Tanzania has tightened up its procurement systems. When it completed its debt-relief process, Tanzania gave an undertaking to the World Bank board that it would review the contract, but the Government of Tanzania came under pressure to break that undertaking. We have said that we will hold back the £10 million and that when we have the report and if we can get a good outcome for Tanzania, we will assist Tanzania to take forward the process. That is the right thing to do. We do not give aid unconditionally where there are bad procurement and bad contracts and so end up using aid money to subsidise a bad contract that is damaging a country.

EU Aid

4. **Tony Baldry** (Banbury): When she next expects to meet Commissioner Patten to discuss the proportion of the external affairs budget which is allocated to poor countries. [54740]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I meet Commissioner Patten and his colleagues regularly. He and Commissioner Nielson are committed to reforming the EC development systems to increase their effectiveness, but they are not convinced that budget funds should be allocated to reduce poverty. EC spending in Asia, where two thirds of the poor live, is therefore very small.

Tony Baldry: Does the Secretary of State agree that if EU aid were properly focused it could be an enormous power for good, but that a system in which more money is given to Poland than to the whole of Asia is simply unsustainable? We have a collective responsibility to persuade political colleagues in Europe, whether they are Christian Democrats, Liberals or Socialists, that EU development aid must now be poverty-focused. We all know the problem; it is time that we all collectively shared responsibility for work to find a solution.

Clare Short: I agree completely. The EC spends 3.38 euros per head in the Mediterranean, but only 0.15 in Asia. That is a disgraceful misallocation of resources, but we need co-operation across the EU and across all parties to put it right. I agree also that if Europe, which is the world's largest single market and the biggest destination for developing countries' exports, and which accounts for 60 per cent. of the world's development

assistance, could focus its aid well, it could be an enormous force for good in the world. We must try to achieve that.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): The Secretary of State knows that 15 per cent. of the EU's money goes to the middle east even though only 1 per cent. of the world's poorest people live there. None the less, when working on reform of the system, will she bear in mind the fact that some of that money is vital to rebuild the Palestinian Authority and repair the damage done to Palestinian refugee camps? Will she state the Government's ongoing commitment to ensuring that EU aid continues to be received by the Palestinian Authority and that the money is used to rebuild and to further peace in the area?

Clare Short: Yes, I can give the hon. Gentleman that absolute undertaking in respect of both my Department's budget and that of the EU. We must help the Palestinian people to survive and provide the humanitarian relief that is needed, but how much better it would be to direct those resources to building the new Palestinian state—a competent state that cares for its people, manages its resources well and is a good neighbour to Israel. That is the work that we all want to undertake.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): When my right hon. Friend meets Commissioner Patten, might she not find that he is a little envious, given that, although he was a Minister responsible for international development, he was never appointed to the Cabinet because the then Prime Minister did not regard the matter as seriously as today's Prime Minister rightly does? However, as Commissioner Patten is a fair man, will my right hon. Friend encourage him to encourage European nations and those who seek membership of the EU to set a date for the achievement of the 0.7 per cent. of GDP UN aid target?

Clare Short: Mr. Patten was later appointed to the Cabinet, but not in his role as Minister for Overseas Development, which he said was the best the job that he had ever had in politics. I should not be telling the House that, but it is a fine job. We can do a lot and it matters enormously. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has heard what my right hon. Friend just said about UK resources for development.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): The Select Committee report is intensely critical of the European overseas aid programme, and the Secretary of State shares in the criticism about the priorities upon which the money is spent, yet her Department is set to increase the amount that we spend through Europe to more than £1 billion by 2003–04. Does the right hon. Lady agree that although the Council disposes decisions in Europe, the decisions are made by the member states? If the Secretary of State maintains that she has a strong voice in Europe, it appears that Europe is simply not listening.

Clare Short: No, I would not agree. There has been agreement in the EU that present practices are inefficient and that there has to be major reform, and a major reform agenda has been set in place. At the last review of the amount of EU development assistance, we kept the rise to 1 per cent. Under the Conservative Government the increase was 180 per cent., and unfortunately there was no reform effort. I am trying to clean up the mess.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [54767] **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 May.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Five days ago, we learned that the Secretary of State for Defence wrote to the Foreign Secretary saying that a "clear majority" of the people of Gibraltar were "opposed to the negotiations" being carried out by his Government and the Government of Spain. Will he therefore now seriously consider the request made by my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary that those negotiations should be suspended forthwith?

The Prime Minister: No, we will carry on negotiating in the way that we have described, as set out under the Brussels process that began in 1984, initiated by the Conservative Government.

Q2. [54768] **Helen Southworth** (Warrington, South): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the staff, volunteers, parents and children of Westy sure start, which has just celebrated its first anniversary? I have been privileged to join them in the past 12 months and it has been a lot of fun, but it is fun that underpins a serious aim—to promote the physical, social and intellectual well-being of babies and young children in a disadvantaged part of my constituency. It is breaking the cycle of disadvantage and giving them opportunities to flourish at home and at school. *[Interruption.]* Will my right hon. Friend make sure that many more children have the opportunity to have a sure start in life? *[Interruption.]*

The Prime Minister: I am sorry that Conservative Members do not approve, but sure start is now helping 400,000 children throughout the country. The Conservatives may scorn such measures, but sure start, investment in education and the new deal for the unemployed are important measures; if we are taking strong and tough anti-crime measures, which we should do, measures that tackle the causes of crime are important too.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Why are there now more managers than beds in the NHS?

The Prime Minister: We have increased the number of beds. The number rose in the last year for the first time. I totally disagree with the right hon. Gentleman if he is

saying that good management in the NHS is not important. It is important, and one reason why last Friday's figures show not just every single section of in-patient waiting lists down, but out-patient waiting lists down below the levels that we inherited, is good management within the health service.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Prime Minister should remember what he actually said. In his 1997 manifesto, he said:

"And a greater proportion of every pound spent will go on patient care not bureaucracy."

The NHS now has 210,000 managers, but fewer than 200,000 beds, so he has failed. It is small wonder that if looks at his own Office for National Statistics report, he will see that it tells us today that productivity in the health service has been declining since he took over. Will he now confirm that half the extra money that he has put into health care has not gone into improved treatment for patients?

The Prime Minister: The report to which the right hon. Gentleman refers—I think that it is the ONS report about which there were newspaper reports this morning—deals with the position up to 1999. It also makes it clear that it does not take into account improvement in the quality of health care. I believe, as the recent NHS Modernisation Board report showed, that the quality of health care is indeed improving. That is why, although the right hon. Gentleman used to be able to say to me that waiting lists were up for this month or that month, or that out-patient lists were above the inherited level, virtually every single indicator is now moving in the right direction, precisely because of the extra investment that we are putting into the health service, which he opposes.

Mr. Duncan Smith: After all that nonsense, no wonder the Prime Minister is being sponsored by the owner of the Fantasy Channel; it is absolutely idiotic. He knows that the public do not believe any longer that there will be any significant increase or improvement in health care. What they want to see is guaranteed treatment within four weeks, as in Denmark, no waiting lists, as in Germany, and the ability to choose their hospital, as in France. Will the Prime Minister answer this very simple question: will he tell us now whether we will get European standards of health care for European levels of spending by the next election? A simple yes or no.

The Prime Minister: We have set out precisely the targets that we will reach by the next election and we have set out when we will hit, and, indeed, exceed the European Union spending average. However, when the right hon. Gentleman talks about bed numbers and waiting in the health service, let us remember that the Conservative Government cut beds by 60,000 and saw waiting lists increase by 400,000. They ask what we have been doing for five years; I will tell them. We have half a million more operations and 1.3 million more out-patient appointments, and waiting times as well as lists are falling against every indicator. But I agree with the right hon. Gentleman: we have to do far more to get our health care standards up. That is why we are prepared to put additional investment into the national health service. Can we have a response from him on this question: is he in favour of that additional investment in the national health service or not? If he is not, all his protestations about his concern for health care are just hot air.

Q3. [54769] **Ian Lucas** (Wrexham): In Wrexham and north-east Wales there are 400 retired miners who have registered compensation claims for emphysema and are still waiting to be medically examined. They are elderly and vulnerable, and some of them are very ill. Will the Prime Minister, as head of the Labour movement, give me his assurance today that until all those men are seen, their local fixed-site testing centre in Wrexham will remain open?

The Prime Minister: I understand the sensitivity of that issue in my hon. Friend's constituency. Of course, it is only as a result of our introduction of compensation for miners in such a position that the issue arises at all. I have heard exactly what he has said, and if he will allow me, I shall look into the matter and correspond with him.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): In his television interview last night, the Prime Minister acknowledged that the state of the railways today is worse than when he became Prime Minister. Will he address the obvious question: why is it that, five years after the shambles of privatisation, a Labour Government have not done more to redress the situation?

The Prime Minister: I also explained why we did not take Railtrack back into public ownership in 1997. I explained, too, that the main issue that has arisen since 1997 has been what Hatfield revealed—that is, the need to restructure and re-engineer virtually entire parts of the track on British railways. It is precisely for that reason that it is important that we move away from the old Railtrack situation, whereby it was looking after its shareholders before its passengers. That is precisely why it is in administration at the moment. In addition, we must ensure that we get the investment into the railways for the future. That investment will deliver results, but it will take time.

Mr. Kennedy: Obviously, none of us would want to prejudge the outcome of the inquiry that will take place into last week's terrible accident. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister will acknowledge, as will the whole House, that the public want, expect and deserve safe, reliable and affordable rail services. Given that the timetable for implementing the recommendations for greater safety has been delayed, will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to say that he will put fresh pressure on Railtrack to bring forward those recommendations sooner rather than later?

The Prime Minister: First, the whole House would want to express its sympathy to the families who lost loved ones in the Potters Bar accident. Our thoughts are with them today in particular, as some of the first funerals of the victims of that accident are being held.

Secondly, without in any way minimising what took place at Potters Bar or the need urgently to make sure that we understand the lessons from it, it is important to stress—as, indeed, people from within the industry have been stressing—that, looking back over the past 20 years, overall safety on the railways is improving, not declining.

Over the past few years, for example, collisions are down by some 12 per cent. and derailments are down by more than 20 per cent. The number of signals passed at danger—SPADs—is the lowest ever recorded. None of that detracts in any shape or form from what has happened, but it would be wrong to say that the whole railway system is in a state that means we need to fear for its safety.

Thirdly, in relation to the Cullen recommendations, the majority are either being introduced or have been introduced—or, where particular problems have arisen, we are working with the industry to introduce them. Of course, I certainly accept that they have to be introduced.

Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the first sailing, later this week, of the super-fast Rosyth-Zeebrugge ferry from my constituency? Does he agree that that will be a real boost to the Scottish economy and tourist industry? Does he further agree that Rosyth's redevelopment would not have happened without partnership between the UK Government and the Scottish and European Parliaments, which, along with Fife council, Forth Ports and Scottish Enterprise Fife, have in five years transformed an area that had been left devastated?

The Prime Minister: I very much welcome the initiative that my hon. Friend describes. I understand that the existence of the ferry as a means of transport will relieve something in the region of 2.4 million lorry miles, so it has a beneficial environmental impact as well. My hon. Friend is of course right to congratulate all those who brought about the initiative. In particular, I know that she would want to point out that as a result of the measures taken by all the bodies that she mentioned, unemployment has halved in her area in the past five years.

Q4. [54770] **Mr. Bill Wiggin** (Leominster): Will the Prime Minister at last recognise the need for a full public inquiry into the foot and mouth epidemic, especially as foreign travel has now resumed, not least between Britain and South Korea, where this week there was an outbreak of that disease?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, for the reasons that I have explained many times before. I believe that the inquiries that are under way will provide the lessons that we need to learn.

Q5. [54771] **Mr. Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton, North): Has my right hon. Friend read articles in the newspapers this week and last week about European Commission proposals to vet eurozone member countries' budgets before they are put to their Parliaments, and to reinterpret the Maastricht treaty more strictly in future? United Kingdom deficits arising from the Chancellor's recent increased spending on health will be well outside current eurozone limits. Does that not make a strong case for remaining outside the eurozone for the foreseeable future?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

The Prime Minister: Plenty of support over there—but I am afraid that I cannot agree. Only yesterday, the Commission congratulated the Chancellor on his exceptional, prudent and brilliant management of our economy.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Prime Minister talks a lot about using the benefits system; recently he suggested using it to punish criminals. Last year he launched a scheme to cut benefits for criminals who breached their community service orders. Can he tell us how many criminals have had their benefit cut?

The Prime Minister: I cannot tell the right hon. Gentleman how many criminals overall have had their benefit cut. However, I can tell him that the combination of orders, not only those to which he refers but antisocial behaviour orders, reparation orders and action orders for young people, too, run into many thousands.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The answer is only 39. The Prime Minister said, as he is fond of saying, that the scheme would make criminals serve the sentences that they were given. How many criminals have completed their community service orders?

The Prime Minister: What I can tell the right hon. Gentleman is that as a result of our measures, crime has fallen whereas it doubled under the Conservatives. *[Interruption.]* Oh yes, it doubled. Not only the community service orders but the new supervision penalties for those serving community sentences, halving the time it takes juvenile offenders to get to court, the Proceeds of Crime Bill and our other measures to toughen up the criminal justice system are making a difference. The Conservative party opposed them all. The orders to which the right hon. Gentleman referred are an important part of magistrates' and courts' powers.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Prime Minister should try telling that to the British people, who know that violent crime is rising, not falling. The answer to my question, according to his latest figures, is that 40,000 criminals have failed to serve their sentences—yet only 39 have had their benefits docked. So that was just another gimmick. The public know that violent crime is increasing. Instead of gimmicks, would not it be better to do what they want, and put real police back on the streets, not confine them to their police stations?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about police numbers, but in the few years before we came to office, they were falling, not rising. The Government have increased police numbers to the largest ever. I agree that there is a genuine problem with street and violent crime.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Do something about it.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman says, "Do something about it." That is precisely what we are doing. I shall tell him what we are doing, and find out whether he supports it. We are increasing the number of police officers; he opposed the necessary investment. We say that persistent offenders should not be bailed if they are on drugs; he opposed that. We say that the proceeds of drug dealers' crimes should be taken from them; the

Conservatives also opposed that measure. We say that there should be more community safety officers to help the police; the right hon. Gentleman opposes that. He also opposed the measure to halve the time that it takes to get juvenile offenders to court. There is a problem, but the difference between us is that we are dealing with it, and he is simply exploiting it.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Has my right hon. Friend had the opportunity to see, hear or read reports of the happy and peaceful scenes in Sierra Leone yesterday when many people voted in their parliamentary and presidential elections? After 10 years of bloody civil war, does not Sierra Leone's return to peace and democracy in four short months show that Britain's decisive military intervention, backed up by United Nations peacekeepers and democracy-building organisations such as our Westminster Foundation for Democracy, can give hope and encouragement to other countries in Africa and elsewhere that are currently riven by conflict?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend, and pay tribute to his work in helping people in Sierra Leone. It is moving that as a result of work by this country, and by our armed forces in particular, Sierra Leone was returned to democracy. People there value their democracy. I agree that that sends the right signal across the world about the prospects for Africa, and that is as important as anything else. I hope that, as part of the partnership initiative that we take to the G8 this year, we can get stronger measures to deal with some of the outstanding conflicts in Africa that blight the lives of people, notably in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and Sudan.

Q6. [54772] **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): I entirely agree with the Prime Minister—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I agree with him that fuel poverty, which results when people have to spend more than 10 per cent. of their income on heating, is unacceptable and should be eliminated. Does he agree that council tax poverty is equally unacceptable? Under his Government, why do more than 1 million pensioners have to spend more than 10 per cent. of their income on council tax? What is he going to do about that?

The Prime Minister: What we have done is to increase the amount of money going to councils by some 20 per cent., whereas the hon. Gentleman's Government were cutting it. As for fuel poverty, most people remember that the Government of whom he was a member introduced VAT on fuel. I do not think that pensioners liked that. What is more, the Conservatives opposed the £200 winter allowance and the additional sums of money going to pensioners, so I am afraid that I cannot take his protestations very seriously—although I thank him for agreeing with me.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): The Prime Minister will be aware that yesterday the House debated the modernisation of its procedures, and in particular, the replacement of the Committee of Selection with a Committee that would not consist wholly of party Whips. The Prime Minister did not record a vote yesterday. May I ask for his views on the issue?

The Prime Minister: I support the proposals put forward by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, but there was a free vote—as the House would expect on such issues—and the House has spoken.

Q7. [54773] **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): Faced with overwhelming evidence of IRA involvement in the promotion of terrorism in Colombia, what action does the Prime Minister propose to take against the IRA as part of his war against terrorism?

The Prime Minister: I agree that that is a serious issue, and that is why we are making it quite clear to Sinn Fein, and to any paramilitary organisations, that such behaviour is unacceptable. However—*[Interruption.]* I ask Conservative Members to reflect a little—when they oppose every single stage of what happens in Northern Ireland—on how much the last five years have brought Northern Ireland, and on how totally irresponsible it would have been if we had broken the bipartisanship that we used to offer the Conservatives on this issue. That included not criticising the Conservative Government when it was revealed that they were in secret talks with Sinn Fein and the IRA. I would have hoped that the same responsibility that characterised our relations with them when they were in office would characterise their relations with us, but I am afraid that I am disappointed.

Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Following his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins), does my right hon. Friend agree that, given that there is a common monetary policy in the euro area while budgetary policy is, in the main, still in the hands of the 12 nation states, it is not unreasonable for the Commission to argue for more of a common budgetary policy? Otherwise, economic convergence in the euro area will not continue, and the currency will not be stable on the international markets.

The Prime Minister: I agree with the position that is presently being taken in Europe about the degree of co-ordination, but I would point out to my right hon. Friend—as I did to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North a moment ago—that the Commission has supported this Government's Budget. I have to say to my right hon. Friend that we obviously differ on the issue of the single currency. The Government have an established position on that issue, and it is important that we recognise that the single currency is a reality today, and that we deal with that reality.

Q8. [54774] **Mr. David Chidgey** (Eastleigh): What reply would the Prime Minister suggest that my colleagues and I give to the dozens of our constituents who complain that each of them must be one of the only two whom he claims are unfortunate enough to have been waiting more than 15 months for an operation?

The Prime Minister: In the hon. Gentleman's constituency, as in others, health service spending has been increased hugely, far beyond anything that people thought of before. The waiting list figures are drawn up

on precisely the same basis as they were under the Conservative Government, and they are now below the levels that we inherited in 1997.

I would say first to people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, as I say to people elsewhere, let us not exaggerate the number who have to wait. In fact, 75 per cent. of operations are now performed within three months, and the health service has much to be proud of. Secondly, I would say that we agree that there is still a problem with access. The only answer is to increase capacity in the health service. We are doing that with the investment that we are making, which is far in excess of anything that the Liberal Democrats ever wanted us to invest.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): The Prime Minister will know that this is Christian Aid week, and that all over the country people are uniting in support of the Trade for Life campaign to help developing countries. As part of that campaign, I am due to present the Prime Minister with thousands of postcards from my constituents. Will he tell them today that he supports their campaign, and—because it is both morally and economically right—will he do all he can to persuade other world leaders that we must cut a fairer trade deal for people in the developing nations?

The Prime Minister: I entirely agree. I hope very much that as part of the agreement on Africa at the G8, we can secure better provision for access to western markets—to wealthier countries' markets. I also strongly support the work that is being done during Christian Aid week. As the Chancellor has pointed out to me, because of the tax relief available under gift aid the money now goes much further. I am very proud of the work we are doing on aid and development, and I know that it has huge support in the country.

Q9. [54775] **Mr. Paul Tyler** (North Cornwall): Does the Prime Minister agree with the Leader of the House that there is now a centre of gravity in favour of reform of the House of Lords? Will the Government put a proposal in respect of the elected component of the reformed Upper Chamber to the Joint Committee? However, when there is a free vote in this House, will it be like the free vote that took place last night?

The Prime Minister: There will certainly be a free vote, because there are hugely different views across the House. It would be very foolish of anyone to say that there was unanimity in any political party—either in this House or in the other place. We have chosen this way of proceeding because it is what was put to us during consultation by both the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats. We listened, we have engaged with the process, and there will be a free vote at the end of the day—but I ask Members to realise that we will be deciding on the basis of what happens not just for this generation, but for future generations. I think we should act responsibly.

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): Will my right hon. Friend give us some idea of when the dossier, which I believe that he says he has, on the situation relating to weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, will be published? I think it very important for us to have full information before a decision is—we hope—made in the House of Commons.

The Prime Minister: It would certainly be right to publish the dossier before any action was taken. We have not decided when to publish it, but if my hon. Friend or any other Member wants to know what Saddam Hussein has been up to—not the full details, which we can provide in due course if necessary, but the basic case against Saddam—he can already read the published information from the weapons inspectors who were in Iraq, which covers vast amounts of chemical and biological weapons as well as attempts to establish nuclear capability. As I always say, how we deal with the issue is open, but it is without doubt an issue, and there is enough published information to convince anyone of that.

Q10. [54776] **Hywel Williams** (Caernarfon): The Prime Minister is a "vision" sort of guy. What is his vision for Welsh manufacturing industry?

The Prime Minister: The vision is one of stability, and investment in skills and education. I think that despite the problems that manufacturing has experienced in Wales and elsewhere, for obvious reasons to do with the strength of the pound and the weakness of the euro, the single worst thing we could do is either lose control of Government finance or return to the old days of boom and bust—with 15 per cent. interest rates, and 10 per cent. interest rates for a year—or to the days when vast numbers of jobs and a vast amount of output were lost in manufacturing during the two recessions that we experienced under the Conservative Government. My vision is also of continued Labour government in Wales.

Q11. [54777] **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): Will my right hon. Friend join me and other hon. Members who represent seaside and coastal towns in welcoming the decision of the English Tourism Council to renew a marketing role? Will he go further and renew his focus on tourism so that by the time he comes to Blackpool for the Labour party conference in the autumn some of the anomalies in the standard spending assessment that discriminate against seaside towns will have been dealt with?

The Prime Minister: We shall deal with the issues concerning the SSA in due course, as my hon. Friend knows. He is right about tourism, and that is why English local authorities have been given some £90 million to improve their ability to attract tourists. I am delighted to say that despite all the difficulties of last year and the year before, we have a thriving tourism industry and we shall do all we can to support it.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Is the Prime Minister aware that in recent years my home town of Kendal in Cumbria has not only suffered the impact of the foot and mouth crisis, which devastated tourism, to which he has just referred, but lost 352 jobs at AXA, 289 jobs at K Shoes—including 64 last month—and just

yesterday 210 jobs at Scottish Provident? Will he ask his ministerial colleagues to consider the case for urgent extra help for that town?

The Prime Minister: At least the hon. Gentleman did not ask for a public inquiry. The loss of jobs in his and other constituencies is terrible for the people concerned. I understand that. It is precisely why we have taken so many additional measures in the Employment Service and the new deal to make sure that people who lose their jobs are given the chance of finding new ones. I do not think that we or any future Government will be able to tell people, "There is no way you can lose your job. We can protect you." We cannot say that, but we can say, "If you lose your job we will give you the best chance of getting a new one." That is what we are doing in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and other constituencies up and down the country, and that is why today there are about 1.5 million more jobs in the economy than there were five years ago.

National Cancer

3.31 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for cancer services and to establish priority for the treatment of cancer in the allocation of resources within the national health service.

Right hon. and hon. Members could reasonably ask why there is a need for such a Bill, given the Government's positive moves in national health service and cancer services funding since May 1997. Indeed, there are those who argue that we can sit back and wait for it all to happen—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Will hon. Members leave the Chamber quietly please?

Dr. Gibson: There are those who argue that even if the diagnosis rate of one in three becomes one in two, given the increased longevity of the population in this country, we will be covered by current plans. It is also possible that cancer will become a chronic disease, we will live longer with it and advances in medical science will allow us to contain it for longer.

The Government reacted with determination to the Select Committee's July 2000 report on cancer services. They invested in radiotherapy equipment and set up the National Cancer Research Institute, incorporating charities, industry, research councils and Government Departments in a new, exciting partnership that has concentrated on a national strategy to improve cancer services, set up new research programmes, scrutiny of those programmes, advance clinical trials and arrange treatment in our cancer centres and hospital departments.

The Select Committee report also said that long-term continuity of purpose underwritten by an Act had served cancer research well in the USA. On the other side of the big pond, the National Cancer Act 1971 is now the subject of a campaign for revision by the US Senate. It is a robust Act that has stood the test of time. It has ensured that, year in, year out, the US health budget for cancer services and research is ring fenced and given bypass budget status. It has ensured long-term planning independent of bureaucratic delays and battles over funding.

The Bill would, I hope, provide the same in the UK and ensure that we have a truly national cancer programme. It would strengthen and solidify the authority of the National Cancer Research Institute, placing its funding on a statutory basis, thereby enabling it to tackle current problems of the postcode lottery, drug approvals, clinical trials and cancer registration, which is a thorny problem.

To ensure delivery, we might take a leaf from the USA, which is setting up a network of tsars—cancer quarterbacks, as they are called over there—whose remit is to ensure that each patient throughout the nation is guided through the cancer journey, from diagnosis to treatment and care. The success of the USA's programme—to which the need for this Bill is related—involves paying off the debts of medical and nursing students to get them into the system; the training of new researchers, nurses and other groups; further regulation of tobacco sales; and new screening programmes for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer. The list goes on and on.

Although it is true that the financing systems in America are different, I do not mention America because it has a different system of health care provision. Such an initiative should prove easier in this country, because we have just one system: our national health service. American legislation ensures research and clinical development, so treatment and care merge into one another to give better patient benefits. Bill Clinton says that cancer deserves the same respect as the war in Afghanistan, the war against terrorism and the war effort at home. We might decry his use of military terminology in respect of cancer, but the House will get the message.

Year on year, we need to address the problems and to match the excellence achieved in cancer hospitals such as the Royal Marsden and the Christie. As an ex-medical colleague said to me the other day:

"The best cancer services in this country are provided by dedicated cancer hospitals, such as the Marsden, the Christie, etc. In these hospitals people get faster and better investigation and treatment, usually with newer drugs and types of treatment than are available elsewhere. The physicians at these hospitals are the engine room of clinical cancer research in Britain. They provide treatment which cannot be bettered anywhere in the world.

At present, UK clinicians cannot compete with their US colleagues because they are working with their hands tied. It is hard to enter patients into trials."

With national cancer legislation to support the National Cancer Research Institute, we could set up clinical trials comparable with those in the United States. In 1999, America set up breast cancer trials, and had the luxury of being able to compare drugs such as tamoxifen and raloxifen. The Americans put us in the shade with programmes that merge clinical research and treatment.

There is now great confidence—precipitated by the activity of this Government—in the cancer movement and community in this country. What is required is the surety of an ongoing funding mechanism, which would result in the better survival rates and treatments for which we are aiming.

The Bill would provide the necessary stability to ensure that existing cancer structures are funded, and that new initiatives are encouraged year on year. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Dr. Ian Gibson, Joan Ruddock, Miss Julie Kirkbride, Jane Griffiths, Dr. Desmond Turner, Mrs. Patsy Calton, Jonathan Shaw and Sandra Gidley.

NATIONAL CANCER

Dr. Ian Gibson accordingly presented a Bill to make provision for cancer services and to establish priority for the treatment of cancer in the allocation of resources within the National Health Service: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed [Bill 137].

Opposition Day

[13TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Post Office Closures

Mr. Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.38 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I beg to move,

That this House is deeply concerned that, with 10 months left for the transition to automatic credit transfer for the Post Office's 16 million benefit and pension customers, there is great uncertainty and confusion hanging over the network; believes that, in the absence of new sources of income to replace the lost £400 million, many post offices will close, including a third of all urban post offices; is alarmed by reports that new initiatives promised under the PIU Report are failing, in particular that the Your Guide programme is being downgraded and that planning of the Post Office Card Account is well behind schedule; has little confidence that the commercial banks have the ability or motivation to meet the financial needs of many of those Post Office customers expected to migrate to the use of bank accounts; notes that the network's problems coincide with growing losses in Consignia and the threat to its mail services and to the universal service obligation; and calls on the Government to set out a clear policy and timetable for heading off a potentially disastrous collapse of the rural and urban network.

There have been several debates and statements in the House in the past few months on the state of the Post Office, Consignia's losses, job losses, the impact on the universal service obligation, and competition. However, I want today's debate to focus on something that, arguably, is as important, or more so: the future of the network, which comprises 18,000 sub-post offices and their 28 million customers, 16 million of whom depend on the benefit system that operates through sub-post offices.

A big national project is looming—in 10 months, there will be a changeover to the automated credit system. I do not want to be melodramatic, but the project is very big. The technical and commercial challenge is probably on the scale of metrication, or of the millennium bug. It is appropriate for the House to take stock of where the Government have got to with their planning, and of what the consequences will be.

In my business career I was taught never to predict the future but to think in terms of scenarios. I do not know whether the project will be a success or not. It could be a brilliant success, but we need to think of alternatives.

The optimistic view was set out in the performance and innovation unit report at the end of 2000. I supported it, as did most other hon. Members. It was ambitious and forward looking, and dedicated to finding alternative sources of income to make up for the £400 million that will be lost to the network as a result of the introduction of ACT. If the PIU report is implemented in full, or something approaching that, the changeover will have a relatively positive outcome.

According to a different scenario, however, that £400 million in income to the network will not be replaced. Hon. Members who are new to the House might be interested to learn that the consequences of that were set out most graphically in a parliamentary answer three years ago to the former hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington, now Lord Corbett. He achieved what no one else, before or after, has been able to achieve: he secured a constituency breakdown of the number of post office branches, and got the Post Office—and the Government, I guess—to analyse the implications of a loss of income from the post office network of £400 million.

The overall conclusion was that there would be 40 per cent. fewer branches, but results were very skewed. Constituencies such as mine would lose very few branches, but rural constituencies—especially in Wales, Scotland, Devon and Cornwall—would lose a great many. The biggest casualties would be the urban post offices in areas predominantly represented by Labour Members. In some cases, such areas would lose between 70 and 80 per cent. of their post offices.

That was the bleak, doomsday scenario, but a lot has happened since. The PIU report has been published, and we need to take stock of where we have reached.

A problem with the PIU report, and its follow-up, is that it is rather unclear about what is happening. When the Select Committee on Trade and Industry evaluated the PIU report, it gave the rather pithy summary that "much remains unclear". Almost everything that the Select Committee found unclear—the amount of income that the Post Office will get, the way in which the Post Office card account system will be phased in, and the nature of the contract and of the technology—remains unclear and uncertain today. I shall take the Ministers present today through the various steps indicated by the PIU report, and I hope to be able to ask them questions about the matter.

The first point concerns the most interesting, ambitious and forward-looking idea—the "your guide" scheme. Under the scheme, postmasters and postmistresses would become general practitioners dispensing advice and help to customers. They would have the advantage of advanced technology. They would be properly trained and have access to a computer system that would give them local and national data, and they would help people with their transactions.

The system was tested, quite properly, by means of a pilot scheme centred on the constituency of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, among others. The feedback has been rather positive, and shows that some 130,000 people have used the system over the six months during which the pilot has been in operation.

In the past few days, however, I have heard a report that the "your guide" scheme is being ditched because the Treasury has pulled the plug on it. I am anxious to hear the Government's reaction to that.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Patricia Hewitt) *indicated dissent.*

Dr. Cable: I see that the Secretary of State is looking both mystified and negative. I hope that she will be able to reassure the House that the report to which I referred is completely wrong. However, the version given to me by people close to the project is that the Government propose to introduce a system called UK Online. I am not a computer buff—other Members may be more familiar with the significance of this—but UK Online is the Government portal for accessing Government information. It does not have the GP service, the advisory service or the transaction work. If the Secretary of State does not accept this version—judging by her body

language, she does not—I hope that she will reassure us that it is completely wrong. As a result of talking to people close to the project, many post office employees and people in the network have been persuaded that it will happen. I sincerely hope that they are wrong and, from a sedentary position, Ministers seem to suggest that that is the case.

The other, very important, part of the package is the idea of the universal bank and the use of alternative facilities by which people could be paid cash at the post office—a combination of the post office card account, agency facilities for people who have bank accounts and the basic bank account. The importance of this has always been to honour the Government's promise that people should be paid in cash. Whether that would provide a large amount of replacement income was never clear, but perhaps we shall receive clarification on that point today.

Information is available about what the new system could mean for customers. A very good academic study has been carried out by the Department for Work and Pensions. Elaine Kempson and Claire Whyley have performed a detailed analysis of post office customers, what they can cope with and what they expect.

To summarise a complicated study, there are essentially three groups of people who use the network. About 40 per cent. will have no problem with automated credit transfer. They are fully familiar with banking—they use banks, they will not be greatly inconvenienced by the new system and the money will be paid into their normal bank account. These are mainly people who receive child benefit and who are mobile. ACT will not present them with a problem, but it will present the post office with a problem, because those people will, in all probability, stop using their post office branch. That figure of 40 per cent. represents a lot of people—about 8 million.

Another 30 per cent. of people have no problems coping with the ACT idea—they know about banking and have bank accounts—but are very attached to the post office. These are the younger pensioners who may be rather conservative in their habits. They find it convenient to use the post office and want to continue to do so. They want the choice of using the post office, even though they would be perfectly able to use a banking arrangement. If those people are to be accommodated within the new system, there needs to be an efficient arrangement whereby the agency banking, which I believe has been worked out, operates in full. Will the Minister explain how people who want to use the post office as a bank to cash their money will be able to do so?

The technology involved is complex: it means marrying the Horizon technology, which the Government inherited some years ago, with the new technology of the banks. How will that mesh? We are talking about 10 months, which is a short time away. We need reassurance that the system will work and that that 30 per cent. of customers will continue to be able to use the post office as a banking facility without being steered away from it.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): In his researches, did the hon. Gentleman stumble across the civil service phrase "actively managed choice"? I gather that that is now the Government's policy for ensuring that, rather than having a level playing field, people will be channelled into choosing a particular bank account. Does he agree that that makes a complete nonsense of the Government's removal of the so-called cap on the number of post office accounts?

Dr. Cable: It does. I have heard that phrase, which is beginning to percolate through the post office network. The scripts being prepared for customers, which some people have seen, make it clear that unless there are strongly extenuating circumstances, people will be expected to move to a banking service. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that.

The policy affects the people to whom I referred, but the effects would be even greater for the remaining 30 per cent: people who really need the post office. They do not have bank accounts, or they may have a savings account that they do not use for cash transactions. They are often extremely old and frail and are, in the words of the DWP report, "difficult to move".

The DWP study suggests that the number of people in that category is about 5 million. They cannot realistically be expected to move over to a banking system. The concept of the post office card account—a simple alternative—was developed with such people in mind. However, the problem is that the Government have set a target of 3 million such accounts to serve about 5 million people. That may answer the hon. Gentleman's intervention about active management.

What will happen to the 2 million people who want to continue using the post office much as they have always done and who do not want to use banks? How will they cope in the new environment? I think that "active management" means that many of those people will be steered or encouraged to open a bank account, even if it is only the PAT 14, the basic account developed by the banks in recent years.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): I agree completely with the hon. Gentleman's analysis. Does he agree that many of our most elderly and vulnerable pensioners find it extremely difficult to deal with any type of officialdom at any time? Does he share my anxiety that money will be spent on trying to force those people to change over and stop collecting their pension in cash every week? It is a form of coercion. Does he agree that it would be wrong for a penny of Government or Consignia money to be spent on making people—especially the elderly—give up that choice?

Dr. Cable: The hon. Lady is right. I can add nothing to her comments. We are talking about choice on a level playing field. We need reassurance from Ministers that the undertaking given two years ago by the then Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—the current Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions—will be honoured. There are grave doubts about that.

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman says. What happens if the pendulum swings a little further and a vast number of people—more than 3 million—realise that the basic account would be cheaper to run than their normal account and decide to open one? Who will pay the extra costs involved? Will that not worsen the situation and result in even more expense for the Government?

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman touches on a real dilemma. The assumption is that the banks will contribute

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to that process. However, there is much evidence to show that they are not enthusiastic about that—to say the least. It costs them between £60 and £70 a year—that is not the customer service charge—to run such an account. An account is viable for the banks only when it contains a minimum of £1,300, and they have made it clear that they are not really interested in running those basic accounts.

If the Government have any doubts about that point, they should consult the useful blind study carried out a couple of weeks ago by the consumer panel of the Financial Services Authority. It investigated how people shop around between banks and found that only one of the 10 banks even mentioned a basic bank account. Four in 10 people who tried to open a bank account were turned down with no reference to the fact that the basic bank account was on offer. The banks are not interested in the scheme; they do not want to undertake it but they are being pushed into it—that is where the scheme will fail.

Why should the banks be involved? Why have they undertaken to give that service, even though they are reluctant to provide it and their customers are reluctant to take it up? I suspect that it has something to do with some of the points under discussion yesterday in the Select Committee on the Treasury. A group of bankers were interviewed about the Cruickshank report and so-called excess profits in the banking system.

I suspect that the banking community was very worried two years ago that the Government would propose tough regulation through Paycom and perhaps even a windfall tax on the banks. The Government promised to do that, but it never happened and the pressure is now off the banks, as was reflected in the somewhat arrogant tone that their representatives adopted during yesterday's Treasury Committee sitting. The banks are now in a much stronger position in dealing with the Government, but that explains why that process was once encouraged. However, it is difficult to understand how the basic bank account system can accommodate the needs of that substantial group of people.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Does my hon. Friend accept that there is another indirect way in which people are being coerced to change their accounts? For example, just a mile away from here the Elephant and Castle branch office was said to be closing about three years ago. The decision was then deferred, but the closure was announced again. Those involved consulted wrongly, so they had to do it again. The staff were telling people all the time that the branch may not be open in the future, so people were being persuaded to move their accounts elsewhere. Of course, that is self-fulfilling. At the end of an exercise in which an urban post office is threatened with closure, the number of people using it decreases significantly so the case for its staying open is significantly reduced. That is another example of death by 1,000 cuts, which is surely exactly why we need to have clear policy, clear commitment and a belief that people, particularly those without other accounts, should be encouraged to use the Post Office if they wish to do so, not discouraged from doing so.

Dr. Cable: That was a very helpful intervention. I shall come a little later to what is now rather euphemistically called the urban renewal process—the urban closure process would be a more accurate description—and my hon. Friend's comments are highly germane to that.

Let us stick for the moment to the problem of banks. If large numbers of people at the bottom of the income scale move into the banking system with varying degrees of coercion, or voluntary acceptance, a lot of problems will confront them. We know from the work of the FSA and others that there are all kinds of hidden charges—for example, when people are late with direct debits. Vulnerable members of the community can confront all sorts of practical problems if they use banks, but not if they use the Post Office.

Let me take an example from my constituency experience. Two or three years ago, I dealt with a very elderly lady—she was 93 and blind—who was used to using the Post Office for most of her transactions, but who had an account with the Halifax. She sent her carer to a branch of the Halifax to collect some money for an irregular and unusual transaction. The bank staff said, "Sorry. We will only dispense money to people in person. If you are a carer, that is not satisfactory. If you produce a letter from a lawyer, we will release the money to you. Under no circumstance will we release it on any other basis."

Those letters cost £75. I fought the case with the company. I eventually dragged the Halifax through the *Daily Mail* and, with some reluctance and ill-grace, the chief executive gave up. There is no tradition in the banking system of helping vulnerable customers, carers and people who genuinely need help. Very large numbers of people who have been pushed—I think that the phrase is "actively managed"—into the banking system will encounter that problem over and again.

Pulling the threads together, we have been largely considering the affects on the customers, but we have to go back to the fundamental issue: income. How much income will post offices derive from the universal bank and from "your guide"? I have never heard a figure cited for how much money will come in. It could be as little as £50 million, which is the fee paid for the post office card account, but it may be more. Will the Minister tell us, at the end of the negotiations that we have had for 18 months, how much of the £400 million income will be replaced?

If the income is not replaced, or even if it is replaced in part, there will be substantial post office closures. So we now need to consider what is happening in terms of those closures. The fact is that closures have been taking place. In 2000–01, there was a record number of closures—547. The figure fell substantially last year, and the Government drew a lot of encouragement from that, although the sub-postmasters to whom I talk say, "Yeah, sure, we are not selling." They are not selling because they are expecting compensation and because they cannot find buyers. None the less, the Government may well feel justified in the short run in drawing some consolation from the promise of the PIU programme.

What is happening in terms of closures? First, the Government have given an undertaking that they will prevent rural closures, beyond those described as unavoidable. The Labour party manifesto says:

"the Post Office is now obliged to prevent closure of rural post offices except in unavoidable circumstances, with £270 million to help achieve this and recruit sub-postmasters."

The problem is that closures are still happening. Despite the Government's assurance, in the last two years, 80 per cent. of all closures have been in rural areas. There is a programme providing £2 million of help to rural post offices, and several of my colleagues have asked parliamentary questions about that. At the last count, only seven projects had been approved—perhaps the Minister will update us on that—which accounts for a tiny fraction of the £2 million sum.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): On the law of statistical averages, my constituency is clearly a blip. We have had 5 closures in the last 12 months. In every case, the Post Office said that they were not permanent, and that it would do everything that it could to replace them. None of those post offices has reopened, and nobody believes that they will. That is the reality—nobody will take them on because it is not worth the money.

Dr. Cable: That is what unavoidable closures means—the process of closures is continuing, will continue, and once the emptiness of the follow-up to the performance and innovation unit report has been demonstrated, the process of closures will accelerate on a very large scale, and it will happen in rural areas. I hope that the Minister will clarify one aspect of the Labour manifesto statement that I do not understand. It says that £270 million was set aside in the comprehensive spending round for rural post office development. My understanding—which I hope will be corrected—is that £180 million of that has now been siphoned off to compensate postmasters in urban areas. Is that right? Is that money, as was pledged in the Labour party election manifesto, going to sustain the rural network? That is a very important question, as in many cases the rural network is teetering on the brink of collapse. If there is money to sustain it, there is hope, but if there is Enron-type accounting, and the money is being shifted somewhere else, large numbers will collapse. I hope that, at the very least, clarification of that basic point will be given today.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Will the hon. Gentleman accept that, as an extension of what he is saying, we are seeing uncertainty blight on the ground? Postmasters wishing to retire simply cannot sell. This is not just a rural problem; it is now becoming a suburban problem. Corner shops and the post offices that have sustained them are disappearing left, right and centre. That is due entirely to the uncertainty generated by this lack of policy.

Dr. Cable: That is absolutely right. The uncertainty is spreading into the suburbs and the towns.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees that it is vital that we retain post offices, whether in rural areas or in the inner cities, for some of the reasons that he has outlined. Many pensioners and disability groups rely on the local post office, particularly in villages where it can be the focal point of village life.

Dr. Cable: I think that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me, and I take his intervention as constructive. I want to mention one small problem in reference to my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Sue Doughty), who has pointed out that one of the sources of uncertainty is that it is not always terribly clear whether the post office being talked about is urban or rural. She has a village in her constituency called Shalford, which I think has been reclassified as urban to permit a closure to proceed. There may be a conspiracy theory at work, but anyway the post office, which would have been protected under the rural programme, is now being exposed to closure. That kind of device is being used everywhere.

In towns, the Government have an urban renewal programme, which, when it was announced, seemed attractive. We now know, however, as many postmasters have had letters in the last week, that 3,000 of those 9,000 post offices are likely to be closed. In some cases, there may be commercial logic to that. Some post offices are close together, but many of them are not. In Twickenham two years ago, a post office closed for six months after a problem of dishonesty had been discovered. No bus service was available and that meant that many pensioners had to walk a mile in one direction or a mile in another direction to reach another branch. That problem will be repeated many times in urban areas when a third of all branches close.

We now know that the label for the Government's urban renewal programme is desperately misleading. The programme is about closures, and who will decide whether a branch should shut? There will be an arbitration process that will be looked after by Postwatch, but how will that organisation evaluate 3,000 appeals in two years? It does not have the resources, so it cannot be expected to handle that number. Many branches will close willy-nilly.

I would like Ministers to address, in particular, the issue of funding. Under the comprehensive spending review, £270 million has been pledged to the network, so will they explain exactly where that money has gone and where it is going? There is enormous confusion among the beneficiaries about that.

On the general strategy, we are dealing with a big project that could go well—I do not wish to prejudge matters—but it could be a disaster. Let us therefore have a proper system of planning and of targeting objectives. At the moment, there is an enormous lack of clarity about fundamental issues—the technology used in the universal bank and the fees that will be paid. All that should be spelled out much more clearly.

If, as we gather from inside the problem, the problems are as serious as they seem, are the Government giving any thought to spreading the plans for automated credit transfer over a longer period? The Horizon project, which the previous Government introduced, is a precedent. It had to be abandoned at short notice six months before it was due to come in even though the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) still endorsed the project. The technology did not work. That could very well happen again. Would it not be sensible and would it not help if the Government adopted a much more measured and deliberate approach to the introduction of the programme to ease much of the uncertainty and pain that is now felt by postmasters and postmistresses?

4.7 pm

The Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness (Mr. Douglas Alexander): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'applauds the Government's decision to accept all 24 of the PIU recommendations in its June 2000 report "Counter Revolution—Modernising the Post Office Network"; notes that Consignia is committed to preventing avoidable closures of rural post offices and has drawn up a code of conduct on how this is to be implemented in conjunction with the consumer watchdog, Postwatch; further applauds the decision of the Government to grant the greater commercial freedom to Consignia that management and unions had long called for; welcomes the action of the Government in appointing a new chairman of Consignia and a new chief executive of Post Office Ltd. and to enshrine in legislation the primary duty of the regulator to preserve the universal service; further applauds the commitment of the Government to a national network of post offices; and further notes the commitment by Post Office Ltd. to ensure that 95 per cent. of people in urban areas will live within a mile of a post office, and the majority within half a mile.'.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) has reminded the House that the Post Office and the post office network, in particular, are venerable institutions that have long played a central role in communities the length and breadth of the country. In that, at least, he is in agreement with the Government. The Post Office touches lives like no other industry. It has a turnover of more than £8 billion, it delivers 80 million items of post every day and, every week, 28 million customers visit their post office to take advantage of more than 170 different products and services.

I pay tribute to the men and women who work for the Post Office and the post office network. It is no exaggeration to say that the Post Office is one of the strands that helps to bind together our communities, whether urban or rural, across the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman raised several points, and I shall endeavour to address them in my response. I shall try to cover the major issues that he raised in the order in which he raised them. I shall first focus on the network and touch on management, in particular, before addressing the implementation of the performance and innovation unit report. I shall then discuss "your guide", the universal bank and the urban network in particular.

No one doubts that the Post Office faces major challenges. Its tradition of work needs to respond to the challenging and changing requirements of customers, to changes in society and to the opportunities arising from new technology. The hon. Gentleman focused his remarks on the post office network so I shall try to set in context the programme of work that has been taken forward on that.

The Post Office is the largest retail network in Europe and more than nine out of 10 people in this country live within a mile of a post office. It has unrivalled coverage, with more than 17,500 branches the length and breadth of the country. Two thirds of people live within half a mile of two or more post offices. Yet although local post offices are still important to many people, as customers, they are not using them as often. In recent years, there has been a steady decline in the volume of transactions undertaken at post offices as a result of changing habits and lifestyles, changes in customer preferences and new ways of doing business. I have two examples of that. First, the number of telephone bills paid at the post office is down from 39 million in 1996–97 to 32 million in 2000–01. Secondly, the number of postal orders issued is down from 37 million in 1996–97 to 32 million in 2000–01.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): I note the Minister's comments on the decline in business. However, he will recall that that decline, especially in rural areas, spreads beyond the post office, particularly to banks. He may also recall that, a year or so ago, a strong attempt was made—and partly carried out—to get banks that were closing local branches to transfer over-the-counter services to local post offices. That was a great idea that we all applauded and encouraged. Does the Minister realise, however, that the charges made to local post offices for installing, supporting and filling automated teller machines are prohibitive, so that the arrangement costs them money and is falling apart? I asked questions on that in the House and received bland replies about the information being commercially confidential, but post offices are the business of us all, and not just a commercial interest of the Post Office.

Mr. Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that. I am reminded of his contribution to the debate on the Postal Services Act 2000 in which he made it clear that he had long argued from Liberal Democrat Benches

"for greater commercial freedom for the Post Office, and at last such a policy is being set out by the Government".—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 28.]

It ill behoves the hon. Gentleman to suggest that it is inappropriate for Post Office Counters Ltd. and independent banks to engage in commercial negotiations on decisions about ATMs. I have some sympathy with his point, however.

More than 3,000 post offices closed between 1978 and 1997. During the 1990s, the number of post offices declined by 10 per cent. By way of comparison, banks and building societies declined in the same 10-year period by 25 per cent. and the number of petrol stations declined by 30 per cent. It was therefore vital after those decades when the Post Office was a neglected national resource to develop a strategy and an action plan to secure the future of the post office network, which I believe we all want to see. That is why, in October 1999, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister asked the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit to develop the strategy that we are discussing. The specific challenge for the report was to consider how best to harness the full potential of the network to ensure a viable and vibrant future for the network.

In response to the statement to the House on 28 June 2000 that marked the publication of the PIU report, the hon. Member for Twickenham was kind enough to welcome it, and he acknowledged:

"A similarly comprehensive approach adopted 20 years ago at the beginning of Conservative rule might have prevented the closure of many of the 4,000 branches which have closed."—[*Official Report*, 28 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 912.]

The report made 24 recommendations and the Government accepted each of them. Working closely with the Post Office and the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, we are implementing those measures as we advance our goal of ensuring the future of the national network.

Dr. John Pugh (Southport): I have an advantage because I have a Labour party briefing prepared by the

Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, which says that it is the Government's desire to create bigger, better post offices. Does the Minister agree that there is some confusion in that statement? Bigger is not necessarily better because it may be more remote and anonymous with longer queues.

Mr. Alexander: The no doubt well-written briefing was making a serious point. Some urban post offices face a challenge fundamentally different from that facing rural post offices. The nature of the challenge in a rural community where the post office is perhaps the last retail outlet in a village is fundamentally different from the plethora of retail outlets available on an urban high street. It is therefore particularly important that we ensure that the retailing experience of people who visit post offices in the urban network is outstanding. Frankly, judging from many of our own constituency experiences, it would be fair to say that the urban network has not kept pace with many other retail networks in ensuring exactly such an experience.

Simon Hughes: I accept what the Minister says, and that is the experience of many of us and of our constituents. Will he therefore, after the debate, consider the example that I cited to my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable)? The local community has proposed making a branch office into a sub-office, with a local business leading. Another community, the Latin American community, and other retail businesses would be involved. However, the Post Office will not tell the proponent and the community on what grounds it is rejecting her proposal to run the business. It would be an innovative business, it stems from a desire to regenerate, and it would be a flagship for the Post Office. Yet we are told that it is unacceptable, for no published reason. Will the Minister consider that matter, because the Post Office really must do better?

Mr. Alexander: Certainly I am concerned by the example that the hon. Gentleman cites. I will be more than happy to make representations directly to the Post Office management, if information that rightfully should be shared with the community is not being shared. Only yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear in a newspaper article our ambition to see exactly that kind of innovative solution being devised to address the needs of the modern network.

Perhaps I could focus the debate by moving it on from the issue of spending, which I shall return to when I deal with the specific points raised. Alongside the commitment of resources, £270 million, we have in recent months moved decisively to strengthen the management of Consignia. As is well known, in March, the Secretary of State announced that Allan Leighton had been appointed the new chair of Consignia. He is now responsible for driving forward the management strategy to meet the challenges of stemming the company's losses, reforming its industrial relations and developing its strategy to strengthen and sustain the network. As a former chief executive of Asda, Allan Leighton has the proven track record of success in business that I think will find favour with the Post Office. He has the determination, drive and energy needed to transform the management of the Post Office. As the interim chair and a non-executive director of the company, he has seen at first hand many of the challenges that it faces.

In addition, last month we appointed David Mills to the newly created post of CEO of Post Office Counters Ltd., with a seat on the board of Consignia Holdings. He joins the network from HSBC, where he was general manager of personal banking. For far too long, the network's management failed fully to realise the commercial and retailing opportunities offered by the reach of the country's largest retail network.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): The Minister has named the gentlemen from Asda and HSBC who joined the board of Consignia, but does he accept that much of the post office network is made up of small sub-post offices, and those gentlemen do not necessarily have the business experience to get them up and running and keep them going?

Mr. Alexander: I shall try to answer that general question with a specific answer. In one of my first conversations with David Mills after his appointment as CEO of Post Office Counters Ltd., he drew a clear parallel between the present availability and range of products in sub-post offices and those in an equivalent banking facility. To sustain the margin for sub-postmasters in rural communities, which often have small outlets, we must ensure that the margin is appropriate for the number of products stocked in the institution. To that extent, exactly the expertise and leadership that David Mills has brought to bear within the bank could be of direct relevance to some of the individual sub-post offices about which the hon. Gentleman expresses concern.

I would make a further point, however. It is a matter of regret that, over time, relations between individual sub-postmasters and the management of Post Office Counters Ltd. have not been as fruitful and co-operative as they might have been. Among other things, I hope that David Mills will rise to the challenge of ensuring that there is confidence throughout the network of sub-post offices that someone in Consignia is batting for them and arguing the case for the network. That is why the Secretary of State ensured not only that, for the first time, we appointed a chief executive to the network, but that he had a place on the main board of Consignia.

Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale): My hon. Friend rightly holds strong views on the management of the Post Office, and he wants to ensure that it is very good. Does he have any views on the postal regulator, Postcomm? Have the Government responded to Postcomm's consultation, or do they feel that the consultation has nothing to do with them?

Mr. Alexander: When I was before the Select Committee on Trade and Industry recently, I narrated precisely the arrangements that were established as a result of the Postal Services Act 2000. One of the elements of that package, which, I remind the House, was supported by the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives as well as Labour Members, and recommended by the Trade and Industry Committee in a previous report, was that greater commercial freedom be given to the Post Office. Consistent with that greater commercial freedom was the recognition of the need for a regulator to balance the new public policy framework that was set down.

I note in passing that at the time of the passage of the 2000 Act, the Communication Workers Union urged the Government to establish "as independent as possible"

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a regulator at the time that the new framework for postal services markets was established. It is therefore entirely appropriate that, consistent with my responsibilities in e-commerce where I have an informal but continuous dialogue with Oftel and its director general, David Edmonds, I meet the chairman of Postcomm regularly and informally.

On the other hand, it would be unwise of the Government to get themselves into the position of trying to second-guess the challenge that Postcomm faces. Let me make that challenge clear. In the Postal Services Act, we set down two principal responsibilities for the regulator: first, to maintain the universal service obligation, and thereafter to introduce competition to assist consumers, cognisant of that primary duty to uphold the universal service obligation.

Geraldine Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Alexander: If my hon. Friend will allow me to answer her question in my own terms, I will give way to her afterwards, if she thinks that that will be helpful.

I emphasise the fact that in my discussions with the regulator I have made it clear that the Government consider the regulator to be obliged to uphold its responsibilities, in particular in connection with the universal service obligation. On the other hand, Postcomm's deliberations are based on a wide range of information: representations have been received from the CWU and from Consignia itself. It is therefore essential that a clear evidential basis be established for the decisions that Postcomm ultimately reaches, and we have been keen to communicate to Postcomm the importance of a fruitful dialogue between itself and the company from which many of its figures are drawn. On that basis, there are grounds to be optimistic that a fruitful dialogue is now taking place between Consignia, not least about the volume of market that Postcomm is contemplating opening up, and that Postcomm is fully cognisant of its responsibilities, consistent with its duties set down in the Postal Services Act.

I emphasise that the proposals outlined by Postcomm at the end of January were precisely that—proposals—and that further discussions have since taken place between all of the interested parties.

Geraldine Smith: All the universal service obligation demands of the postal service is that there is one delivery and one collection each day. Will the Minister make it clear that he expects the service provided by the Post Office to be far greater than that? Currently, there are several collections a day from urban post offices, and two deliveries a day in urban areas. Is the basic one delivery and one collection a day all that the Minister is demanding through the universal service obligation?

Mr. Alexander: The obligation under which Consignia operates is set down in the licence granted by the regulator Postcomm. However, in my conversations with Consignia I have consistently made it clear that, given that competition is starting to come to its business, it is vital that it offer outstanding service to its customers. It is precisely the sort of innovation in services to customers that is now being discussed that will give Consignia advantages. Based on the universal service that is currently enjoyed, there is considerable scope—given appropriate management who have the capacity to recognise the opportunity—to tailor services to the needs of individual customers. That is why it is essential that in the network and in Consignia itself there is leadership that is capable of driving forward that agenda and realising the full potential of the company that I described at the beginning of my speech.

Mr. Page: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Weir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Alexander: I have been generous in giving way so far, and consistent with my obligations to the hon. Member for Twickenham, I should make some progress.

The hon. Gentleman specifically mentioned the "your guide" pilot. As he said, the Post Office has been piloting the concept of post offices as government general practitioners in Leicester and Rutland. The aim is to test the concept of the post office acting as a one-stop, first-shop facility providing advice and access to transactions within a range of public and voluntary sector organisations. The Government invested £25 million in that major pilot, which ran from July last year until March this year.

During the pilot, the post offices concentrated on a number of limited key services to their core customers, which included advice, information, transactions in broad areas of retirement, seeking work and local information. The service includes advice and information on pensions, other benefits, job vacancies, local transport, interface with local government and many more services besides.

The Leicester and Rutland pilot takes forward the recommendation in the performance and innovation unit report. The outcome of the pilot is now being fully evaluated by the Post Office with those organisations participating in the pilot and by the Government. The evaluation is examining the extent to which the "your guide" concept can deliver services that citizens really want and need, and the extent to which "your guide" can provide value for money for Government Departments and other organisations using it as a channel to offer their services directly to the public. That includes examining the extent to which those organisations achieve efficiency savings and the extent to which "your guide" services can improve the ability of Government Departments to meet their service objectives.

The evaluation process has included gathering data, manually and electronically, the conduct of surveys within and beyond the pilot area, and the gathering of qualitative data via focus groups, discussion groups and feedback sessions involving the public, sub-postmasters and stakeholder organisations, including central and local government.

All the evidence has been drawn together by a central evaluation team, which includes members of the office of the e-envoy. As the Minister responsible, along with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, for UK Online, I fear that there may be some confusion in the mind of the hon. Member for Twickenham as to the role that those services can provide. We are confident that there is at least potential to draw on the expertise of the e-envoy's

office in exactly this type of service provision online in evaluating the "your guide" pilot. I simply do not recognise the kind of conspiracy that the hon. Gentleman seems to be suggesting in drawing from within Government exactly the expertise that we need to make effective the evaluation that is being carried out.

Dr. Cable: I agree that we should put conspiracies behind us. Do I take the Minister's endorsement as an indication that the Leicester pilot study will now be rolled out across the country?

Mr. Alexander: I make it clear to the House that, consistent with remarks I made in the Adjournment debate on 18 December 2001, the evaluation will be completed by June. Given all the complaints that I have heard from Liberal Democrats today about the need for effective project management, it would be irresponsible to prejudge exactly the kind of evaluation that was absent from the horizon project for all those years, causing such profound and real problems. A full and robust evaluation of the pilot outcomes is necessary to inform future planning for the network. Given that a range of departments and organisations are involved, and that they would pay for the national service, the decision must, by definition, be made collectively. Unlike the Liberal Democrats, I would argue that full evaluation in line with best practice, project management and public procurement cannot be rushed. There are rules to which we must adhere for any major project of this kind.

Let me deal now with the points raised by the hon. Member for Twickenham and set out how the management of Post Office Ltd. will drive forward innovations necessary for the network. The hon. Gentleman spoke at some length about banking. Universal banking services, together with the Post Office's plans for an expansion of network banking—the provision of counter services for ordinary current accounts—should lead to a substantial increase in the range and volume of banking at post offices, tapping into a much larger customer base than benefit recipients alone. David Mills' long experience in the banking sector equips him well to lead those developments.

The trend for existing network banking already shows strong growth. Excluding Alliance and Leicester's post office business, the average daily number of transactions grew from under 20,000 in April 2000 to more than 40,000 at the end of 2001–02.

Mr. Weir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Alexander: I am keen to make some progress.

Management is also keen to provide new financial services, such as household insurance, which proved a huge success in a recent pilot project. The Post Office management sees this as only the start and is in discussions with all the major banks to expand and improve the network banking services.

On the specific issue of universal banking services, progress is being made and the work is being taken forward for their introduction next year when the migration of benefit payments to ACT is scheduled to begin. The Department for Work and Pensions, given its key role in delivering pensions and benefits, is co-ordinating the work to modernise the payment of pensions and benefits along with the introduction of banking services through post offices. The Department of Trade and Industry continues to be responsible for progressing the universal bank project in relation to the post office network and the DWP for the benefits being paid efficiently.

The Department for Work and Pensions, together with the Inland Revenue and the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency, is now finalising contractual terms with the Post Office for provision of the post office card account. All the major banks have agreed to make their own basic bank accounts accessible at post offices. Of course, that agreement is now subject to detailed commercial negotiations between the Post Office Ltd. and the banks about wider access to their bank accounts.

The hon. Member for Twickenham mentioned yesterday's Treasury Committee hearing. It is at least worthy of note that the chief executives of the big four banks—Matthew Barratt of Barclays, Bill Doulton of HSBC, Peter Ellwood of Lloyds TSB and Fred Goodwin of the Royal Bank of Scotland, who hails from my part of the world in Paisley—gave evidence to the Committee. According to press reports, their evidence affirmed those banks' commitment to offering basic bank accounts and providing funding for universal banking services. With respect, I suggest that the hon. Gentleman read the transcript when it becomes available, given the anxiety that he has expressed about the banks' commitment to the project.

Mr. Waterson: I thank the Minister for giving way; he has been generous in doing so. Will he confirm that his Department now has a policy of so-called actively managed choice? What does that mean?

Mr. Alexander: The hon. Gentleman anticipates the point that I was about to make. Simultaneously with the commercial negotiations that are being taken forward with the major banks, the Government are now developing a detailed migration and marketing strategy for the transition to ACT. The emphasis of the ACT migration and marketing strategy will be to ensure that each customer has the best account for his or her circumstances. Conventional and basic bank accounts offer more services and do not have the limitations of a post office card account, so they are likely to be the best option for certain people.

Our operational assumption as we progress universal banking services—the hon. Member for Twickenham alluded to this point—is that about 3 million benefit and tax credit recipients will open a post office card account, but I reiterate that there will be no cap on numbers or eligibility criteria for such an account. The choice of 3 million people as our operating assumption reflects the fact that that is broadly the number of current benefit claimants who are without a bank account that is capable of receiving payments by ACT. I know that a number of points have been made about that issue, but it is worth pointing out that, in accordance with our desire to advance social inclusion, we are keen for people to move from a sector that is unbanked and into the banking sector so that they can enjoy the other benefits that currently fall only to people in that sector.

I regret that the hon. Member for Twickenham talked down the urban post office network. In preparing for this debate, I noted that he was quoted on 17 December in

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The Birmingham Post as asserting without any apparent evidence that there was a serious threat to basic services such as house-to-house delivery, the uniform tariff throughout the UK and the network of sub-post offices. Those remarks strike a very clear contrast with the words of Colin Baker, general secretary of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, who dismissed as "rubbish" recent newspaper reports of mass post office closures. Regrettably, such newspaper reports appear to be precisely those on which the hon. Gentleman relied for his speech.

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): A terrible smell is emanating from the Labour Front Bench this afternoon—that of hypocrisy. Back in 1997, the Minister and I campaigned to prevent the Tories' proposed privatisation from going ahead. Some 4,000 post offices had closed. Under Labour, 1,405 post offices have already closed in five years and there are 3,000 more to go. How on earth can he justify that? He should intercede and start to bat for rural communities and the post offices that are closing all the time.

Mr. Alexander: As the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench colleague was generous enough to recognise, we took specific steps that were consistent with the PIU report to advance the sustainability of the rural network. That is why rural transfer advisers are working throughout the country where there is a threat to such a post office. It is also exactly why we have established the £2 million fund that I shall happily talk about later and strengthened the management as necessary to provide exactly the retailing opportunities that we need. I give greater credence to the further remarks of Colin Baker, who said:

"Talk of mass closures is scaremongering and wide of the mark".

He went on to say:

"It is wrong to criticize the industry for being out of date and in decline and then create panic when we are doing something about it".

I fear that that is exactly the sort of panic that the Liberals seek to stimulate. There may be mergers or relocations of branches as a result of the progress that is being made—that will allow sub-postmasters to invest in exactly the kind of improved services for urban areas that I mentioned—but only in urban and suburban areas that are densely populated with post offices and are experiencing duplication of services. In fact, as a serious contribution to the debate, the PIU strategy identified particular needs of the network in both rural and urban areas.

The rural post office network had been slowly contracting for the previous 20 years. The Government are committed to ensuring that it is maintained. The importance of rural post offices cannot be underestimated. Often, they are the last remaining local shop, providing a vital service and acting as a focal point for the local community, as I said in response to the remarks made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes). To protect rural post offices, the Government placed a formal requirement on the Post Office to maintain the rural network and to prevent any avoidable closures of rural post offices. However, despite their best endeavours—it is important to be clear about this with the House—neither the Government nor the Post Office can guarantee that no post offices will ever close. Even the Liberal Democrats would think twice before making such a commitment. It very much depends on the local community that is using the facility and the willingness of a sub-postmaster to continue to run the business or to achieve its sale on the basis of its being a going concern.

The hon. Member for Twickenham asked about the £2 million fund to support volunteer or community initiatives, and I am happy to give him the information he seeks. I have to say that the thinking behind that scheme gave me concern, on the basis of the point raised by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. The fund was established to maintain or reopen rural post office facilities. Let me give the latest figures. At the end of April this year, 88 applications had been submitted. Of those, 46 grants to a total value of £390,000 have been approved. The fund is expected to provide the impetus for maintaining or reopening up to 200 offices nationwide over a two-year period.

I point out to hon. Members that, in direct contrast to the uniformly bleak picture painted by the Liberal Democrats, over the last financial year from March 2001–02 there has been a significant and welcome reduction in the number of closures. In the year to the end of March 2002, there were 262 net closures, compared with 547 in the previous year.

The Government recognise that it is not just in rural areas that post offices play an important community role. We want to maintain convenient access and to improve the quality of post offices in our towns and cities, as well as in the countryside. Under pressure from the changes in the pattern of retailing that I described, the quality of many post offices and associated retail businesses has declined in urban areas over recent years. I am sure that that point will be well taken by many hon. Members in relation to their experience in their constituencies. We believe that the best way to address that is for the Post Office to work closely with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters to reverse the years of underinvestment, as the PIU recommended.

The hon. Member for Twickenham asked about the urban reinvention programme. The purpose of that programme is to ensure that there are post offices equipped to offer the quality of services that customers need in the right locations to serve urban communities, where at present some two thirds of the population live within half a mile of two or more post offices. Indeed, in some areas there can be up to eight to 10 post offices within a single square mile, some located within a few hundred yards of each other.

I first inform the hon. Gentleman that the programme has not yet started. Decisions on individual offices will be based on detailed, local studies, the preferences of the sub-postmasters concerned and the outcome of consultation with Postwatch and those sub-postmasters. I should add that the programme will be carefully tailored to the circumstances of each locality to ensure that post offices meet the high expectations of customers and that they are in the right locations for their communities. Special provision to sustain and improve vulnerable offices in deprived urban areas is being made under a separate fund operated by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. Funding for the programme is subject to approval under European state

aid rules and scrutiny by Parliament. Indeed, before the programme starts there will be the opportunity for Parliament to debate it.

Dr. Cable: Can the Minister clarify the specific point about the funding arrangements? Will the £180 million compensation package come out of the £280 million that was pledged for the renewal and sustenance of the network, or is an additional sum?

Mr. Alexander: The £270 million that was allocated in the previous comprehensive spending review was to implement the recommendations of the PIU report. They included a range of working programmes. One was urban reinvention, and another was the pilot that I mentioned. It is worth £25 million in terms of "your guide". Further work to support the rural network will be done, and we are determined to ensure that, if additional support is necessary, there will be a process whereby it can be considered as and when it is required.

There is no dispute about the fact that, in every part of the operation, the Post Office needs to adapt to new challenges. The public want it to provide world-class postal services and a thriving post office network fit for the 21st century. The Government want a universal service on which everyone can rely, with faster, more reliable mail deliveries, a strong network of modern post offices, and an effective partnership between management and the unions. We want a better Post Office for people to work in.

Standing still, as some suggest, is not an option. The business must move forward, tackle its shortcomings, and tailor its services to changing customer demands. The Government are implementing the terms of the PIU report and underpinning that by committing resources and strengthening management.

We cannot turn the clock back, but, with the right management, proper investment, the right support and the backing of customers and communities, we can realise the full potential of the Post Office in future. I urge the House to support the amendment.

4.40 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): So we have yet another debate on the Post Office, or Consignia, as we have come to know it. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing the discussion. It is unusual to hold regular debates about a company in the private sector; it is even more unusual when that company is doing well. However, despite the hot air about commercial freedom, the Post Office remains mired in the public sector and its attitudes to innovation and service.

The Independent got it right when it stated:

"The problem is that this Government has spent too much of its time trying to make public entities like the Post Office behave like private companies and private companies such as Railtrack behave like the old nationalised industries. Such contortions suggest at the very least that, for all their unhealthy closeness to businessmen and wealth entrepreneurs, New Labour does not really understand business and enterprise."

I am sorry to see that the Post Office's sole shareholder has left us, doubtless for something that she considers more important.

Another reason for continually holding such debates is that the Post Office is, sadly, in deep trouble. It is a failing company. That was not always so: the Post Office made a profit in every year of Conservative government. As *The Guardian* stated:

"Less than 10 years ago, the Post Office was perceived as the best of its kind in the world. Unlike its European competitors it was profitable, its delivery performance was top of the international league table and its then Chief Executive boasted of the workforce as his '200,000 in-house consultants' and 'ambassadors to the public', for whom the 'postie' was trusted and respected."

The postie continues to be trusted and respected, but the Post Office is in deep trouble.

The Post Office loses £1.5 million a day and plans to shed at least 30,000 jobs. It has endured dreadful industrial relations and continues to miss its delivery targets. Some parts of the country go for days on end without a delivery. The Post Office is scrapping the second delivery and the early collection. If that were not bad enough, it is losing 1 million items of mail a week, according to the watchdog. It has been suggested that only one delivery a day should be made to private addresses at or around lunch time. That will affect hundreds of thousands of small businesses especially badly.

One of the most worrying aspects is the deterioration in the network of sub-post offices, which have been closing at an ever increasing rate with a record number of closures—547—last year. An average post office branch could lose 40 per cent. of its turnover overnight when benefits payments cease next April. The closure rate has decreased in the year to April 2002, and that is welcome, but the Government should not take too much comfort from that because there are problems of disposal and sale, and people are hanging on in the hope of receiving compensation. Of the 262 post offices that closed, 194 were rural sub-post offices. This is therefore a network in decline.

What has the Government's reaction been? They have set up a programme of so-called reinvention of the urban network. They have not, of course, fulfilled conclusion 6 in the PIU report, which proposed the production of a report by autumn 2001 about the future of the rural sub-post office network. I would like the Minister to tell us when we can expect those proposals to be brought forward.

The sad truth is that most of the money that has already been earmarked, particularly for the urban network, is actually being used to close it down, rather than to keep it open or even to expand it. The most serious problem, however, is that the Government have, as yet, no clear strategy to deal with the future of that network.

Dr. Pugh: I am having difficulty following the thread of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. He began strongly by saying that he thought the flaw in Consignia was that it was not acting sufficiently like a private company, and that it was too wedded to a public service ethos. If it is going to act exactly like a private sector company, should it not be released from the burden of a universal service obligation—private companies do not have such obligations—and left free to close what branches it wishes, if it is to work as a commercial operation? We would argue that neither of those things should happen, but the hon. Gentleman does not seem to be capable of arguing that.

Mr. Waterson: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman has been following my speech closely enough. He seems

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to be confusing two things. Overwhelmingly, the network of sub-post offices has nothing to do with Consignia; most of them are owned by private individuals who have opened them up using their own savings, perhaps from redundancy payments or whatever, collected over some years. Those are the people we are talking about.

The hon. Gentleman made a rather more important point on the universal service obligation, but he must remember that, at the moment, the Post Office is not meeting that obligation in some parts of the country. It is certainly not meeting its obligation on next-day delivery of first-class mail. Under the Postcomm proposals, any new private company entering the post office market would, I am sure, be equally obliged to fulfil the universal service obligation.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) *rose—*

Mr. Weir *rose—*

Mr. Waterson: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Carmichael: To whom are you giving way, Sir?

Mr. Waterson: Let me see. I shall give way to the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael).

Mr. Carmichael: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would be kind enough to answer a question that I asked him when this matter was last debated in Westminster Hall. Is the Conservative party in favour of the deregulation proposals that Postcomm currently has out for consultation?

Mr. Waterson: The hon. Gentleman has indeed asked me that before, and he will get almost exactly the same answer—I hope—which is that we think that the Postcomm proposals contain a lot of interesting issues. It is for the Government to form a view on them, but most importantly, it is a matter for the regulator.

Mr. Carmichael: What is your view?

Mr. Waterson: I shall deal with Postcomm's proposals in some detail, so if—unlike some hon. Members—the hon. Gentleman can stay for most of the debate, I may be able to assist him. The reality is that we do not know what kind of shambles we shall inherit after the next election. It is clear, however, that by then Postcomm's proposals will long since have been implemented in the postal system.

Mr. Weir: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Waterson: I want to make a little more progress, then I shall be happy to give way again.

The Government seem to be involved in managing the decline of the network, and this process is being supervised by Postwatch, the consumer watchdog. I would like the Minister to deal with an issue raised, I think, by the hon. Member for Twickenham. Does he think that Postwatch is being properly resourced to carry out that task?

We have 10 months in which to complete the transition to automated credit transfer. Most people in the industry are very dubious as to whether that will be possible, from a technical point of view, within that time scale. The reality is that an awful lot of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses have to be trained, and their customers have to be put in a position to be able to use the new equipment. At the same time, however, despite the Minister's repeating the promise that there is to be no cap on the number of people holding post office accounts, we have now discovered that the Government have a working figure of 3 million, by contrast with the 16 million potential customers, on existing figures.

We also know that the Government are now pursuing a policy of actively managing choice. That is a wonderful civil service phrase, but to me it sounds a bit like persuading people—possibly elderly or vulnerable—that they need one sort of account rather than another. If the Government are successful in their policy of actively managed choice, that means that, on any view, the footfall for the average post office will not return to anything like the levels of the recent past.

I think there are serious concerns here, and so does the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters. The Minister enjoyed quoting some things said by Mr. Colin Baker of that organisation, but in its briefing for the debate the organisation also says this:

"We shall campaign vigorously against proposals to influence people's choice or make pensioners and child beneficiaries justify why they want a post office card account".

It goes on to say:

"We share the concern of many parliamentarians that the Universal Bank may not be in place by April 2003, in time for the introduction of ACT".

Those are very worrying statements.

The NFSP also says:

"Twenty-eight million customers currently make 45 million visits to post offices every week."

The briefing concludes:

"The UK's 18,000 SubPostmasters remain extremely worried about their future and their continuing ability to provide their services to 18 million customers."

I can only assume that the Minister was quoting a different Colin Baker.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Earlier in the debate, the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness mentioned yesterday's Select Committee meeting. When questioned, the big four banks admitted that doing business through the post offices and universal bank, and new basic bank accounts, was very good for them and would extend much further a banking system that had been retrenched in recent years. Would that not help the post offices?

Mr. Waterson: I think it would if that were genuinely the case, but I have formed the same impression as the hon. Member for Twickenham—that this is not the sort of business the banks really want, or would seek if they were not being put under intense pressure to help the Government out. Once they get wind of the fact that the

Government are trying to cajole people into going for the bank rather than the post office option, the matter may well be reopened by the banks themselves.

We should remember that the regulator was established by this very Government, as an independent regulator. We should also remember that two aims featured in all the detail of the Postcomm proposals. The first is improving services for consumers. As I said earlier, in many respects Consignia—the Post Office as it currently is—is not fulfilling even its current service requirements. The second, although it does not seem to be seen in this way, is safeguarding the future of the Post Office, or Consignia.

In its briefing, Consignia says:

"We accept that greater competition will spur us on to be innovative, improve our customer service and become more efficient."

The only issue between it and the regulator seems to be the pace at which the market is to be opened. The regulator takes the view that competition will encourage efficiency and innovation. That has certainly been true in other countries where postal services have been opened up, and in other parts of our own national life and economy.

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): Now that the hon. Gentleman has returned to the subject of the Postcomm proposals, and given his signal failure to answer the question posed by the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael), may I put the question in another way? I accept that, as a member of an Opposition party, he is entitled to say, "We do not answer questions now; we will wait until we are in government". In the case of these proposals, however, he can do something. He, like anyone else, can put his views to Postcomm. Has the Conservative party put its views on the proposals to the regulator, and if so, what was the content of its representations?

Mr. Waterson: If I thought about it, I would be rather flattered by the desire of hon. Members on both sides—albeit with similar accents; hence my initial difficulty in identifying the hon. Gentleman—to know our policy. It cannot have escaped his attention that barely a year ago we lost a general election, but let me remind him that we are firmly on record as saying that we are in favour of competition, although for better or worse the Ministers here today will have to deal with Postcomm's recommendations. I should add that many of the submissions from Consignia and from the union that oppose the Postcomm proposals seem pretty threadbare intellectually.

Despite all the problems, the Post Office had one priceless asset that could not be destroyed even by inept management, bolshie unions or interfering Ministers—the brand. The names of the Post Office and the Royal Mail were recognised throughout the country and the world. They were up there with Coca-Cola and Microsoft. So the Post Office decided to destroy the brand at a stroke by renaming itself Consignia—at a cost of £2 million, to boot. Now even the chairman of Consignia and the Secretary of State admit that it was a mistake. In an article in the *Daily Express* only yesterday, the Secretary of State made the same point again. It is inconceivable that Ministers did not give their approval to the name change.

We have heard pious words of concern from the Secretary of State, who seems finally to have woken up to the dire problems facing the Post Office. As she said in yesterday's *Daily Express:*

"The Post Office has simply failed to adapt to modern life . . . more changes will be needed, affecting the consumer as well as staff."

I am sorry to upset the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Geraldine Smith), but the Secretary of State also said:

"I think consumers would accept it if it guaranteed one reliable delivery every day."

She also mentioned the possibility of a pay rise, and her great new idea to save the Post Office from its losses of £1.5 million a day:

"postmen could collect and deliver cash . . . and sell stamps"

on the doorstep. That should make all the difference.

Little did Post Office managers or workers or the British public realise that while the Secretary of State was uttering pious sentiments about improving the Post Office, she was secretly planning to flog it off to the highest bidder.

Earlier this year, my noble Friend Baroness Miller pressed DTI Ministers in another place. In reply to her question on 21 March about whether there were negotiations on selling Consignia to TPG, which operates the Dutch post office, Lord Sainsbury said:

"I have heard of no such suggestion."

In answer to a subsequent question from Lady Blatch he said:

"I know of no negotiations which are taking place to sell the post office network, which I assume is the point of the question. I have no indication that any negotiations have ever taken place on that."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 March 2002; Vol. 632, c. 1471-73.]

The following week, reports surfaced about the TPG group's interest in Consignia, and on 26 March the Secretary of State replied to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale) as follows:

"There are no proposals to sell Consignia Holdings, its mails business, Parcelforce or the network of post offices."—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2002; Vol. 382, c. 800W.]

She could not have been clearer.

Unfortunately it emerged later that that answer was not strictly accurate and that Lord Sainsbury had been even less accurate. He had to admit to the Lords on 30 April:

"I believe that the answer now is 'Yes, there were merger discussions. However, as I explained then, I was not aware of those discussions at the time."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 April 2002; Vol. 634, c. 569.]

Of course, we must give Lord Sainsbury the benefit of the doubt and assume that he is right to say that he knew nothing about those negotiations. However, it is equally clear that detailed talks on selling Consignia—our Post Office—to the Dutch post office took place for some eight months.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend seems to be making a very serious allegation. Is he saying that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry gave a less than full answer to his question, which could be described as misleading and economical with the truth?

Mr. Waterson: I am sure that my hon. Friend is not trying to put words in my mouth, but the phrase

"There are no proposals to sell Consignia"

is pretty uncompromising. As I said, we now know that serious and detailed discussions took place for some eight months. Even if the Dutch post office is now out of the frame, one wonders about other negotiations that might involve selling Consignia to Deutsche Post or to any number of other interested organisations.

The sad truth is that the Government cannot find a buyer for our Post Office. The ultimate humiliation is that, under their stewardship, no one wants to buy it. As the Post Office staggers from crisis to crisis under this Government, it will not be long before it cannot even be given away.

5.1 pm

Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I commend the Liberal Democrats for bringing these matters before the House. I have no doubt that the provision of postal services and the long-term viability and survival of Consignia hang in the balance. Having examined the Liberal Democrats' proposal, I can find nothing wrong with it, so I will join them in the Lobby.

The postal industry faces ever-increasing competition from various forms of electronic document transmission, a slowdown in the growth of traffic and the impending liberalisation of postal services throughout Europe, and it needs to undertake a radical review of its entire operation to meet those challenges. All who work in the industry are aware that change is inevitable; indeed, they have grown accustomed to it, given that the postal industry has been changing continuously for the past two decades. The industry would have faced such changes and challenges regardless of whether the Post Office had remained a publicly owned corporation, rather than a publicly owned plc.

The restructuring of the loss-making parcels business and the transfer of the universal parcel service back to Royal Mail is long overdue. I have every sympathy for the staff who will be affected by that change, but the initiative is nevertheless welcome. Parcelforce was split from Royal Mail under the previous Conservative Government simply in order to be sold off, and it was right to bring the two back together. Much has been said today about the radical review and restructuring of the counters network, which is being developed in close co-operation with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters. It is critical to the prosperity and sustainability of the network, and although some of the changes will prove difficult, they are necessary.

Those are just two brief examples of the changes and challenges that the postal business has undergone for many years, and which would have occurred regardless of the operating company's status. It is important to remind ourselves that, despite the difficulties and continual changes that postal workers have faced, in terms of cost, range of services and reliability, they have literally delivered for us the best value-for-money service in Europe. Since 1993, the cost of a first-class stamp has risen by just 7 per cent. and the price of a second-class stamp has not risen at all. Given that the retail prices index has risen by 25 per cent. over the same period, that is a remarkable achievement, and a credit to British postal workers.

I understand that Consignia is currently contemplating asking for an increase of 1p in both first and second-class postage, although it has not made a formal application. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness will clarify the matter. However, I urge Consignia to apply for the increase without further delay.

The company should use the additional revenue to improve the terms and conditions of British postal workers, who are very poorly paid and work extremely unsocial hours. Hon. Members may work late into the evening, but not many of us would relish getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning to start work, six days a week.

I have been at pains to point out that many of the challenges facing Consignia have nothing to do with its move from public corporation to public limited company, but it faces a number of challenges that are a direct consequence of that change. Beyond a doubt, those are the challenges that cause me the greatest concern.

I refer, of course, to the competition proposals made by Postcomm, the postal regulator. I am not opposed to the principle that competition should be introduced into the reserved postal sector, but I certainly oppose the introduction of any competition that threatens Consignia's universal service obligation or its financial viability.

Consignia has made it clear that it would welcome the introduction of increased competition, provided that the approach adopted was the gradual and controlled approach evident across the rest of Europe, where there has been a progressive reduction in weight and price limits in the reserved or licensed sector. Consignia believes that, under that model, the impact of each successive step in the process on the system's ability to maintain the universal service can be assessed before the next step is embarked on.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): My hon. Friend has said that she is worried about the recommendations from Postcomm. She and I served on the Standing Committee considering the Bill that became the Postal Services Act 2000, which established the Post Office regulation system. She supported the measure, as did I. In retrospect, however, does she now think that there is something wrong with the regulator? If she is not in favour of the current system for dealing with Post Office regulation, would she prefer the regulator's role to be amended or changed?

Geraldine Smith: I certainly believe that it is important to have a Post Office regulator, and I supported the Postal Services Act. However, the regulator has to be accountable to someone. I cannot sit back, say nothing and allow the regulator to make proposals that could jeopardise the future of the postal industry, just because I believe in the principle of having a regulator. That would be quite wrong.

As I said, Consignia has made it clear that it would welcome the gradual introduction of more competition. The impact of each step in the process on the ability to provide a universal service must be assessed before the next step is undertaken. I fully support that.

The gradual approach is acclaimed across Europe and was supported by the Government at the Council of Ministers in autumn 2001. I believe that it is the appropriate model for the UK too, especially as the Government have

determined that the achievement of essential social obligations such as the universal service and the uniform tariff structure should override the introduction of a fully competitive market.

Although other companies should be allowed to collect, sort and transport mail for delivery over "the final mile" by Royal Mail's nationwide network of delivery offices, Consignia should be adequately compensated. The price that Consignia gets for such access should be in line with the principles set out by the European Commission in its draft postal directive, which is supported by all postal operators throughout the European Union and all member state Governments. That approach recognises that the access price should be set on the basis of standard public postal prices, minus the savings made in the long run as a result of Consignia having avoided costs in the collection, sortation and transportation of mail. That retail-minus basis will ensure that rivals taking advantage of access to Royal Mail's delivery network have to be efficient.

Deliveries are by far the most expensive part of Royal Mail's operation. Access prices would depend on the weight and size of individual items as well as where they were posted in the network. For a basic letter weighing up to 60 g, posted in Consignia's network immediately prior to final delivery, the level of access price would need to be about 20p at today's prices. That, most importantly, would ensure that Consignia could continue to meet its universal service and uniform tariff obligations. However, Postcomm is silent on this crucial issue; it has not said a word. Nor has it yet defined precisely what will be protected by the universal service and tariff obligations. Will the Minister clarify what we are talking about? Are we talking about a basic one delivery and one collection per day under the universal service obligation? If so, that would represent a greatly worsened postal service for many people.

The regulator has not yet announced the pricing system within which Consignia will be expected to operate. However, Postcomm has misinterpreted the Postal Services Act, although I am not sure whether it has done so through dogmatic arrogance or incompetence. When I and a number of colleagues from the House met representatives of Postcomm, they displayed little knowledge of the workings of the postal industry and failed to answer the many pressing questions that we asked. They appeared to display a dogmatic arrogance, they appeared incompetent and they appeared not to understand the postal industry.

Postcomm appears to believe sincerely that it has a duty to introduce competition into the reserved area wherever it is possible to do so. It does not have such a duty, only a requirement to introduce competition where it is appropriate, after ensuring that the universal service and tariff obligations are secure.

Postcomm's first obligation is to protect the universal service, yet its approach is to reverse the criteria and put the introduction of competition at the top of its agenda. To this end, it has made proposals that threaten the universal service and tariff obligations and introduce competition further and faster than the rest of Europe, thereby making Consignia vulnerable to foreign competition because it does not have reciprocal arrangements.

Postcomm has introduced proposals that target the most profitable areas of the postal business and could, indeed, lead to the collapse of Consignia. The profitable areas of the Post Office support the rural network. Competitors will not step in and take over the small rural post offices, which do not make much money. They are not the part of the Post Office that private competitors want. The cross-subsidy keeps the Post Office in business, and it is so important.

Postcomm's proposals have been based on a financial model that is built into it woefully inadequate and incomplete data and assumptions about future growth, revenue and costs that bordered on the ridiculous. They were arrogantly presented to Consignia, with a wholly unacceptable period of only six weeks allocated for the company's response.

Where was the consultation with the general public? Where was the consultation with district and parish councils? Many parish councils in my constituency were not even aware of Postcomm's proposals. That is wrong. When I tabled parliamentary questions on Postcomm, they were not even answered because Postcomm is, supposedly, an independent regulator—but it is also accountable to Parliament, so why can we not obtain answers to our questions?

There is no doubt that if the proposals are implemented they will be disastrous for our postal services, for many of my rural constituents living in villages and for many of my constituents who currently receive a good service from the Post Office. The Post Office is not in a shambles—it is not in a mess; all it needs is the ability to raise prices. If the regulator allows it to increase prices so that it can once again be profitable, we will have the postal service that our constituents want and deserve. Postcomm's proposals are disastrous and they should be opposed.

5.16 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I do not often have reason to praise and thank the Liberal Democrats, but I do so today. Under the auspices of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) they have initiated debate on an important subject that will not go away: the House will return to it time and again until the Government of the day provide a solution.

In that spirit of generosity, which will not last long, may I turn to the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness and even to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry? I do not blame the right hon. Lady for the mess that Consignia is facing—it is not the Government's fault. In politics, as we know, the guilty party often moves on and someone else is left to sort out the mess—*[Interruption.]* To set the mind of Liberal Democrats at rest, I acknowledge that many of today's problems actually started in the early to mid-1990s. I am not sure whether the Labour party had undergone its butterfly transformation to new Labour by then, but the House may recall that the then Labour Opposition, supported by between 12 and 15 misguided Conservative Members, resolutely blocked any move by the Conservative Government to introduce competition in our postal services. Let no one forget that: the Government were blocked from doing what was necessary. If we had taken that path in the early to mid-1990s we would not face our current difficulties.

The only crime that I could possibly lay at the door of the Secretary of State is that she may have agreed to the change of name to Consignia. My hon. Friend the

[Mr. Richard Page]

Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) made a most important point: in any form of selling or marketing, the brand name is the most important thing. To throw away the name "Post Office" shows that someone has no grasp of what is needed to sell things in the modern world. Perhaps the Secretary of State or the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness will tell us who pleads guilty to that crime.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): Although Consignia's name has great entertainment value and is an easy target, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the organisation effectively continues to do business under its two brand names "Royal Mail" and "Post Office"? We should not confuse the rebranding of the whole group with the services given to customers.

Mr. Page: I understand the hon. Gentleman's comments, but when one is trying to advertise something it is helpful if it has only one name rather than two or three. Everyone agrees that the Consignia issue has muddied rather than cleared the waters.

I was convinced when we were in office and afterwards that the way ahead was for a BT to be done on our postal services. In 1988, I made that point to the Minister for Pensions, who was then a Minister at the Department of Trade and Industry. He responded by drawing the House's attention to my general shortcomings. He has done so regularly, and I fully accept that; I am used to it. Apart from doing that, he said:

"we are rebuilding a Post Office from the wreck left by the previous Government. From day one of this Government we have made the Post Office a priority, and we shall continue to do so."—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1998; Vol. 312, c. 499.]

Well, that gave me so much confidence, but what have we got at the moment?

Four years or so on—five years after day one of that commitment—the Post Office is losing substantial sums of money, post offices are closing at a record rate, and there are worrying levels of inefficiency. Massive redundancies are coming. A national strike was narrowly averted, and the Director General of Postcomm was warned off introducing any form of competition.

Dr. Pugh: I have listened to that litany of failure. I understood the hon. Gentleman's initial point to be that, if the process had been completed earlier, it would have been done better in some ways. I have not heard him amplify that point. All those things could have happened if he had had his way, but they would have happened a lot earlier. Why should that not have been the case?

Mr. Page: I do not in any way mean to be condescending, but the hon. Gentleman is relatively new to the House. If he had been here just a little longer he would realise that if we had started to introduce competition earlier, we would have beaten what is happening on the continent with the Dutch and German Post Offices and we would have managed to achieve improvements and to introduce competition earlier. We did that with BT; we caught the continental countries cold.

Mr. Lazarowicz: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Page: Hold your horses.

We enabled BT to become a world player because we were first on the list. BT had been well behind, but it did a fantastic job when it was privatised. If we had started earlier with the Post Office, we would have done much better.

Mr. Lazarowicz: Perhaps I shall give the hon. Gentleman a chance to be really condescending to a new Member from the 2001 intake. Does he support the current Postcomm proposals? Will he give a clear answer, yes or no?

Mr. Page: As a humble Back Bencher, with no responsibilities whatever—I have no position from which I can be removed or sacked—I can say that the director general of Postcomm is going in the right direction. I only wish that we had moved in that direction much earlier, as I told the hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh), who is fresh to the House.

Kali Mountford: I thank the hon. Gentleman; he has been most generous in giving way. As a humble Back Bencher claiming visionary times for the previous Conservative Government, does he not accept that those proposals failed because they were deeply unpopular with the people of this country? We are accountable to the people, and they simply did not want those proposals.

Mr. Page: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. In saying what she says, she pays tribute to an intensive, clever, smart and focused campaign by the Union of Communication Workers, in which it suggested that any form of privatisation would involve losing sub-post offices. It so confused the issue in people's minds—it was not the clearest of explanations—that they were very unhappy about going forward.

I pay tribute to the union: as a political exercise, it did a fantastic job. Whenever I can, I pay tribute to the Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions who used to be the general secretary of that union, for the skill with which he conducted that campaign. I am prepared to do that time and again; he did a fantastic job. The campaign misled the people of this country and it set our Post Office back years, but he won, and perhaps the Labour party thinks that that is all that counts.

Mr. Waterson: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the crucial differences between then and now is that, then, the Post Office was contributing £1 million a day to the taxpayer, and now, it is losing £1.5 million a day, and the Government are in the humiliating position of having to give it its dividends back?

Mr. Page: With his usual sagacity, my hon. Friend has put his finger right on the point. That was the time to have made the change. Now, it is going to be more difficult and more painful. A total of 30,000 redundancies are being talked about. I shake my head in sorrow at the size of those figures.

Mr. Gale: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Page: I will give way just this once; otherwise, I will still be talking at 7 o'clock and no one will be able to wind up the debate.

Mr. Gale: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He has referred to 30,000 redundancies, and we have heard

reference to the importance of the people working in the postal system. We may not be paying enough attention to that. Much has been said about Post Office Counters, but the work force are another priceless asset. If we lose that work force, their skill, their knowledge and the social service that they provide, we will never replace it.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend makes an important point. All Members have visited their local post offices and sorting offices and have seen the bank of knowledge, good will and caring for the people of this country. The staff there know when somebody is not answering their door or taking their mail, and they will call the emergency services. I do not want that to be destroyed, and neither does any other hon. Member.

We must find the right way forward. Unfortunately, five years on, with the privilege of this Labour Government, we are no further forward. The post office system seems to be collapsing around our ears. I do not know what to believe. Going back to 14 May 1998, the Minister for Pensions, who was then the Minister with responsibility for the Post Office, said:

"The terms of reference are unequivocal. The Post Office will remain in the public sector".—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1998; Vol. 312, c. 505.]

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne says, however, that there were negotiations to try to do a share swap deal with the Dutch post office. If that is trying to remain in the public service, I am a Dutchman—*[Laughter.]* That came to me on the spur of the moment. I apologise for it. Unfortunately, we cannot go back.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne said, both sides of the House agree that sub-post offices are an essential part of the fabric of our society. They supply all the services that we need to drive ourselves forward. They help the older as well as the less-well-off customers. As I said, I want to pay full tribute to the daily work of sub-post offices.

A vital concern is that sub-post offices continue to expand and develop, but as we all know, they have been contracting over the past 20 years. That has been partly due to changes outside the control of the Post Office—new technologies and new patterns of work, the difficulties of finding new recruits when a sub-postmaster decides to retire, and the lack of profitability of operations in some rural and urban areas. All those factors come into play. No Government or postal provider could have compensated for or counterbalanced those factors entirely. The process of contraction, however, is now taking place at an unacceptable rate.

Despite the Government's promises back in 1997, the Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions, in his former capacity as the Minister for Competitiveness, commented more than once on the fact that the network was under-utilised and not properly promoted. He told the House in January 2000 that the measures that the Government had in mind would attract new business to the post office network. He did not mention the fact that they would remove 35 per cent. of the income of sub-post offices through the introduction of ACT. In a debate in the same month in Westminster Hall, he said that attracting banking back to rural areas and taking advantage of computerisation would allow the random effects of the previous 20 years of erosion to be tackled. He was equally clear in the Committee that considered the Postal Services Act 2000, on which I had the privilege to serve, about how that would be achieved. I have great respect and affection for the hon. Gentleman, but I do not share his faith in the Government's powers of prophecy or their ability to deliver.

One has only to consider the number of sub-post offices that closed last year to realise that the organisation is in meltdown. Sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses cannot sell their sub-post offices when they want to retire because no one has any confidence in the levels of income that they will earn. People who have sunk their savings and their pensions into the business or who have borrowed money are now saddled with a sub-post office. There is nothing that they can do. The measures in which they put their trust—the creation of the universal banking service with post office card accounts for people receiving state benefits, basic bank accounts and access to current bank accounts via the post office, the provision of information on Government services, the routing of transactions through the "your guide" scheme and so on—look more like a coherent strategy in theory rather than in practice. The sub-post office network is melting away.

I understand from the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters that the Government are working on the assumption that 3 million people will opt for post office card accounts. When I asked the hon. Member for Twickenham whether that would be the figure and what would happen if it were even higher, he expressed the alarm that I share. People might say, "This is a useful method. I will transfer out of the banking system and have a post office card account because it is a system for which I do not pay any charges." However, the pressure is on the clearing banks to provide the moneys to subsidise the service. Unless the banks are careful, they could face considerable difficulties.

How will the Post Office be able to offer basic bank accounts to the several million people who have poor credit histories and perhaps county court judgments or bankruptcy orders set against them? Will those people be able to set aside the orders and take money out? Is it true, as the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters alleges, that the Department for Work and Pensions will actively discourage people from opening post office card accounts?

If the sub-post office is to become the vehicle for basic and current bank accounts, we want to know who will be the beneficiaries. Will it be the people who open the accounts or will it be the banks? Perhaps the service will cost the banks so much money that they will call a halt and the whole system will collapse like a pack of cards.

Kali Mountford: The hon. Gentleman is characteristically generous in giving way. However, does he not recognise the possibility of a win, win, win situation? Some people are kept out of the formal economy because they do not have access to bank accounts. It will benefit them to be in the formal banking system and to be able to run their affairs appropriately. Such a system could also benefit post offices, because they might benefit from the extra services that they can offer the public and will be better able to sustain themselves. The banks also believe that the system will be commercially viable. Once they have a new customer, they rarely lose them. Customers stay with the banks

[Kali Mountford]

for life; 85 per cent. of people never change their bank account. Does the hon. Gentleman not see that everyone could benefit from the proposal?

Mr. Page: I can see many advantages, but I have pointed out that there could be some disadvantages. What is incredible is the Government's insensitivity in announcing to all sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, "By the way, you will lose, on average, 35 per cent. of your income. We will come along sometime in the next two or three years and let you know how we will supplement it through this universal banking scheme." The details of the universal banking scheme are not universally clear. I hope that the hon. Lady is right and it is win, win, win, but sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses do not share her optimism. The difficulty of selling on sub-post offices is a serious worry. If it is such a win, win, win situation, why are they closing at record rates? Perhaps she will ponder that reality of life. Rural post offices are closing at a worrying rate and before funding is allocated to tackle the problem.

There are rumours of a plan to allow sub-post offices to close until they number about 12,000, when each will have enough income to make them viable. The hon. Member for Southport talked about the move towards bigger sub-post offices, but if they have a limited throughput of work, there will be fewer of them. When I mentioned the 12,000 figure, the Under-Secretary shook his head. At what number does he think the sub-post office network will stabilise? When will it reach an equilibrium? The Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness is giving him advice, no doubt using words to the effect, "Don't you dare give an answer because it will be too embarrassing." I see that the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness is shrugging, and it is clear that they do not have an answer. We are obviously flying into the wild blue yonder.

We also need to understand how the £15 million fund to support post offices in deprived rural areas is functioning, because it is shrouded in mystery. The Government remove money quickly, but it is less than clear how they are going to replace it.

Postal services are being opened up to greater competition, which I welcome, but sub-postmasters want to know how likely it is that Consignia will ensure that local sub-post offices continue to hold cash deposited by businesses. If financial difficulties force the organisation to put its cash handling out to tender, will the new postal services be encouraged to locate their boxes at or in existing sub-post offices, where the flow of customers may be critical to their survival? Those are not academic issues.

We heard that handling costs will determine whether sub-post offices survive or die. Handling charges have to be realistic and set at the right level. Only today, however, someone approached me to say that the sub-post office charge for handling payments for her utility services had gone from well below £1 to more than £1. She is actively considering whether to make those payments in a different way.

My constituents have made their views clear. I have a petition from a small post office run by Mr. John Hayden in Tudor parade, Moneyhill, in my constituency. It is just three short of 300 signatures. Everyone who signed it is concerned about the closure of sub-post offices, the fact that they are losing 35 per cent. of their income and that more than 500 closed last year. They want to know where the line will be drawn. I hope that I get specific answers to my constituents' concerns on those wider issues. However, experience has taught me that I must not raise my hopes too high.

In recent years, the Post Office has become a symbol of the confusion at the heart of the Government's strategy for the public sector. We had a Post Office that was the envy of the world, but instead of a brave new world of modern services and commercial and financial freedom, what have we now? We have a Post Office that, in the words of the former general secretary of the Labour party, is suffering from inherent faults and crippling levels of inefficiency.

It is too much to expect Ministers to accept any blame for the situation. I have noticed that this Government are prepared to accept only credit, not blame, but the country, and my constituents, will hold them to account. We have to reverse the decline in our sub-post offices and put them back on the map, with security, and that is what my constituents are looking for.

5.40 pm

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a short contribution to this important debate. I am committed to a publicly owned and publicly managed universal postal delivery service, and to the maintenance of a comprehensive network of well equipped post offices.

That said, I am greatly disturbed by the style and standards of much of the management of Consignia that I have encountered since I entered the House in 1997. I know that Consignia's statistics demonstrate that postal delivery standards are improving, but my postbag, like those of other Members, deals with individual cases, not statistics. My experience is real, not statistical, and it includes loss, delay and misdirection.

The management style of the Post Office seems frozen and unyielding. The Welsh Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, has several times taken evidence from the Post Office. On the most recent occasion, a list of post offices in Wales was requested from the company. It provided the list, but clearly with some reluctance because it asked that it should not be released to the public. That is a novel way to conduct business—to set up thousands of outlets but not let the public know where they are. Fortunately, the company agreed with the Committee that it was being over-zealous. Perhaps by then it had seen the list published, for all to see, in the Yellow Pages. The list that the company provided to the Committee appeared to be in an entirely random order; it was set out neither alphabetically nor geographically, so the post offices in my constituency were distributed throughout a 25-page list.

I had earlier asked the management for a list of the post offices in my constituency. I was told that it was cost-prohibitive to provide it. In fact, from a list of all Welsh post office locations and their postcodes, it should be possible to produce such a list for all constituencies in Wales without any difficulty. It may surprise hon. Members that although the Post Office uses postcodes for the efficient delivery of mail, and an excellent system

it is, its management is incapable of using them in its business, so it is happy to tell me that post offices in Dyserth and Holyhead are in my constituency. That may surprise my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) because, as intelligent people will know, neither of those places is in my constituency. Those are just two examples of such errors.

Other hon. Members have commented on the closure of post offices. In Wales, the Post Office has appointed rural advisers, but there are only four for the whole of Wales and they have yet to prove themselves. Closure also affects urban post offices, and they are outside the remit of the advisers. Post office closures are not always handled well by management. Standards of communication between management and sub-post offices appear to be less than satisfactory.

I am aware that the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters has concerns about the future of the post office network, and I understand the remarks made by the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) about rumours. Let me quote a letter from one sub-post office proprietor, who said:

"I am afraid the people at the top of the Post Office, who are the people who can actually make the changes and are often those who reply to you, seem to have little or no first hand experience of what actually happens at a Post Office counter. It is not surprising therefore to find that the real reason so many Subpostmasters are trying to leave the organisation is because they have such little confidence in the hierarchy. The ACT threat is of course very real, but most Subpostmasters also run another side to their business and are used to competition and challenges. It is when they see the constant floundering exhibited in the managing of the Post Office and the utterly disgraceful failure to develop the business to meet a long known about challenge that Subpostmasters become despondent about their future livelihood."

That is the view of a practitioner delivering a service to the customer over the counter.

Closure of the sub-post office in Mostyn street, Llandudno, was announced in November 2001, to take effect in March 2002. It was caused by the franchise partner deciding not to renew the contract. There was considerable local opposition to the loss in that town centre location. The mayor of Llandudno, Councillor Brian B. Bertola, and Llandudno town council raised a petition of more than 3,000 signatures. When asked to receive the petition from the mayor and myself in the town of Llandudno, management in Wales declined to do so. They also declined to receive it in Westminster, saying that it was

"not cost effective to do so."

I have used the expression Post Office rather than Consignia because the name Post Office is known to the public. In Wales, the Post Office has a long history of providing reliable delivery of mail to households, many of which are in remote locations. I have nothing but admiration for Post Office staff, who on occasion must deliver in weather that can be understood only by hon. Members with mountainous constituencies. The universal postal obligation is essential to my constituents. Mr. Martin Stanley, chief executive of Postcomm, knows of my concern through correspondence and early-day motions 797 and 827. Cherry-picking of rich urban areas must not be permitted.

Equally important is that the management of the Post Office become more responsive to their staff, their sub-post offices and to the users of their services. So far, management have hardly begun to demonstrate a willingness to do so. I hope that I have been able to demonstrate that it is too simplistic to say that throwing additional funding at the issue will be sufficient. The attitude of management must change.

5.48 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I am sorry to have to speak in the debate, but although all rural Members are used to the occasional pub or filling station closure in their constituency, the closure of local sub-post offices in villages in my constituency happens too often. On 27 March, the post office at Bryanston, just outside Blandford, closed. On 12 April, I received a letter headed "'an essential part of everyday life' www.postoffice.co.uk" which read:

"Dear Mr. Walter

Winterborne Whitechurch Post Office Branch . . .

We wrote in August 2000, advising of the temporary closure of the Post Office branch . . . At that time, we were unable to identify a suitable candidate or premises".

That was the second time that that post office had closed in five years—they had previously found a suitable candidate. The letter continued:

"The purpose of this letter therefore is to ask if you are aware of any changes".

On the same day from the same gentleman on the same headed paper, I received a letter about the Glanvilles Wootton post office branch, which had also closed in 2000. It said:

"Do you know of any changes in the circumstances within Glanvilles Wootton which may help us restore a service to our customers?"

The first post office that I mentioned at Bryanston was located in a small village shop and its closure was involuntary. Everyone in the village knew where the post office was. Those who used its facilities knew that if they went to the village shop the post office counter was located at the back. But that was not good enough for those who run the post office network. They made it a condition that the person who ran that post office—for only a couple of days a week—would have to relocate the counter so that it was more prominent within the shop. The capital expenditure that would have been required for that would have been out of all proportion to the shop's commercial viability, so on that basis the postmaster declined to renew his contract because he did not have the resources.

So far I have mentioned just three post offices, but the list is not complete. During the last five years, my constituency has lost post offices at Tarrant Gunville; Pimperne, where it has fortunately re-opened; Weston; Lydlinch; and Hazelbury Bryan, where I am also pleased to say that a year ago I was invited to cut the tape as we re-opened the post office. However, the net loss of village post offices is symptomatic of an underlying problem. The village postmasters are under pressure. Forgive me if the evidence is anecdotal; it is none the less valuable. Several village postmasters have told me that village businesses no longer buy stamps from them because they are being offered stamps at a discount direct from the Post Office.

Car tax is a matter for the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, not for the Post Office or the DTI, but in the interest of joined-up government, surely it would be good news for village post offices if the Government could give

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some encouragement to the DVLA to allow all sub-post offices to sell car tax. A village garage in my constituency has within its premises a shop and a post office. One can buy a car, insure it and have an MOT done there, but one cannot buy a tax disc.

The key threat, which has already been mentioned, is the changeover in the benefits business. Nothing in the Minister's opening remarks convinced me that the Government are sensitive to the threat that that poses for village sub-post offices. What I heard sounded like an urban agenda. Few of my rural constituents live within half a mile of a post office, which I think was the phrase that he used. The village post office is a key part of the social fabric of the countryside and the strategy for transferring the benefits business is confused for the sub-postmasters involved and for the public whose benefits will be involved.

Kali Mountford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Walter: No.

The result will be the closure of more vital village post offices. Too often have I received letters from the Post Office informing me of the closure of yet another post office and giving alternatives up to five miles away. Post office facilities affect the elderly and their closure is a disaster for the many in those villages who have no public transport and is usually soon followed by the closure of the village shop. It is devastating for the social fabric of our villages. I believe that the Post Office and the Government are indifferent to that and I pray that the Government will wake up to the damage that they are doing to rural Britain.

5.55 pm

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): The Minister will be aware that on many occasions I have raised with him problems with sub-post offices in my constituency and the postal services. He and many hon. Members present today will be aware that I have certainly not been slow to raise with Ministers, publicly and privately, concerns that have affected my constituency. Hon. Members speak up for local interests and try to resolve local difficulties as well as possible. But the difference between the approach that I and many of my hon. Friends try to adopt and that taken by some Opposition Members today is that, as well as trying to address some of the local problems and issues, we recognise that there have to be fundamental changes to the post office network and to postal services. Changes are taking place in the marketplace, in technology and in demand that cannot be simply wished away.

I listened closely to the carefully crafted opening remarks of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and read the Liberal Democrat motion, but at the end of the day I saw no real recognition that there are fundamental problems and changes that need to be addressed. Their approach today has been very much along the lines that something must be done and radical steps must be taken, but they are not sure what they are and there must not be any changes.

The Minister charitably suggested that the Liberal Democrats would not oppose the closure of some post offices, but the line that they have taken today and on other occasions has been to suggest that no post office anywhere in the country should ever close. If I do the Liberal Democrats an injustice I invite them to show me a single Liberal Democrat "Focus" newsletter anywhere in the country that has done anything other than condemn a sub-post office closure as outrageous, scandalous and attacking the fabric of the community. If I am being unfair and any of the diminishing number of Liberal Democrats here can show me such a leaflet, I shall be happy to give way to them.

Mr. Allan: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that, in the context of local campaigning, I have yet to see a single copy of Labour's "The Rose" or the Conservatives' "In Touch" saying, "We are happy with the post office closure." I think that we should accept that we are talking about the big issues of the future of the Post Office in our motion and that any local party of whatever persuasion is bound to campaign against post office closure. It is unrealistic to think otherwise.

Mr. Lazarowicz: I am touched by that refreshing honesty. In my constituency, I have a problem where two sub-post offices in one area are closing and I have done my best to campaign, with the assistance of the Minister, for the retention of those postal services. I accept that the best solution may be one post office in place of two, so we do not all take the hon. Gentleman's approach.

Mr. Waterson: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has seen the Liberal Democrat campaign document that advises candidates to "act shamelessly", "be wicked" and "Don't be afraid to exaggerate". It concludes with advice relevant to the point that the hon. Gentleman was making, saying:

"Oppose all service cuts. No cut is going to be popular and why court the unpopularity that goes with the responsibility of power".

Mr. Lazarowicz: I am glad of the hon. Gentleman's support on that point, but I now come to a criticism of his position on the matter. Although I enjoyed his quoting from the briefing of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, he showed, I believe, that it is always dangerous selectively to quote from a briefing that is sent to all hon. Members, as others are invited to draw attention to the other points that are made in that briefing. The federation has a realistic approach to the problem facing the sub-post office network, by contrast with Opposition Members. It states:

"It is accepted that there is duplication and overprovision in some urban areas, making those post offices commercially unviable. There is an urgent need for restructuring."

It goes on to state:

"Tough decisions must be made in order to ensure a viable network for the future to create bigger, better and brighter post offices . . . The larger customer base for some offices following restructuring should enable sub-postmasters in many cases to invest in improved facilities, additional counter positions and longer opening hours."

That is a realistic approach. Of course, the federation makes other comments, as one would expect from a lobby group whose role is to be critical of the Government and which is likely to demand action that they may not be able to support. The basic point, however, is that the federation supports the urban reinvention programme, and that should be emphasised in this debate.

A dose of reality is required when we discuss sub-post offices and postal delivery services. Of course, all hon. Members support the universal service obligation; the Government and every hon. Member who has spoken support it. The universal postal delivery service must remain. Along with many hon. Members, I have signed a number of early-day motions strongly criticising the Postcomm proposals, as I do again today. At the same time, we must recognise that times have changed since the postal service was the only way in which communities—remote ones in particular—could stay in touch with the rest of the world.

Of course, the postal service still plays a vital role in communities throughout the country. We should be proud that, through the postal service, somebody in the Isles of Scilly can be in contact with somebody in Lerwick—or Leir-vik, as I believe we are meant to call it—just as easily and at the same price as somebody here in Westminster can communicate with somebody in the City of London a mile down the road. However, it is one thing to say that we should provide a cross-subsidy to enable people throughout the country and especially in remote areas to enjoy the same postal service as everyone else and allow them to stay part of the community and to stay in touch with friends and relatives, but quite another to say that we should give the same large cross-subsidy to enable direct mail marketing companies to send the same junk mail to everyone in the country—the sort of rubbish that finds its way into the bin whether it is delivered in Thurso or Truro, Edinburgh or London.

That is the reality of the changing way in which the postal service is used. There are no easy solutions. I am not calling for the abolition of the universal post; far from it—I want it to be retained. However, we must recognise changes in the marketplace and in the role that the postal service plays in our society.

The way forward is not to stay stuck in the past, but to rebuild a post office network to take account of changing needs, technologies and opportunities. The "your guide" initiative is an excellent scheme; like many hon. Members, I saw the display in Portcullis House. There are many opportunities to develop that system, perhaps by involving local government and other services that can be provided for communities.

The Liberal Democrats' approach seems basically one of managed decline of the sub-post office network. They do not have the same grounding in reality as the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters. We are all concerned about change in our areas and communities, and all of us will speak up for the interests of our communities whenever they are threatened, but I recognise that fundamental change is necessary. I welcome the fact that the Government are taking that need seriously and putting in £270 million to back up what they say with actions.

6.4 pm

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland): A great deal has been said in this debate that I would like to pick up on, but I have one careful eye on the clock and I am aware that other hon. Members want to speak, so I shall try keep my remarks within as narrow a compass as possible.

There were interesting contrasts between the speeches of the hon. Members for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Geraldine Smith), who is unfortunately not in her place. If there is a race to achieve junior ministerial office, I suspect that the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith will probably win it, but I thought that the speech of the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale was a great deal more commendable.

The closure of post offices has been an ongoing sore in my constituency for many years. It strikes at the heart of island communities—especially the smaller ones that I represent. Rural post offices in such areas bring with them another Government wage and eventually a pension—money coming in to an island that would not otherwise be available. As other essential Government services such as coastguards and Customs and Excise are withdrawn, taking with them jobs from rural and island communities, particular importance must be placed on the continuation of post offices in our communities.

Barely a month goes by when I do not receive another letter from the Post Office telling me that yet another sub-post office is to close. It always happens because somebody has retired or is moving away, which is an indication of just how unattractive the job of sub-postmaster in a rural or island community now is.

I shall focus on the current Postcomm consultation on deregulation of letter post—a subject that has exercised many of my constituents and causes grave concern throughout Orkney and Shetland. In March, I presented at Downing street a petition bearing some 5,000 signatures; since that time, a further 1,000 signatures have been added. I have an electorate of 34,000, so about 17 per cent. of my electorate were represented. *[Interruption.]* I hear barracking from behind me, but I remind hon. Members that were my constituency situated on the mainland, it would stretch from London to Harrogate, so I am not looking for any extra pieces to be added, even if that were possible.

My main concern about the Postcomm proposals is that they are a licence for cherry-picking. I can see the great advantage of competition in attractive areas such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and other towns, but I cannot envisage much competition to deliver mail to Papa Westray or to Graemsay, which has a population of 17, or Papa Stour, which now has a population of 15. That is why the continuation of the universal service obligation is so important to my constituents and why we so desperately oppose the Postcomm proposals.

The proposals are the thin end of the wedge, as once the Post Office monopoly is removed, the universal service obligation will also go as sure as night follows day. I do not understand how Postcomm can possibly say that its primary concern is the preservation of the universal service obligation when it chooses to conduct a consultation about it after the current consultation on deregulation. To my mind, that seems a classic case of putting the cart before the horse, and I think that it gives the game away.

We have had experience of deregulation in relation to parcel post. Hon. Members can now pick up any Sunday supplement and see in the mail order advertisements small print saying "Free delivery to all mainland areas of the United Kingdom". We already routinely expect to pay a supplement for our parcel delivery service.

Postcomm's response to my concerns about the universal service obligation ending as a result of deregulation was to tell me, "Don't worry, old chap—we've thought about that

[Mr. Alistair Carmichael]

one and we've got it sussed. The people who want the universal service obligation are the banks, credit card companies and big mail users, and they won't let it go." The real tragedy of that argument is that it was made with a totally straight face—I could almost have believed that it was made sincerely. I cannot believe that the Royal Bank of Scotland, the Bank of Scotland, Mastercard and American Express will go to the barricades to save the universal service obligation in my constituency.

The problems with Consignia have been well documented, and I am pleased that they are at last being taken seriously. Now, time should be given to allow the radical measures proposed by the Post Office in relation to the Postcomm consultation to bed in and take effect.

I want to say a few words about Postcomm—the regulator on a mission. I am disappointed that the Government take such an extremely non-interventionist attitude towards Postcomm. The Government have a duty, where they see a regulator acting as perversely as Postcomm, to intervene and pull it back into line. Whatever the fine print of the law may be, the fact remains that this House must ultimately be accountable for postal services, and the Government cannot be allowed to duck the issue in this way.

My other great disappointment over the past few weeks with the Postcomm consultation came from the body that one might have hoped would be prepared to take up the cudgels for the individual customers being served by the Post Office—Postwatch. When I met the chairman of Postwatch Scotland, he told me that it regards the big mail companies, banks and credit card companies as consumers as well, so it was prepared to represent their views as vigorously as those of my constituents. That unhelpful attitude leaves a big gap in the debate and a vacuum where there should be proper representation of constituency needs and wishes.

I deeply regret the exceptionally poor relations, as I see them, between Consignia and Postwatch. Having those two bodies, regulator and provider, at each other's throats, as they have been since the end of January, is not in any way helpful. My plea to the Minister is this. Do not leave it to the regulator, because it has shown that it is following an agenda that will be to the detriment of communities such as those that I represent. Get in there, bang heads together and get it sorted out.

6.14 pm

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. We seem to have a similar debate every few months as we follow the Post Office's progress.

Ministers are well aware of my concerns about the future of the Post Office. Many of its problems can be traced back many years. I want to separate the problems in postal services from those in the sub-post office network, as they are slightly different.

I well remember discussing the structure of the Post Office during the passage of the Postal Services Act 2000. The dilemma that we faced was how to allow the Post Office commercial freedom while retaining its role as a public service. Under the model that we came up with, a Post Office regulator—Postcomm—was introduced. Since then, the frailties and inadequacies of the management, operating under the old nationalised industry model, have become increasingly apparent, and their failure to cope with the change to a commercial freedom role has become increasingly obvious. I hope that the changes that have taken place since the introduction of Allan Leighton and David Mills to the Post Office's senior management will begin to make a difference.

On Postcomm, having a regulator in a public service will remain a problematic issue whether it is a publicly owned company such as the Post Office or a privatised utility. Wherever it is necessary for the public interest to intervene in the markets, and there is a regulator, that imposes a great deal of responsibility on that regulator, which needs to be at arm's length from the Government. I fully recognise the difficulties faced by my colleagues on the Front Bench in intervening directly. The key decisions that Ministers make about regulation concern the brief that is given to the regulator and the individual or individuals who are appointed to regulate. Let us be under no illusion. If Postcomm messes up when it produces its final report, and the universal service is not maintained because it is not financially viable, the regulator will walk away and politicians will be blamed.

I have noticed in discussions with privatised utilities that have moved through several regulation regimes that they are always dependent on the skill and knowledge of the regulator in being able to make a judgment on the degree of competition and, where relevant, of price fixing that it can impose on a monopoly or semi-monopoly. Postcomm has to make decisions on market access from other competitors and on whether to allow an increase in the price of first-class and second-class stamps. The job of a regulator is to make a judgment on whether the industry concerned is capable of making the internal reforms and changes that are required to meet external competition and price restraints. That is what happened in relation to many of the other utilities that were privatised. Getting it right places a great deal of responsibility on Postcomm.

One of my concerns remains the quality of the Post Office's management, because the key information on which Postcomm will make its judgment when it has finished its consultation is that provided by the Post Office. If that information is not robust or is badly put together or inadequate, there will be a grave danger of real damage being done to the Post Office in terms of postal deliveries. I stress to my colleagues on the Front Bench that that is my main anxiety.

I voted for the model that we established, but it depends on a Post Office management that can provide good and adequate information to the regulator, and a regulator who has skill and knowledge and is prepared to seek information to make an adequate judgment on the market in postal offices—on what it is and what it should be.

I want to consider also the post office network. We have debated the matter endlessly, but I believe that the existing network will continue to decline irrespective of what happens to the benefits system. More and more people will transfer benefits directly into their bank accounts, and fewer and fewer will collect them from the post office. The drip, drip decimation of the post office network over the past 20 years will continue.

We must also acknowledge and make it clear to our constituents that the post office network is, to all intents and purposes, a network of private businesses. It is not run, owned and controlled by the Post Office. If it needs

to be subsidised, robust and adequate systems need to be in place to assess reasonable and fair amounts of subsidy to ensure that a specific rural post office is maintained.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Is my hon. Friend interested in the example that I would like to cite briefly of the post office in the largest town in my constituency, Coalville? It is not only rural post offices that experience commercial problems that lead to their collapse and create social difficulties. It has happened in Coalville and although there are other post offices in the urban fringes, the Post Office, or Consignia, appears extremely slow and not especially willing to find alternative facilities for a town of 30,000 people.

Mr. Borrow: I shall deal with that shortly, but first I want to consider support specifically for rural post offices.

The PIU report set out a way forward, but we need to ensure that systems exist to ensure that money reaches the places where it is needed. The Post Office must properly assess the sort of rural network that is sustainable and should be sustained.

Similar problems exist in urban areas. I accept that where there are many urban post offices in close proximity, it makes sense to have a smaller network of larger and more viable businesses to serve the area. However, the trick is moving from the current position to where we want to be in dealing with private businesses. Sub-postmasters and mistresses say that they have never felt that Post Office Counters is good at communicating and working with them or at managing the system. Unless we get the right management to cope with the essential change in the urban post office network, it will not happen.

Many of our problems are down to getting the right management to work in the existing structure and to use the funding properly to ensure the maintenance of the post office network and the right postal delivery service. My greatest fear for both is that we may have left it too late to appoint the right sort of management to make the necessary changes to the business. Our constituents will not only suffer poorer postal services, but hundreds of them in most constituencies will experience employment problems because of the difficulties of the post office for which they work and for which they want to continue to work.

6.24 pm

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): In my short time as a Member of Parliament, this is the third time I have spoken about the Post Office on behalf of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru. The direction appears no clearer, and we shall happily support the Liberal Democrat motion.

The position of sub-post offices in Scotland and Wales is precarious and causes great anxiety. It has already been said that the Government's determination to press on with automated credit transfer means that some 40 per cent. of post offices' income will vanish. It is difficult to understand how they will be replace that.

In opening the debate, the Minister spoke at length about network banking. However, the experience in my constituency is that banks, like many other businesses, have removed themselves from rural areas. In the past decade, banking services have retrenched out of rural areas. It reached the stage where one big bank was running an advertising campaign to try to gain a lead over its rivals on the basis that it was not closing branches.

In my constituency, several rural post offices have closed in the past few years. In the village of Farnell, the post office closed six months ago and is unlikely to reopen. The post office in Monikie keeps going simply because the current postmistress, who wishes to retire, has agreed to stay on in the hope that a new owner can be found. If that does not happen shortly, the post office will inevitably close. A third example is the post office in Marykirk, just over the border in West Aberdeenshire. It closed last month and will be converted into a house. The people of the village face a trip to Montrose in my constituency to obtain postal services. That may not seem a long way, but it is for those who do not have a car or are elderly or disabled.

The Minister cited the statistic, which Consignia also gave, that nine out of 10 people live within a mile of a post office. That is disingenuous when one considers the population break-up of rural areas. People in my constituency and in that of the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) face much longer trips to reach a post office.

Much has been said about the closure of post offices in the United Kingdom. In a rare bout of charity to the Government, I must say that it is not entirely their fault—the trend began some 20 years ago. In 1980–81, there were 22,475 post offices in the UK. That figure fell to just below 18,000 last year. It has been said that 547 post offices were closed in 2000–01. I appreciate that the rate has slowed, but that may be for various reasons. It is worth looking behind the statistics because they contain alarming messages for Scotland and Wales.

Most closures have occurred in rural areas, and 64 per cent. of all Scotland's post offices are in rural areas. In 2000–01, 89 per cent. of closures were of rural post offices. That is much higher than the UK average. The position is even worse in Wales, where 70 per cent. of post offices are in rural areas. That is the highest proportion in the UK. Last year's closure rate of 6 per cent. was again much higher in Wales.

It is not only rural post offices that are under threat. Consignia's latest restructuring plan, which was announced in March, foresees the closure of up to 3,000 urban post offices—one third of the total. The closure rate is higher in deprived urban areas. We cannot consider the Post Office purely in terms of business, balance sheets and profit and loss accounts. There is a social element to it, especially in rural and more deprived areas. That must be acknowledged.

I should like to know more about the "your guide" proposals, which are innovative, although in some ways they seem simply a more electronic form of doing what many sub-postmasters have done for many years. Post offices have been the hub of the community.

The motion also refers to delivery services and the universal service obligation, which is vital to Scotland and Wales. Both nations have large rural and remote areas, and delivery costs are higher to them than to densely populated urban areas. If the universal service obligation and the universal tariff are allowed to go, it will spell disaster for postal deliveries in those areas.

The Government have previously said that they would insist on the retention of the obligation, but I would like the Minister to tell me how that would be workable in a

[Mr. Michael Weir]

system with a multitude of operators. Many of the players will wish to go for profitable urban routes, and there is a clear danger that rural areas in particular will be left out in the cold. It does not seem feasible to insist that one carrier, Consignia, should have a universal service obligation when others do not.

What would such an obligation mean to a carrier operating only in an urban area? It would be very easy to fulfil the universal service obligation and guarantee a universal tariff in such a location. It would be much more difficult, however, for a carrier operating only rural deliveries. Most hon. Members on this side of the House believe that Postcomm's proposals will ultimately lead to the end of the universal service obligation and the universal tariff.

International comparisons give serious cause for concern. In Sweden, for example, prices have increased by 72 per cent., and deliveries in rural areas are made not to the door but to cluster points along the postman's route. The number of post offices in Sweden has halved over the past 10 years, and employment in the industry has fallen by 20 per cent. In spite of that, the Swedish postal service now runs an operating deficit approaching £20 million a year. Furthermore, postal deliveries to rural areas in New Zealand now take, on average, two days longer than before.

When Sir Rowland Hill introduced the penny post in 1840, he did so to reform a system in which many carriers were operating services of variable quality and charging whatever they liked. Mail was paid for by the addressee, and if they could not afford it they could not have it. The Postcomm proposals seem to take us back towards that system. For all those reasons, we shall support the Liberal Democrats tonight, and we urge the Government to reconsider this matter before it is too late.

6.31 pm

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I am conscious of the fact that we are short of time, and I shall be brief. I would like to consolidate what I said in the two interventions that I made earlier in this very interesting debate.

First, I very much appreciate the remarks of the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir), with which I have a great deal of sympathy. He will understand why, when I have said what I have to say. We have heard a lot about rural village post offices this afternoon, and "village" has always been synonymous with "rural". In a town called Herne Bay in my constituency, there are a number of villages. It is a town of 25,000 people, but within that town, Studd Hill, Hampton, Greenhill, Herne, Reculver, Broomfield, Beltinge, and Eddington Lane all regard themselves as villages. In that urban community, those village sub-post offices—those little private businesses—are every bit as important as the ones in the bigger towns. To suggest that it is possible to consolidate all those private businesses into a few bigger ones just because they are in a town—and to say, "That's all right, isn't it?"—is completely to gainsay the demands and requirements of the people living in the immediate vicinity of those little businesses.

Those businesses are used by many elderly people, by young mothers with babies in prams, and by people who regard them as the shopping core—sometimes their once-weekly contact with society—of their community. We must all—not just the Minister, but all of us—be very careful before we take that away and destroy it. If we take it away, we will never get it back, and that would be one social service gone.

Not much has been said this afternoon about the other bit of the debate on the Order Paper, which concerns the delivery service. Yes, we have rightly talked about the needs of the highlands and islands; I understand why. But who is going to compete to deliver a letter from Margate in my constituency to East Anglia overnight at the price that is now charged? Who is going to want to do that job?

I know who is doing the delivering at the moment, and I suppose I should declare a slight interest here. My wife and I have living in our house a young lady whom we regard practically as a daughter, who also happens to be a postman. We know what time she and thousands like her all over the country get up in the small hours of a dark winter's morning when it is bucketing down with rain. She goes into the sorting offices and does her job there. She then lifts a very heavy bag on to a bicycle or into a van—she is lucky enough, most of the time, to use a van—and goes out into the dark with a torch to deliver those letters, as thousands like her do all round the country.

Those are the people who tell the local bobby or someone like me that somebody is not well or in trouble and needs help. We have talked a lot about business, and I understand that this is a commercial business, but if we lose the expertise of all those people delivering all those letters, trudging and cycling all those miles all around the country every day except Sunday—although even on Sunday there are collections—we shall never get it back.

I want to say to hon. Members on both sides of the House—on my own Front Bench, on the Government Front Bench and in the Liberal party—that we must not take away something that is very precious. It has been damaged by some fool who turned it into Consignia, which is about the most crass thing to have been done since we changed the tail fins on British Airways planes and ceased to "fly the flag". It is just another brand image, but it matters to people and is very precious. If we destroy it, we shall never be able to rebuild it.

We need to take a step back and have a long hard think before we lose more of our urban village, and rural village, post offices, and before we sacrifice their work force. Yes, that work force might have Spanish practices—they need to be dealt with—but in the main, it is dedicated, hard working and does a job that most people in this House would not wish to do.

6.36 pm

Dr. John Pugh (Southport): I apologise in advance for the brevity of this contribution, although I am not entirely sure why I am doing so. I must also apologise for not altogether concurring with my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), in that I do not think that we are talking about a project that may or may not fail; we are talking about a project that is doomed to fail.

Only 10 years ago, we had something called the Royal Mail. For hundreds of years before that, it was a monopoly in this country. This country does not take easily to monopolies; by inclination, we do not favour them. We need—and we had—very good reasons for enforcing that monopoly. Those reasons were to do with

the reliability and integrity of the mail, and with the universality of the mail—the fact that we could post a letter in one place and it would end up anywhere else in the United Kingdom for the same price, whoever posted it. Those reasons were also to do with economies of scale. Our ancestors could not visualise the possibility of hundreds of different types of letter boxes provided by different companies in different places.

The Royal Mail was a Crown service. It was not an absolute monopoly; people could deliver mail themselves, and it called upon the Scouts at Christmas. None the less, it was a monopoly for a reason. It was very profitable, but as hon. Members have said, it had all the problems of a state monopoly. There were Spanish practices and industrial relations problems. So gradually the presumption that it should be a monopoly was questioned. It was questioned intellectually by people who had ideological hang-ups. full stop, and ideological hang-ups about state provision.

A competitive market was thought to be better for the provision of all services, whether or not they had a social dimension. Many case histories illustrate that there are certain benefits when state monopolies are broken up. Equally, cases such as Railtrack illustrate that, following the break-up of British Rail, there have been very few benefits that the public can identify. None the less, the weight of the argument was against monopolies.

I accept—as I expect the Minister to point out—that the nature of the mail was going to change anyway. E-mail has made it possible for people to communicate in different ways, and the volume of mail will necessarily decline, to a certain extent. The computer has had an effect on the mail service. It has also made possible the infinite quantities of junk mail which make the volume of mail very similar to what it was in the past.

The other reason for change is that there was a legal challenge with regard to the single market. All these challenges led in the same direction: towards an end to the monopoly. The simple question was: how soon and how fast? It was a question of, "Goodbye, Royal Mail; hello, Consignia." Almost immediately after that happened, there were closures, losses and redundancies. That is all, somehow, thought to be coincidental. There is a temptation to see the whole of the present problem as one of transition and change. It has been suggested—wrongly, I believe—that some changes have already come about on the continent, but the continent was never in the position we were in in the first place.

I am not easily persuaded that we are talking about new, innovative ways of delivering an old service, and that this is simply a change in the method of delivery, rather than a change of product. The consumer—the person actually using mail services—is now receiving services that are more expensive, that will become less frequent and less reliable, that will not necessarily be guaranteed to those in the far-flung reaches of this country and that, certainly in terms of post offices, will be far less local. People who used to be able to go to suburban centres will have to go to the centres of towns. So it is not just a question of a change of method; it is a question of a change in the product.

There is a reason for that. Indeed, all the reasons for Royal Mail's existence are the reasons why Consignia does not work now. Economies of scale are not possible if profitable areas of business can be cherry-picked, as they can. Businesses are severely hampered if they have a universal service obligation to discharge, as they have. Reliability is not possible, or satisfactory, when a company is permanently placed in a vulnerable market situation, as Consignia is.

Consignia is a doomed project, and at least four categories are affected. The staff are already casualties. The public are receiving diminishing services. Then there are Government finances. The Government are now having to fund closures, whereas in the past post offices made a net contribution to the Revenue. Communities, too, are losing out. in my constituency, when a sub-post office closes, the little nest of shops surrounding it suffer from less passing trade and have to close as well. Staff, the public, Government finance and communities: they all lose. It is a doomed project.

The Government have two options. They can leave Consignia to the permanent tender mercies of Postcomm, to the unions as they fight for the remaining jobs, and to a flailing and failing management. They can let predictions of a second-class service for the ordinary consumer come true. They can adopt an arm's-length, Pontius Pilate approach, and let it all happen. Or they can simply look at the facts, step in now, and work on the premise that the old lady of John O'Groats wants a world-class service as much as the city slicker, and may have much more difficulty in finding alternatives to Royal Mail.

This will be the Government's problem. It will come home to roost. I ask them to consider what ordinary folk want, and I say, "Do not stand aside; make it happen."

6.42 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The debate has proved that this was the right subject to discuss, and at the right time. There is clearly concern throughout the House about what is happening to postal services. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) set out extremely well the issues that we need to address, in a speech that was as inexorable as it was unanswerable. Indeed, we received no answers to it.

A number of other Members made excellent speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh) described the damage done to communities by closures. My hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) spoke of the centrality of the post office to small island communities. There is, in fact, little difference in that respect between an island community and a rural constituency such as mine—or indeed urban areas, to which the sub-post office network is equally important. The hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir) made similar points on behalf of his constituents.

Members of other parties also made useful contributions. The hon. Members for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) and for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) drew attention to deficiencies in management. That, I think, is self-evident: there have certainly been management failures in the Post Office. The hon. Member for Conwy was honest enough to say that ACT posed a real threat, which is our view as well. The hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) took a rather more conventional line in respect of new Labour. He may have strayed towards complacency; we shall see whether his complacency is well founded.

Mrs. Betty Williams: May I correct something that the hon. Gentleman said? I was not expressing my view

[Mrs. Betty Williams]

on ACT. If the hon. Gentleman reads *Hansard* tomorrow, he will see that I was reading a passage from a letter from a sub-postmaster.

Mr. Heath: I can only say that the sub-postmaster was absolutely right, and I am glad that the hon. Lady quoted him.

In support of that, let me cite what was said in an intervention by the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey)—who spoke of the coercion inherent in the migration to bank accounts—and also the exceptional speech by the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Geraldine Smith). I do not want to embarrass the hon. Lady, but she will be very welcome in the Lobby this evening—for the right reason: not because I am claiming a miraculous conversion to our cause in general, but because the hon. Lady has read our motion and agrees with our analysis. She has exercised independence of thought. I commend her for that, and wish that more Members were prepared to take the same attitude.

As for the Conservatives' speeches, we heard a vigorous defence of the post office network from the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale), who I think was entirely sincere. The contribution of the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) was amiable and extensive, and extraordinarily indiscreet—that being one of the reasons for our holding him in such affection. He said, "The guilty party moves on, and someone else clears up the mess," and we know that to be true. He was also sufficiently indiscreet to reveal himself as an unashamed supporter of full privatisation of the Post Office—and that, I must say, is why it is so difficult to take the comments of Conservative Front Benchers seriously.

There may be individual Members who share our conviction that the post office network and the delivery system are crucial, but we can only look at their record. Listening to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), and observing the extraordinarily bleak picture he painted of postal services, I was reminded of the bleak picture the Conservatives also paint of the national health service. I think it is possible to identify what is wrong with a system without damning it as a whole, and damning everyone who works in it; but the hon. Gentleman nearly reached that point.

We remember how many post offices were closed during the Conservatives' years in government. We also remember more recent events: we remember the amendments that the Conservatives were prepared to table to the Postal Services Bill, which would have reduced the reserved area and the universal service obligation. There has clearly been no change in their underlying policy. But let us return to the Government of today, and consider what the Minister said.

I have a great deal of time for the Minister—I hope that does not embarrass him—but he did not answer the questions, possibly because he cannot. One of the problems we always encounter when discussing this issue is a faint feeling that DTI Ministers are put up to respond to questions to which they do not know the answers. That is partly because, as we know, the universal bank programme has been taken away: it has been moved to the Department for Work and Pensions, and Mr. Secretary Darling is in charge—I am sorry; I have forgotten his constituency. That may be the reason for the remarkable degree of ministerial imprecision and obfuscation.

Let us consider the key points that have been raised today. First, let us deal with delivery, which is crucial to the communities we all represent. In fact, collections are almost more important: without an adequate collection service it is difficult for businesses, in particular, to survive.

The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale made an important point about the primacy of the universal service obligation for Postcomm. Why, she asked, does Postcomm not appear to be giving priority to an aspect that Parliament felt it had made a clear priority? What is the Government's attitude to this? It is no good saying that it is a matter for someone else. We are dealing with legislation that has been passed by the House and that affects an industry for which we all have corporate responsibility. It is for Ministers to explain why there appears to be a movement towards aggressive and accelerated competition which is doing no good whatsoever to the structure of postal services in the UK.

What will happen if Consignia fails to deliver its universal service obligation, quite apart from the fact that constituencies that are not in profitable postal service areas will lose the services on which they depend? Will there be a fine? That will help Consignia a great deal, given its present financial state. Will it lose its licence; and if so, what will happen to the UK postal service, for that is what is at stake?

Let me turn to the post office network, a matter that is dear to the heart of so many hon. Members and one that we have discussed on many occasions. We have heard the Government's rhetoric and we applaud their intentions, so let us not be distracted into pretending that they do not share our aspiration to maintain the post office network. We are not discussing whether the Government wish to do that, but whether they have done so and whether they will do so in future. The reality is that there has been a continuation of closures—547 sub-post offices closed in 2001.

What issues need to be addressed? The Minister said that he was concerned to achieve an outstanding retail experience within the post office network. I would love an outstanding retail experience when I go to the post office, but a great number of recipients of pensions and benefits do not want an outstanding retail experience; they just want to get the money on which they depend, in cash, on the day they need it.

It is important that Ministers explain how they will ensure that the collection of pensions and benefits in cash, which they have promised on so many occasions will continue. The promised mechanism is the universal bank service, particularly the post office card account. However there is a difficulty: design and investment decisions have been left so very late, and the clock is ticking. The system has to be in place by April 2003, yet we know that the original contracts were not let to the IT firm—EDS—until last November, and we heard from the Minister this evening that the contracts with post offices are not yet complete. There is no clarity, no decision and no certainty that the systems will be up and running when they are needed. A whole migration programme needs to be put in place and the training of post office staff has not started and cannot start yet. That is why we are so concerned.

When we look at other Government Departments such as the Ministry of Defence, which deals with war pensions, we find that war pensions will no longer be paid

out in post offices. The decision has been taken—end of story. What sort of communication is that within a Government who claim to be taking the matter seriously?

We have heard about the so-called actively managed choice. It is clear from anecdotal and other evidence that Consignia will strain every sinew to prevent people from having post office bank cards. That is a tragedy for post offices and for the least well-off who require such a service.

We still have, nagging at the back of our minds, the fact that £400 million of replacement income for the sub-post offices has to be found somewhere. If it cannot be found from the footfall of benefit and pension claimants, there will be a serious problem.

We remain worried about the rural network. We have already heard how important it is and I applaud what the Government have done in its defence. Let me make a confession to the House: far from closing post offices in my constituency, I have opened two in the past two months. I have cut the tape on post offices in Sparkford and Henstridge and that is good news, although there have been many closures across the country. We require the overall network to be maintained, and despite the funds and support available, particularly in rural areas, there is no evidence of that yet.

There is also the issue of so-called urban re-intervention. We know that post offices are closing. We acknowledge that it is sensible to close post offices that are next door to one another if one post office can provide a comparable service with no difficulty of access for the public, but is there a proper system for ensuring that people in urban areas who need access to post offices will continue to have it? We know that Postwatch is to take on the arbitration of these matters, but we do not know whether it will have the money to pay for it.

We have not been told whether the £270 million in the comprehensive review and the Labour manifesto of 2001 includes the £180 million which has been set aside for compensation or whether it is all part of the bigger picture. We do not know about "your guide", which was hailed as a great success story. We were told that "your guide" in Leicestershire was a marvellous success and that it would be rolled out across the country. Now there will be no decision until June.

We do not know what the Government will do if the IT systems are not in place by April 2003. They rejected our amendments to the Tax Credits Bill which would have given them the option, so let them tell us tonight how they will preserve the service, the network and the delivery systems. I do not believe that they can give us those answers and that is why we must continue to express our concern.

6.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Nigel Griffiths): I am sorry that the Liberal Democrats have left me only three minutes to respond to the debate—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Minister seems to be badly informed. The debate does not have to end at 7 pm. We hope that he will give us full answers, and then we will have a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman is quite right. The debate does not have to conclude at 7 pm.

Nigel Griffiths: That is excellent, because it will give me the chance to tell the House about the Liberal Democrats' record, about which I shall say more in a moment.

The debate demonstrates the strength of feeling with which the Post Office and the post office network are regarded in the House and throughout the country. No one more than I appreciates the work of more than 200,000 postal staff and the many thousands of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses who deliver an excellent service.

I am grateful for the many constructive comments that have been made and I welcome the opportunity to respond to as many of them as possible. As everyone knows, the Post Office touches everyone's lives like no other industry in Britain. It is clear from the debate that all hon. Members want it to provide a first-class postal service and network fit for the 21st century. That is why we are delivering the investment and the reform that the business has long needed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Geraldine Smith) made some telling points. I had the pleasure of visiting her constituency recently, so I know how in tune she is with her constituents. She asked about the 1p increase in the price of stamps. I can confirm that this week Consignia applied to raise the price of a second-class stamp from 19p to 20p and the price of a first-class stamp from 27p to 28p. That will now be considered by the regulator, and any representations that my hon. Friend or anyone else wishes to make will be taken into account. Even with that increase, the House will want to know that the cost of sending a standard letter in Britain will remain cheaper than almost anywhere else in the world. Even if we apply the proposed new first class charge of 28p—I stress that it is a proposal—it will still be cheaper than the cheapest in other EU countries. Spain charges the equivalent of 29p, and Italy—the highest—the equivalent of 97p. To put the matter in perspective, even if the proposed rise is allowed, the cost would still be reasonable. Indeed, it would be very low in European terms.

In the light of the intervention by the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir), we must ask how much it would cost to send a stamp in an independent Scotland. The more important question for the Scottish National party, I suspect, is whose head would appear on the stamp. Would it be John Swinney's, or that of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond)? I should certainly like to be party to that internal SNP discussion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale raised another serious point—the second delivery. She will know that only 4 per cent. of items are delivered by second delivery, but that they absorb 20 per cent. of costs—a fact that must be taken into account by the regulator when considering Consignia's proposals. She also raised the issue of consultation, as did several other hon. Members. In response to meetings with Members of this House, and to representations from others with an interest, the consultation period was extended by a full month, so that everyone affected could make proper representations.

My hon. Friend also raised the important question of frequency of collection. So far, the consultation has concerned itself with second delivery, rather than frequency of collection, but we regard collection as key to the future commercial success of Consignia and the

[Nigel Griffiths]

Post Office. They will want to take account of the need for a full network of uplifts to ensure that a place in the market is maintained. I urge my hon. Friend not to vote with the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page)—who called for the immediate privatisation of the Post Office—and the Liberal Democrats. Having recently taken over Norwich city council, the Liberal Democrats have promised to privatise the housing service and the benefits service, so at a national level they would doubtless try to privatise the Post Office as well. Liberal Democrat councils are not a model of good practice in local government, but time prevents me from discussing that issue.

In a witty and incisive contribution—in fact, it was one of the best speeches of this year—my hon. Friend the Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) put the best case yet for strengthening the Post Office's management team. I can assure her that we have done just that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Conversations are taking place throughout the Chamber—*[Interruption.]* Order. Hon. Members must listen to the Minister who is responding to the debate.

Nigel Griffiths: The management team has been strengthened through the appointment of Marisa Cassoni, the new financial director; David Mills, the chief executive of the network, who had a distinguished record with HSBC; and Allan Leighton, whose success in turning round and growing Asda is legendary. I hope that that reassures my hon. Friend and other hon. Members.

My hon. Friend also mentioned closures, about which every right hon. and hon. Member feels strongly. I am pleased that the rate of closure in Wales has more than halved, and that, in addition to the opening of the two branches to which reference was made, a further 169 opened in the previous financial year. As part of the Government's £2 million scheme, £7,000 has been given to Mrs. Jones to ensure the construction of a post office building and counter in Adfa, in Powys. Similar examples can be cited throughout the length and breadth of the country.

I remind the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), who also mentioned closures, that in 18 years of Conservative government the rate of closure was 16 a month. In his south-west region, 33 branches closed last year—equivalent to the number that closed every two months when his party were in government.

My hon. Friend the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness dealt well with the other contributions that were made, and I urge the House to reject the motion.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 195, Noes 307.

Division No. 241] **[7.5 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L
Bruce, Malcolm
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Gregory *(E Lond'y)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Hoey, Kate
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, Dr John
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael

Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Bob Russell and
John Thurso.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cranston, Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Francis, Dr Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Iranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Luke, Iain
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Mole, Chris
Moran, Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purnell, James
Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry

Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Rt Hon Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Graham Stringer and Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House applauds the Government's decision to accept all 24 of the PIU recommendations in its June 2000 report "Counter Revolution—Modernising the Post Office Network"; notes that Consignia is committed to preventing avoidable closures of rural post offices and has drawn up a code of conduct on how this is to be implemented in conjunction with the consumer watchdog, Postwatch; further applauds the decision of the Government to grant the greater commercial freedom to Consignia that management and unions had long called for; welcomes the action of the Government in appointing a new chairman of Consignia and a new chief executive of Post Office Ltd. and to enshrine in legislation the primary duty of the regulator to preserve the universal service; further applauds the commitment of the Government to a national network of post offices; and further notes the commitment by Post Office Ltd. to ensure that 95 per cent. of people in urban areas will live within a mile of a post office, and the majority within half a mile.

Johannesburg Summit

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I must inform the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.19 pm

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the fact that the Prime Minister will be attending the Johannesburg Earth Summit in September, but regrets that the UK is not providing co-ordinated internal or external leadership to ensure the Summit's success, particularly given rising emission of carbon dioxide in the last two years in the UK and the apparent emphasis by the Government on UK business interests ahead of the needs of developing countries; notes with concern the United States' role in the removal of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change's Chair and for their reneging on the Kyoto Protocol; further notes the damage such events may have on the relationship between rich and poor nations in the run-up to the Summit and the potential negative impact on both environmental and political stability, particularly in view of the close co-operation between the UK Government and US Administration and concern by leading NGOs that the Summit, aiming to reduce inequalities between rich and poor nations and promote an improving world order, may be heading for failure; calls on the Government to take a greater role in leading international discussions in the run-up to Johannesburg and promoting related activities in the UK, particularly the need to employ more sustainable solutions and set long-term targets for the use of renewable energy; and calls on the Government genuinely to put the environment at the heart of government, developing the policies and conditions which will promote local action for truly sustainable agriculture, waste, water management, energy and transport.

The motion deals with the extremely important matter of the UK's role at the Johannesburg summit in promoting sustainability. We have initiated the debate because we believe that it is vital for world order and stability for rich nations—of which Britain is one—to demonstrate a clear and unequivocal commitment to alleviating world poverty. It is because we see it in that light that my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) will be winding up the debate for the Liberal Democrats. I understand that the Under-Secretary of State for International Development will then reply to the debate.

We need action world wide to prevent further degradation of the planet and reverse the damage that has been done, particularly in the past 200 years. We hold the earth in trust for future generations and should seek to use it on sustainable terms. We should not take out more than we put in.

We contend that peace and stability in the world can be achieved only if a genuine partnership between rich and poor people and nations takes a common approach to development. Developed economies must demonstrate unequivocally that we will not continue to exploit the lion's share of the world's resources and that we will create the space, in partnership, and the appropriate technology to enable the poorest people on earth to achieve real improvements in their quality and standard of life.

I observed that, with her usual courtesy, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was present at both the beginning and end of the previous debate. It surprises me not at all that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is not in her place—she never shows much interest in these matters. I welcome the Minister who will reply to the debate, but the right hon. Lady does lead on the matter. No doubt she is busy packing for her trip to Bali.

There is a serious point behind this observation. There is, in our view, a moral imperative to address world poverty, but it is also enlightened self-interest. The tectonic plates of the cold war have shifted, creating a freer, more unpredictable, unstable and risky world. Some people exploit the fears of the most deprived and create resentment so that millions of people migrate around the world in the hope of a better life. That creates the considerable problems with which we are having to wrestle.

The world summit in Johannesburg is—or should be—a crucial milestone in addressing these issues. It comes 10 years after the Rio summit started a process of addressing the imbalance of poverty and confronted the need to deal with environmental pressures. It is a question not only of dealing with climate change but of creating the potential for economic development that does not freeze the status of the developed and undeveloped world. There is a fear that we, the rich, will hang on to what we have and cannot allow the poor to develop and further deplete the planet's resources. So it is essential, if we are to address this tension, that Johannesburg be a success and produce a treaty with real commitments, not just a series of bilateral arrangements.

I believe that the whole House welcomes the Prime Minister's early commitment to attend the summit. It is right that he should be there, but it is not clear what he will say or whether the United Kingdom is prepared and able to take a lead in ensuring the necessary progress.

The Secretary of State has been under fire for the apparent extravagance of her planned attendance at the final preparation committee for the summit in Bali next month. It is ironic that Ministers and their civil servants are reported to be spending about £200,000 or £300,000 to attend a preparatory meeting in a holiday paradise for a summit whose prime purpose is to provide a beacon of hope and international action for the poorest people on earth. We are not saying that the Secretary of State should not be there, but if she believes that it is important enough to take a delegation of this size to take the matter forward, surely it is also important that she make a statement to the House about why she is going and what she is hoping to achieve. Moreover, when she comes back, she should tell us what has been done to prepare the way for the Prime Minister to lead a positive engagement for the United Kingdom Government in Johannesburg. Why does she never come to the House and tell us what she is doing? Should she not explain to British taxpayers what she claims to be doing on their behalf?

The Secretary of State claims on her website and in her circulars that she wants to involve the widest range of stakeholders in the preparations for Johannesburg, yet she has refused to meet me or, I understand, the Conservative shadow Secretary of State. She does not want to involve Back Benchers in the process, but she will be taking four schoolchildren with her as part of the Government delegation to Johannesburg. If the Secretary of State is serious and we share common values, should she not, like her counterparts in many other countries, take a broad delegation and ensure that we are all consulted and that this House has a real say in the agenda? She has shown no interest in involving the House in that way.

Attached to the motion is a reference to the report of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit. I thank the Committee for its helpful report. Its verdict on the Government is mixed, as is mine. The Committee welcomes the Prime Minister's planned attendance but points to the inadequacy of DEFRA's resources and alerts the House to the dangers of the summit falling apart and falling far short of the legitimate expectations of the developing world. Indeed, some non-governmental organisations have become so frustrated at the way in which the agenda has become bogged down that they suggest it might be better if the whole event were cancelled. It is up to Governments to show that they have the commitment to make it succeed.

Specifically, the Committee calls on the Government to generate some enthusiasm for the event. I suggest that it is the lack of a clear explanation of why a large delegation is going to Bali that has attracted adverse criticism and undermined whatever case the Government wanted to make. Most people would be astonished to hear of this trip, but they would not have been if the ground had been prepared and an explanation given to show that this is a major event.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham): Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that if a full explanation had been given to the press reporting these matters, they would have given as much information to the public about the true purpose of the visit as we would all like?

Malcolm Bruce: My point is that it would have helped if the Secretary of State had explained to the House why she was going. She could then have benefited from pointing out that we had had a debate about it.

We accept that the Government have recorded some important achievements in shifting the balance of resources to poorer countries. We want to give acknowledgement and credit where it is due. The Chancellor's debt reduction initiative has rightly attracted wide support from the public and international agencies. The UK's aid record is better than that of many countries, and at least the commitment to a 0.7 per cent. target is welcome, although, like the Environmental Audit Committee, we would like a firm timetable as to when that will be achieved.

Of course, we support the commitment made by the Secretary of State, in one of only two statements that she has made to the House since her appointment, to ratify the Kyoto protocol. However, we are not so sanguine about the Government achieving the target and are critical that it is based on a "business as usual" approach following the dash for gas. It does not include a radical drive towards serious emission reductions as a result of innovative policies. This, in the Liberal Democrats' view, is a central issue. We have put the environment at the heart of our thinking. Environmental policies were a green thread through our manifesto. We gained credit from a number of agencies for the priority that we gave these matters.

We also believe that it has proved to be a mistake to make environment and transport the responsibilities of separate Departments, given the need to reduce vehicle emissions and the congestion that makes the problem worse. It is also strange that DEFRA, the Department responsible for implementing the Kyoto protocol, does not have the lead on energy policy, which is crucial to achieving the protocol.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the link between Kyoto and transport policies. He chides the

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Government for being insufficiently robust in putting their case to the public. I remind the hon. Gentleman that when there was a fuel dispute in this country, the Liberal Democrat party was the first to water down the commitments that it had made on fuel taxes.

The criticism applies to every party in the House; each of them has been prepared to water down their environmental policy commitments.

Malcolm Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is factually incorrect. First, we opposed the introduction of fuel taxes without a sustainable transport strategy and voted against them for that reason. Furthermore, we predicted the problems that have arisen.

Too often, the Government put up taxes by the back door—the Chancellor of the Exchequer is a master of that—and then claimed that they had raised revenue for the benefit of the environment. It never was for the benefit of the environment—it was for the benefit of the Chancellor's war chest.

For the past two years, emissions of greenhouse gases have been rising, contrary to the forecasts that they would fall. The Government put that down to a temporary switch to coal, but that only confirms the point that the projected reduction in emissions arose as a result not of environmental policy but of economic decisions—shutting down our coal industry and switching to gas-fired power stations. There was not a scintilla of action on the environment.

The Minister for Industry and Energy used the rise in emissions to reactivate his well-known support for nuclear power; that served only to undermine the drive for the renewable energy of which he is—contradictorily—also in favour. To reopen the expansion of nuclear power confuses the message both at home and abroad. If that is the preferred energy source of the developed world and its priority for contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gases, there would be an understandable demand for nuclear power from developing countries. The problems associated with nuclear waste, as well as the risk of accidents and sabotage, would then multiply world wide on an unprecedented scale.

By contrast, we need a clear and ambitious drive from countries such as the UK for all forms of renewable energy. That would show commitment to sustainability at home and would help to develop appropriate sustainable technology for export. Indeed, when ScottishPower lobbied me recently, I was surprised to be asked to maintain our firm commitment to phase out nuclear power at the end of its natural life, rather than holding up the drive to renewables by extending it, thus making it difficult for the company to make the commitment that it wants to make to long-term investment in renewable energy.

At the same time, the Export Credits Guarantee Department is pursuing a strategy that seems uninformed by the Kyoto priorities—with no reference at all to the Kyoto agreement. On average, the department gives support worth £2 billion a year to fossil fuel and nuclear power generation projects. It is estimated that those projects will emit at least 52 million tonnes of carbon dioxide as long as they are in operation. Our commitment to the Kyoto process seems to be that we undertake to reduce our emissions at home while giving export credit guarantees to promote emissions elsewhere—exporting the problem rather than helping to tackle it.

In the sphere of export credit guarantees, as in those of overseas aid and development and the needs of the poor, the Government are highlighting the benefits to British business. They have even pointed out that the summit could be good for British business, instead of talking about the world's poor. We do not object to the involvement of business but that should not undermine our fundamental commitment to help the poorest people of the world.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): How would the hon. Gentleman resolve the tension between the wish for development to enable the 3 billion people on low incomes to make progress, which will mean that they burn much more energy, thereby giving rise to more emissions and pollution, and the obvious wish to reduce pollution? Is he saying that the west should make an even greater commitment to reducing its emissions to leave scope for the poorer countries to burn more energy?

Malcolm Bruce: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, although I must point out that if he had been following my argument, he would have realised that that is exactly what I was saying.

We are saying that by giving priority to the development of sustainable technology we shall benefit ourselves—by creating space under the global umbrella for us to develop without adding to the depletion of the world's resources. We shall also create space for the developing countries to release emissions if we develop sustainable technology at home—we can share things out. The global objective should be to create a framework in which total emissions are falling. As the developed world accounts for 80 per cent. of those emissions, it is self-evidently true that the developed world must make a bigger contribution. That is what helping the poor is about.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the economic benefits to this country from both developing and selling the technology are being lost because other countries, especially in Europe, are stealing a march on us? For example, in Germany a 100,000-roof programme for solar installation has been under way for several years. Furthermore, companies in Germany see their market as sub-Saharan Africa and are selling stand-alone, portable units in that area. We are missing out on that initiative; our companies do not have the opportunity to develop and to take advantage of international markets.

Malcolm Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes a characteristically constructive intervention. Our trip to Germany with PRASEG—the all-party group on renewable and sustainable energy—was not wasted. The Germans were almost laughing at us; they told us that 15 years ago Britain was the world leader in wind technology—a position now held by Denmark, followed by Germany, Spain, India and the United States. Nowadays, we are nowhere because we did not support the development of that technology, while other countries had faith that it would deliver results.

It might be a good idea—perhaps the Government would promote it—to get some of our leading companies to form an environmental policy committee that would identify and advance technologies specifically to develop the environmental initiatives that flowed from Rio, and extend them in Johannesburg. I fully appreciate that the technology will have to come from the private companies that drive the research, but there must be a clear framework of understanding of the objectives of the peoples of the world.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): The hon. Gentleman makes considerable play of the need to promote renewable energy and has made several references to wind technology. Will he explain why his Liberal Democrat colleagues in the Welsh Assembly often oppose planning applications for the exploitation of wind technology in Wales?

Malcolm Bruce: The Assembly Members must speak for themselves. The one thing that we learned—it was as true in Denmark as it was in Germany—is that the Germans went for indicative planning to try to identify the areas that were environmentally the least exposed and would benefit from wind energy. By not adopting enough indicative planning, the Government leave it open to anyone to apply to build a wind farm anywhere. Unfortunately the nuclear industry is not dead and I suspect that some people promote wind farms that they know will be unpopular in the hope of generating objections so that they can prove that we need nuclear power. That is not acceptable.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that there is also massive potential for offshore wind technology, which could deliver substantial amounts of energy with much less environmental intrusion. We need the will to engage.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): The hon. Gentleman probably has not yet reached the part of his speech where he praises the Government for significantly increasing their investment in renewable energy—about £260 million. What is the difference between the energy policy committee that he proposes and the already established UK Business Council for Sustainable Energy, which the Government have enthusiastically backed and with which they have already begun to work?

Malcolm Bruce: The difference is that I was talking about the whole environmental agenda—not just energy. I do not disagree with the validity of the hon. Gentleman's point. I am trying to widen and broaden the debate in a helpful way, so that business is a partner in the delivery of international policy.

I am sure that the Minister for the Environment will not be surprised if I ask him to explain the Government's position on the Greenpeace and Body Shop initiative, on which an early-day motion has been tabled. Several NGOs support that campaign and want to secure a commitment at the Johannesburg summit to deliver clean, renewable energy to 2 billion of the poorest people.

The Minister for Industry and Energy seems to support that initiative in the quotes that I have seen, but the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs seem to play down expectations not only of that, but of the whole summit. So it would be good to have a clear indication of the Government's attitude and their reasons for adopting it. If the United Kingdom Government were to endorse that initiative positively—if they were to run with it—they would give a clear signal of our commitment to change things at Johannesburg. That would get us out from the coat tails of apparently supporting the actions of the United States and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, which oppose that initiative and seem to want to undermine the whole summit.

I want to refer to the recent events in which Dr. Robert Watson was removed as chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. That was a shame. The British Government said that they supported Dr. Watson, but we all know that his removal happened under pressure from the US Administration and, apparently, at the instigation of Exxon. If a man is opposed on climate change by Exxon, I suggest that that man is doing a pretty good job. His removal has sent out a negative signal.

The argument, which the Government have substantiated, that Dr. Pachauri—who is an Indian and is replacing Dr. Watson—is a representative of a developing country does not go far. Indeed, that is the first time that I have heard the Americans claim that they wanted anyone from a developing country to be the chairman of anything at the United Nations, and it suggests that arms have been twisted and that the issue has been fixed.

All this reinforces the resentment, which I hear in many quarters, about the fact that the US is trying to undermine the Kyoto protocol. Not only is the US not participating; it is actively trying to undermine it. It wants to resist any further commitments in binding treaties on the environment or on the distribution of resources in rich and poor countries.

I am told that the US is working up a series of probably quite imaginative bilateral initiatives. There is nothing wrong with those initiatives in themselves, but I warn the House to see them for what they are: an effective smokescreen for the US efforts to ensure that Johannesburg does not produce any real advance. Frankly, bilateral agreements do not require summits. Summits are designed to produce international binding agreements on Governments, not bilateral trade arrangements.

In the circumstances, the House has to consider the fact that the United Kingdom Government's close association with the Bush Administration will leave us deeply damaged if the proposals are undermined. We are right to press the Government to take their own position and to give a clear signal that the United Kingdom is determined to work for a positive outcome determined not by the US or the United Kingdom, but by the developing countries.

It is more than sad that the world's only superpower is turning in on itself and turning its back on the poor of the earth. It will be even sadder if a country of the United Kingdom's stature and wealth is so intent on maintaining good relations with Washington that we are marked as colluding in this selfish, ugly, wrong-headed and ultimately counter-productive stance.

Some people say that the Americans are engaging in the climate change process, but I suggest that that is a deception. The US says that it is interested in emissions trading, but on the basis of lifting current regulations and allowing emissions to rise dramatically. That represents a total negation of everything that the Kyoto protocol is about, and we should not for a minute suggest that that is

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credible or defensible policy that we should endorse. Indeed, I wish that Ministers had been more forthright about that.

In the end, the United Kingdom will be credible in the world only if we energetically pursue consistent policies at home and abroad. I have already referred to the shortcomings of our energy and transport policies and inconsistencies in the ECGD.

Our motion is not intended as a broadside on Government policy. There are areas of common agreement, and we share the objectives that the Government are pursuing. However, it is completely proper for a party that describes itself as the effective Opposition to show that, although we share the Government's intentions, we express real concern about the risk that the Government will face failure and embarrassment.

The Minister for the Environment has been widely praised for many of his commitments and initiatives. I certainly do not question his commitment. However, as I said last Friday in the debate on the Home Energy Conservation Bill, I am not sure that he is well served by all the people around him, or above him. He is constrained in securing the policies that would make a genuine difference and would give the Government the credibility that I know, from his rhetoric and his energetic hard work behind the scenes, he wants to deliver.

In that context, the Government amendment smacks of complacency. It seems to imply that setting targets for the Kyoto protocol achieves them—it does not. In any case, those targets should be much more ambitious. Cambridge Econometrics shows in its model that it does not accept the Government's contention in the amendment that CO_2 will rise and that the Government will miss the Kyoto protocol targets unless they take concerted action now. That is the problem for the Government because they were suggesting, "Of course we will stand up for Kyoto. It involves no pain, but some gain. We have already achieved the reductions, so we have to do nothing at all—business as usual will deliver." The indications are that business as usual will not deliver, but the Government amendment implies that they still think that it will, but they will miss the target if they do nothing.

The gas emissions trading scheme mentioned in the Government amendment is a first, but it is flawed. At a cost in excess of £200 million of taxpayers' money, companies have been credited with savings that they have already made—the Government required them to make those savings—or are committed to make. In effect, the Government have said, "Here is £200 million. Go out and trade it." Any market will be a success if the Government give it that amount of free goods to float it. That does not prove that anything has been delivered. The scheme is voluntary. It does not fit the European Union scheme and it will consequently have to be phased out in a short period.

The Minister will know that we chided the Government's poor record on waste minimisation and recycling. More money seems to have gone into church restoration than into waste reduction. Waste reduction targets are being missed, unprocessed fridges are pilling up and tens of thousands of abandoned cars are being set alight regularly at huge cost. If the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs really wants to engage, as she suggests she does, with the widest range of stakeholders in the run-up to the Johannesburg earth summit, should not she start with the House?

Bob Russell (Colchester): She is on a caravan tour around the country.

Malcolm Bruce: Well, I hope that she takes her caravan to Bali. It really is the most important environmental summit for 10 years. I should like to suggest, through the Minister, to the Secretary of State—I gather that she was hovering around the door a while ago, but has not yet had the courtesy to come into the Chamber—that if she does not come to the House to tell us why she is going to Bali or what she did there, she will find no credibility for anything that she does on those issues among my hon. Friends. She cannot expect to be believed or taken seriously if she does not take the House seriously and does not engage in the debate that we alone have initiated. No one else has initiated a debate on this important subject. The debate should have taken place in Government time; they should have wanted to tell the House what they were doing, rather than waiting for an Opposition party to raise the issue.

Where is the big, distinctive idea that the United Kingdom should take to the summit? May I suggest to the Minister and the House that we are not the only people who need answers? If the Prime Minister were here, I would tell him that he needs answers. He is the guy who will be standing up for the United Kingdom at Johannesburg in September. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members may say thank goodness for that, but he has nothing to say or to offer; he has not yet explained his policy. If he does not find answers to those questions, he will be in real danger of finding himself the first to sign up to the summit with the least to say on delivery. Indeed, worse than that, he might have colluded in ensuring that the summit failed when action by him and his team could have made it a success. The danger for the Prime Minister is that he could end up with a very red face at what is supposed to be the greenest of international summits.

7.49 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'applauds the leadership the UK is showing domestically and within the European Union, the G8 and the United Nations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development; welcomes the fact that the Prime Minister intends to attend the Summit; further welcomes the UK's climate change programme which is estimated to overshoot its Kyoto target of a 12.5 per cent. cut in 1990 levels of greenhouse gas emissions by 2012, reaching a cut of 23 per cent.; commends the introduction in the UK last month of the world's first economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme; further welcomes the commitment in the Budget to significant increases in the landfill tax to promote recycling and waste minimisation; further applauds the fact that drinking water, river water and bathing water are at the highest ever quality; and calls upon the Government to continue to tackle global poverty through sustainable development.'.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) on choosing to debate an issue of overarching importance, but I was saddened that he immediately chose unerringly to lower the tone by making some cheap and over-heated references to the delegation to the Bali conference, which he trivialises by making unnecessarily personal references to my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I am happy to tell him why my right hon. Friend is going there, as he does not seem to know. It is an international conference of key importance to the United Kingdom. The United Nations asked for three days of high-level negotiating time, and that is exactly the duration of the high-level ministerial segment, from 5 to 7 June. Outstanding negotiations need to be hammered out if the world summit on sustainable development is to be a success. Indeed, there is a view, which I think that I share, that, in some senses, if this conference focuses on and refines the key issues for Ministers to settle at the final conference, it will be more important than Johannesburg. The hard work of bringing down 150 pages of text to a manageable set of worthwhile recommendations, conclusions, proposals and decisions could be undertaken at Bali.

The hon. Member for Gordon is right—although he could have said a lot more about it—that there is a lot wrong with our world. Since 1992, the divide between rich and poor has widened dramatically. Fifteen per cent. of the world's population, in high-income countries, accounts for more than half of total consumption, while the poorest 40 per cent. accounts for only about one tenth. Aid levels have decreased. Africa's share of the world economy has declined, while its population has grown. Desertification affects 70 per cent. of all dry lands, and threatens the livelihoods of more than 1 billion people—about one sixth of the entire world population. We lost 4 per cent. of the world's forest area during the 1990s, after Rio. More than 11,000 species are at risk of extinction. I could go on. There is no question but that this summit is about matters of unparalleled importance for all countries and all people across the world.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Given the Minister's accurate analysis of the growing inequalities across the world, particularly between the very rich and the rest of the world, is it the Government's policy that, as part of creating a more sustainable world, there should be redistribution of wealth across the planet, within all countries of the planet, and within this country, too?

Mr. Meacher: It is our policy that there should be redistribution across the world, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has achieved world renown for her championship of the demand that the number of people on the Earth living in absolute poverty should be halved by 2015. That is a stunning demand to make, and she has put herself at the head of it. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as the hon. Member for Gordon was kind enough to say, has again instigated major moves by the rich countries, particularly the Paris Club, on debt remission and trying to restore the capacity for growth of many of the most highly indebted poorest countries.

The summit comes on the back of the millennium declaration, which gave us the millennium development goals. They offer a set of clear targets on poverty reduction: on education, on halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and of people without access to safe drinking water, and on halting the spread of AIDS.

Tony Baldry (Banbury): Will the Minister confirm that the Government are intent at Johannesburg on pushing issues such as poverty eradication and access to clean water rather than climate change and biodiversity, in relation to which frameworks are already largely established?

Mr. Meacher: Yes. That is a helpful intervention. The hon. Member for Gordon spoke at considerable length about climate change. There is, of course, the UN framework convention on climate change, and there is a parallel process with the conference of the parties, which effectively deals with climate change. The emphasis of Johannesburg should and will be on other issues, such as those to which the hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) referred, and particularly on fresh water, sanitation and energy.

Mr. Redwood: I have a serious question that I am sure the Minister will want to answer. On debt reduction for poorer countries, does he think it wise to pay off debt in countries where there are civil wars or heavy military expenditure by the state, or does he think that those debts should not be reduced?

Mr. Meacher: That is a difficult question, and no one can give a glib answer to it. There is little point in providing aid or debt remission—which come to much the same thing in the end—if that money is to be corruptly or otherwise distorted for the purposes of the ruling elite. That is an issue to which my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for International Development may refer in his reply. It is an issue for the Department for International Development in particular, and it has taken action on that basis. Good governance is an issue, but there is a real problem: such a policy can be exercised only with great care, because cutting off aid or debt remission to undermine a leadership that is perceived to be destroying a country can have unintended and inadvertent effects on the wider population that can be truly dreadful. It is a very difficult decision to have to make and it can be made only on the merits of each case and on the basis of the best available information.

Johannesburg also follows last year's Doha trade talks and the Doha development agenda, which is significant because poor countries need to be able to feel the benefits from participating in the wider global trading system. That initiated a further World Trade Organisation round, which is regarded as a pro-poor round—that remains to be seen. Developed countries committed themselves to improving market access for those goods of most interest to developing countries, including agriculture and textiles. That is vital. We live in a world in which we spend only $50 billion a year on aid but $350 billion a year on agricultural subsidies, which are very largely concentrated on the rich countries.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Surely this is the area in which we should be most critical of the United States. Its conclusion that it can save its agriculture only with a massive increase in subsidies will make an enormous difference by stopping the third world being able to trade with it. Cannot we take the lead by reforming, once and for all, the common agricultural policy to get rid of these ridiculous subsidies?

Mr. Meacher: I am pleased to say that I was at Doha, and one of the best results of that conference was a

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commitment, which was universally agreed—India was very reluctant, but it finally agreed—to a set of proposals and decisions that included the removal of export subsidies and perverse incentives and giving developing countries much greater trade access to the rich world. I hope that that can be carried out—a ministerial declaration is one thing, but negotiating such a change is another—as those are the most profound ministerial commitments that have been made, as far as I know, so far.

We have also recently had the Monterrey conference on financing for development, which, despite not reaching the strength of consensus for which we might have hoped, at least generated a promised extra $12 billion a year of aid by 2006. That is nowhere near the figure proposed by Zedillo, the former Mexican President, who looked into the issue on behalf of the United Nations and suggested that to meet the millennium development goals an extra $60 billion a year was needed. However, the European Union again led the way at that conference and we have seen some movement by the United States.

Monterrey promised extra aid to support developing countries' efforts, so it has been recognised from the very beginning of the process that we will have to focus on actions. The outcomes at the end of the summit should be, in our view, a short political declaration and a detailed action plan. I underline the words "detailed action plan" several times. We need that or a Johannesburg programme of action. That is the litmus test by which we should judge the conference—the specificity, the range, the precision and the detail of the commitments.

A third outcome from Johannesburg—if it happens—would be novel for the UN process. It would be a range of business and non-governmental organisation partnerships that will take action on specific issues such as water and energy. It would be not just an intergovernmental agreement—we need that—but a recognition that the power structures in developed societies are now much wider. If we do not involve business and civil society, we will not achieve the dissemination of our goals so well. The UK has already brought together chief executive officers from the key sectors and NGO leaders to develop innovative strategies and to promote sustainable development in some of the issues that will come up at Johannesburg—water, energy, tourism, finance and forestry.

What about the substance of the summit? Poverty eradication will be a top priority, and that is precisely why Johannesburg in South Africa was chosen. Environmental problems are often a cause of poverty and generally hit the poor hardest. Sudden natural shocks, such as floods, and long-term trends, such as biodiversity loss—on this I disagree with the hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry), because biodiversity loss is important despite the other convention—and declining soil fertility, especially affect the poor. The World Bank estimates that 20 per cent. of disease in the developing world is due to environmental causes such as unsafe water and air pollution. That is a stunning fact.

However, the summit is not just about the south. The north must put its house in order by addressing our unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. If we are expecting and, indeed, encouraging the developing world to grow economically so as to eradicate poverty, we need to be seen to be leading the way in decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation. I will be the first to say that, in this country and in many others, we are only at the start of the process.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Meacher: Yes. I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Thomas: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that; I am not sure whether I want to intervene now.

I was intrigued by the right hon. Gentleman's amendment to the motion. It specifically says that it expects that there will be a

"cut in 1990 levels of greenhouse gas emissions by 2012, reaching a cut of 23 per cent.".

In other words, the cut would overshoot the Kyoto targets. It was interesting that he chose to make that point in the amendment. Is he prepared to stand by that claim and will he come to the Environmental Audit Committee and be prepared to allow it to audit the Government's record on achieving that target?

Mr. Meacher: I would be delighted to do that. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has referred to that issue. The hon. Member for Gordon made one point that was not quite right. He recognised that we are well past our legally binding target of 12.5 per cent., although I recognise that I am projecting forward to 2010 and that we must achieve that figure. However, if we achieve a target of 23 per cent. or thereabouts, that will be well beyond what we are required to do under the Kyoto protocols. However, it is not true that the main reason—or even part of the reason—for achieving such a target is the dash for gas and the closure of coal-powered stations. The main explanation is the whole range of measures that we have taken on transport and, particularly, energy efficiency. The dash for gas is not the explanation.

Malcolm Bruce: I did not suggest that the main reason was the dash for gas, only that it was a significant component. I have passed my notes to the *Hansard* writers, but my recollection is that the model produced by Cambridge Econometrics suggests that the regime under the new electricity trading arrangements—NETA—is forcing down fuel prices and encouraging energy consumption. As a consequence, the model predicts that we will not hit the 23 per cent. target or anything like it unless the Government pursue alternative measures. That is why I am surprised that the Government are so confident that they have put that target in their amendment. I agree with the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas). We need an explanation.

Mr. Meacher: It is odd to suggest that NETA is encouraging greater use of fuels such as electricity. Of course, as a result of the new arrangements and the replacement of the anomalous pool price, the cost of electricity has dramatically fallen by 30 or even 40 per cent. over the past few years. Since NETA was introduced just over a year ago, the price has fallen by another 15 to 20 per cent. Those are large cuts that produce huge benefits in terms of fuel poverty. The poorer sections of society benefit greatly if they can obtain fuel more

cheaply so long as we insulate their homes to ensure that most of the fuel is not wasted. Improved energy efficiency in the use of fuel is important.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: In welcoming the publication today of the Government's strategy for combined heat and power, may I endorse the concern about the impact of NETA on the development of CHP? It looks as though Ofgem has been dragging its feet on a solution to the problems that NETA has caused for renewable and CHP developers. I urge my right hon. Friend to pressure Ofgem to come up with a solution.

Mr. Meacher: It was probably a mistake to pick up on the point about NETA. However, the answer to my hon. Friend's perfectly valid point is that NETA benefits the large generators and causes problems for the smaller embedded generators. The Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have asked Ofgem to carry out its first full year review of the operation of NETA and its impact on small generators. The first year ended on 27 March—about two months ago—and Ofgem will publish a report, I believe, in July. It will be important to consider what further measures can and should be taken to protect the position of CHP.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend made that point, because the Government have today issued their CHP strategy. It draws attention again to the important reform that the Chancellor introduced in the Budget. We have extended the climate change levy exemption to the whole of CHP, and not just to end users but to licensed supplies. We have also enhanced the capital allowances and said that we will consider further measures if they are necessary. We remain absolutely committed to the target of 10,000 MW by 2010.

I am sure that hon. Members will want me to conclude my remarks, but I want to make a highly relevant point about anti-globalisation. I do not know whether there will be riots in Johannesburg. I hope not, because they would be extremely undesirable. Anti-globalisation protesters such as those whom we saw at Seattle—I saw them there—and at Genoa rightly identify some of the problems with globalisation. The system does not automatically address all needs—the needs of the poor or of the environment. Some say that a rising tide floats all boats but not if one's boat has a hole in it or if one does not have a boat.

It must be recognised that globalisation has brought many benefits to many people, but it has also marginalised many people. If it is to become more acceptable, it must become more inclusive and driven by environmental and social concerns not just economic ones. Indeed, it has to be more acceptable economically, too.

In 1996, direct foreign investment in developing countries was about $250 billion compared with official development assistance of $50 billion. Although that is five times more, it has been concentrated on a few richer developing countries. We need to find ways to channel private sector investment into many of the poorer developing countries. At the same time, however, we need to ensure—this will not be easy—that whatever private investment we encourage works for sustainable development. That means giving real teeth to corporate, social and environmental responsibility, and getting corporate transparency by, for example, implementing the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development guidelines for multinational enterprises.

What of the specific issues for the Johannesburg summit? Sustainable energy is widely regarded as one of the central sustainable development challenges. It has close links with poverty and the climate change agenda. The hon. Member for Gordon was right to mention the need for a much more rapid development of renewables in the developing countries—as well as our own—so that their path to industrial prosperity is not powered by fossil fuels, which create the problems of pollution and climate destabilisation that we generated.

Another front runner at the summit is water and sanitation, whose importance I must emphasise. Some 1 billion people lack access to fresh, safe drinking water. That is amazing when we consider the wealth in the world. Some 2.4 billion people—about 40 per cent. of the entire world population—lack proper sanitation. The most shameful figure of all is that every year about 2 million children below the age of five die because of drinking contaminated water or from diarrhoea-related diseases.

The issue is complex. Poor people need access to water and sanitation, so we should provide water services. However, to pick up on what the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said, if countries are not properly managing their resources, there is no point plumbing in the entire nation for the taps to run dry. As 260 river basins lie in more than one country, there is more than enough scope for conflict over how best to manage those resources in an integrated way.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I am interested in what the Minister says about not allowing Governments to control their water supplies because they are so inefficient. I recently saw an example of that Ghana. If such services are run by private companies, how can he ensure that the poor will truly benefit, and not have expensive water instead of no water?

Mr. Meacher: Once again, there are no ready and easy answers to that. We want proper regulation to ensure that that happens, but the rich world also has a responsibility. Presumably our companies will be responsible for improving water supplies and the water framework in developing countries. They will overwhelmingly do that properly and, I hope, efficiently. However, there are powers to ensure that they carry out what is expected of them.

I had intended to address the problem of climate change, but time is running out. One could perhaps be forgiven for wondering whether the summit is the answer. Summit overkill—I am told that the latest estimate of those who will attend is about 65,000—is not an excuse to duck out of taking the opportunity to address the big challenges. The summits are held about once every five years. We did not make much progress at the New York summit in 1997, but this time around people are much more focused on the real issues. If the world summit can produce an ambitious but achievable programme of practical action by a partnership of Government, business and non-governmental organisations, and if its implementation is regularly monitored over the next five years in all the areas of development that I mentioned,

[Mr. Meacher]

we might just secure not only a substantive advance in sustainable development, but a major step change towards more co-operative and socially conscious world Governments, which we all want. That is certainly a prize worth striving for.

8.15 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): The United Nations described Rio as a defining moment. It was, but we are 10 years on and the Johannesburg summit on sustainable development is in no small part an effort to put the rhetoric of Rio into practice. As a spokesman on international development, I am conscious of the charge of hypocrisy that the developing world levels against countries such as ours that have not made as much progress as they should have since Rio, but which still dictate to others less fortunate than ourselves what measures they should take to protect the plan.

I welcome the coupling of the environment with international development. We all know that in our constituencies the burning issues tend to be those close to home, such as infringements of the green belt or campaigns about housing schemes and landfill sites. At a global level, we are beginning to take on board the fact that how we live in our 24/7 throw-away society, and the amount of carbon emissions that results from it, causes global warming with—although this is still controversial—unpredictable climatic results.

Nearer to home, a WWF briefing document contains a statistic that is worth citing. It states that we could fill the Albert hall every hour with the refuse produced in this country. The Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs published a report in March last year on sustainable waste management. It found that the United Kingdom lags behind other developed countries in recycling, showing both apathy and a profound lack of imagination. In February this year, the World Economic Forum highlighted the fact that Britain has one of the poorest recycling records in the developed world. If the UK were to achieve a similar rate of re-use of municipal solid waste as Finland is aiming to achieve by 2005, carbon dioxide could be reduced by 14.8 million tonnes, which is the equivalent of taking 5.4 million cars off the road.

We want to encourage business enterprise, both here and in the developing world, but we also want business to embrace sustainable development. The challenge is to find and support sustainable industrial practices and to persuade industry to take up green methods. That is already happening: huge companies such as Shell and BP, traditionally regarded as the villains of the piece when it comes to the environment, are doing that across the world. Although the bulk of their business still depends on the exploitation of non-renewable resources, they are increasingly investing in renewable energy—wind energy, for example, and in the hydrogen storage units that make use of the emerging science of fuel cell technology, which some say could be used to power our vehicles in the future.

Such large companies are aware of their public image. They are sensitive to public opinion, a lesson of which we politicians constantly need to remind ourselves. In the past five years, BP has cut the level of its CO_2 emissions by 14 million tonnes. It has achieved that through efficiency and technology. I mention those examples to show that change is possible and that sustainability is good for business, too. Supermarkets are increasingly stocking organic food, and fair trade products are becoming big business. Outlets such as The Body Shop have shown how business and environmentally friendly ethics can be mutually beneficial.

I am aware that the burden of climate change levies on small businesses can seem like the final straw in an area already groaning under the weight of red tape and legislation. For a small manufacturing business near me in the west midlands that is struggling just to keep going, a bill for £38,000 for the climate change levy was the final straw. There should be more finesse in the way we try to fulfil our Kyoto protocol commitment to reduce our carbon emissions. There are examples of how other countries are doing that differently.

I have spoken already of the hypocrisy inherent in richer countries lecturing poorer ones on the benefits of environmental sustainability. In fact, we can learn a great deal from the developing world about the art of sustainable living, simply because it is the way people who live in the poorest countries of the world have to live. I was struck by that fact on a recent visit to India with Oxfam. The south of India is of course vegetarian, and while we are all busy filling the Albert hall with rubbish, figuratively speaking, the people there are eating food off banana leaves with their fingers, and then feeding the leaves to their cattle. That is a nice little metaphor for sustainable living. There is also an inescapable irony in the fact that with development comes the potential for unsustainable lifestyles.

Sustainable development is a different matter. It was defined at Rio as

"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

No one could disagree with that ideal, but it is more easily realised in some areas of the world than in others.

At a recent debate at the Oxford Union on the motion that

"foreign aid has failed the developing world",

one speaker made a thought-provoking observation. He begged to differ in his definition of the developing world, which he maintained was in fact a better description of our world, as the so-called developing world is not, in reality, developing.

Christian Aid's campaign "Listen to Africa", which was launched yesterday, is saying that too. The only two African countries that have sustainable debt, as defined by the World Bank, are Mozambique and Tanzania, which both export gold, a finite resource. Because of the collapse of the prices of almost everything every commodity except gold since 11 September, and because many African countries are dependent on a single cash crop such as tobacco or cocoa, many of those countries are drifting further and further away from sustainable development and into intractable debt.

I am not saying that developing countries cannot make a difference. I can think of an arresting example in India. In Delhi, motor vehicles now run on liquid petroleum gas, which although not renewable is at least fume free. So the image of Delhi choked with rickshaws and cloaked in diesel fumes is now a thing of the past.

Where does that leave us? In the developed world the moral argument has been won, but the battle to make a difference has only just begun, and we can do better. I genuinely believe that businesses will increasingly make environmentally friendly decisions on how they run their companies. Any Government should encourage those practices with carrots, rather than sticks.

We all have a part to play in this. I challenge hon. Members to go home and do an environmental audit of the way we live. I am sure I am not the only one who has had to empty the contents of a black plastic rubbish sack in a frantic search for a set of lost car keys. What do those contents tell us? It is a catalogue of convenience where green principles are sacrificed on the altar of packaging and where plastic is king.

When it comes to the ballot box, it may be the state of our public services that preoccupies voters, but there is an undercurrent of change, a growing awareness of what is precious about this planet and a commitment to its survival. We are the guardians of its future, and as Shakespeare said in "Measure for Measure",

"dressed in a little brief authority,"

we have a duty to nurture and maintain it for future generations both on our little patch and in the wider world.

8.24 pm

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): I am grateful to the Liberal Democrats for picking this important subject for debate. However, like my right hon. Friend the Minister, I think that the rather ungracious and pious attitude that they adopted is all too familiar from their contributions in other debates on similar issues. It would have been better to hear a rather more balanced account of how all parties could do a great deal more on environmental issues. Fortunately, we are all improving in our attitude, but we all have some way to go.

I want to restrict my comments to sustainable energy and climate change. Global warming is no longer a far away fear; it is a fact. Even if we stopped using fossil fuels tomorrow, we could not stop the global temperature rising. All we could do is slow the eventual rate of increase. The effects of global warming on the United Kingdom are not certain. If the gulf stream were to change direction, as some predict it will, our climate would cool dramatically. We are more likely to see a warmer and wetter climate, but as sea temperatures increase, sea levels will rise and many coastal areas will be swamped. We are sure to experience extremes in weather patterns.

The countries that will suffer most from those effects are not the developed countries, which have the finance and wherewithal to adapt, but the poorest countries in the world—the very countries that the Johannesburg summit is meant to be addressing. The problems of rising sea levels and climate change will affect the way in which countries can produce food. Population movements, which may be catastrophic and dramatic, will largely affect those third-world countries that are the poorest and the least able to deal with the effects. Although the precise effects are unknown, there is sure to be an impact that will reach right across the globe.

For that reason, most countries are part of the Kyoto process, trying to work together to reduce greenhouse gases. We in this country boast that we are determined to meet our Kyoto targets and that we are in the forefront of that process, and with some good reason. However, there is a danger of our becoming complacent. The amendment tabled by my party speaks of targets that we hope to reach in the future—10 or 12 years from now. I sincerely hope that the Minister is right, and that in 10 or 12 years he is rewarded for achieving those targets. I hope that he will be in at least his present position, if not a more elevated one, so that he can accept the praise of all parties in the House for that achievement.

If we look at what is being achieved now, however, we see that the picture is not so glorious. It is not clear to me that we have made much progress at all in the last few years. At the moment, 70 per cent. of our power is produced from fossil fuels; 27 per cent. is nuclear; and just 3 per cent. comes from renewable sources such as wind, wave, solar and hydro-electric. Of that 3 per cent., the vast majority is from hydro-electric production, which was developed, and to which we committed ourselves, several decades ago. We therefore have no right to demand great praise for that development. New renewable energy probably accounts for less than 1 per cent. of the total—not a glorious achievement.

Are we likely to make rapid progress towards the targets? The simple answer is, not unless we change our ways quite dramatically. I was annoyed by the Liberals' pious talk about the need for the Government to make progress, and by the response the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) gave when he was chided for the fact that Liberals in the Welsh Assembly had opposed wind farm energy production. I notice that not a single Welsh Liberal MP attended even the start of this debate. Furthermore, the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Williams), a Liberal, is vehement in his opposition to the siting of any wind farms in his constituency. Given that his constituency comprises a large proportion of the total land area of Wales, that is a bit of a problem.

I am not personalising the issue by confining my objections to the Liberals—well, I am a little bit. To be fair, we all need to examine the performance of our party, our local councils and so on. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Industry and Energy said, everyone is in favour of developing renewable energy in principle, but the difficulties arise when it comes to developing it in practice.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Although I support the motion, the hon. Gentleman has tempted me to enter the debate. He will know that the proposed site of the largest wind farm in the UK is in my constituency at Cefn Croes, but he might not know that the opposition to that project has come from, yes, local Liberal Democrats. Furthermore, the previous incumbent of the constituency that I now represent is one of the foremost opponents of that wind farm—so much so that he has refused to allow it even to pass electricity wires over his land.

Mr. Jones: I did not know that, but I am sure that the House is grateful for the information, which shows the difference between what the Liberals say and what they do. I do not want to be drawn into attacking only the Liberals, but as it was they who chose the subject of the debate and as their spokesman was so pious in attacking the Government, we should be informed about their actions at the local level. There is a slogan "Think globally, act locally"; well, the Liberals speak globally, then act locally in an entirely different fashion.

[Mr. Jones]

If we are to meet the ambitious targets that the Government have set, and I hope we do, we will have to act quickly, especially on planning issues. We must find a quicker, more efficient and reasonable way to deal with planning proposals; otherwise we will never be able to meet the targets. If we meet them without building any new nuclear power stations in the meantime, nuclear power will decline over the next 20 years. If we meet our ambitious targets, in 2020 we shall be producing about 20 per cent. of our power from renewable sources, but the 27 per cent. of our power that we currently derive from nuclear power will have declined to about 7 per cent. In other words, we will have lost the 20 per cent. accounted for by carbon-free nuclear generation and gained it back in carbon-free renewables generation. We will still be in exactly the same place as we are now—no progress made at all.

That is a difficult problem that can be resolved in only a few ways. The first is to forget about making any real progress towards the Kyoto targets. The second is to admit that those targets can be achieved only by building nuclear power stations as well. The third is to take the current ambitious renewables targets, double them, and take serious action to meet those new and much more ambitious targets. Those are the only options available. I would never accept reneging on our Kyoto targets, and I would prefer us to have the option of developing renewables at a far more ambitious rate than we are currently achieving so that we do not need to use nuclear power, but if that becomes impossible, nuclear power is a better option than polluting the world with global warming gases. We should admit that and deal with the difficult issues that arise from it.

I am glad to see that David King, the Government chief scientist, has set his mind to those difficult issues. I would like the Liberals to tell us their intentions in respect of each of those options, instead of saying all the politically popular things—

Malcolm Bruce *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Jones: It is true: the Liberals always say politically popular things and duck the difficult decisions.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Does my hon. Friend accept that the chief scientist's recent statement referred specifically to the nuclear option as a possible interim solution, pending the full development of a renewables industry in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Jones: I am glad that my hon. Friend has made that point. That is indeed precisely what David King said, and I think that it may well be the best practical solution. The Government chief scientist also said that he hoped nuclear fusion would be developed. That is a long-held ambition—ever since I was at school, people have hoped that nuclear fusion would prove to be the answer to our power needs.

We have to examine how different parts of the United Kingdom contribute to the overall national target. Some work has been carried out by the Department of Trade and Industry, but when we look at the various targets set by the regions of the United Kingdom and at how they intend to achieve them, it is hard to see that they are all working towards the same economic, social and environmental strategy, because there are huge variations in the targets that the different regions propose to reach and in the ways they propose to reach them. Some intend to use wind power, others wave power, tidal power or biomass. The Government must provide greater co-ordination and direction on how to reach the targets if we are to have any realistic hope of success.

8.38 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury): It is imperative that the UN conference on sustainable development should not merely become a talking shop. There is a risk that it might do so in focusing on the wrong policy at the wrong time. There is no clearer example of that than "Kyoto"—I put it in inverted commas because I use it as a piece of shorthand. If Kyoto is taken to Johannesburg, one might as well forget about real progress being made at the summit. Kyoto would divide the conference and it would mean disaster and a missed opportunity.

Developing countries are not yet even bound by the environmental targets set at Kyoto, so I was slightly surprised that, when the International Development Committee recently took evidence from officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, one of the witnesses commented that the Johannesburg summit would not primarily be concerned with poverty reduction in developing countries. There is perhaps some confusion in the machinery of Government in Whitehall, because that comment was all the more surprising when one considers that the Department of International Development defines sustainable development as follows:

"livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintains or enhances its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base."

It is worth putting Johannesburg in the context of the process of arriving at a consensus on poverty eradication through a number of UN summits. The first part of the process were the millennium development goals, which sought agreement on poverty reduction, health and education, and progress on those at Johannesburg is as vital as the environment itself. The Cabinet Committee co-ordinating work on Johannesburg said in evidence submitted to the International Development Committee, which I chair, that the first priority is poverty reduction. That is essential.

The Environmental Audit Committee—whose Chairman I hope will catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker—made an excellent report to the House:

"We note that poverty eradication is emerging as a uniting theme for the World Summit on Sustainable Development. We acknowledge that this issue is a prime candidate for a Summit agenda which is seeking to explore global problems in the context of their economic, social and environmental impacts".

Poverty eradication must be at the forefront and the substance of what Johannesburg is all about.

Mr. Simon Thomas: The hon. Gentleman referred to the Environmental Audit Committee's report, with which, as a member of that Committee, I agree. Does he accept that also on the agenda in Johannesburg is sustainable energy, and the trick is to make sustainable energy work in favour of the poorest countries and in favour of their

development? I agree with him about the real politics about Kyoto; we cannot take energy issues out of what is happening in Johannesburg.

Tony Baldry: That was why I put Kyoto in inverted commas. If Kyoto is on the agenda at Johannesburg there will simply be a bust-up, and that is why we need to approach the matter from the point of view of poverty eradication; and sustainable energy, sustainable water and sustainable livelihoods are all part of that.

From the millennium development goals we went to Doha and the Doha declaration, and from there we went to Monterrey. Monterrey was important. I am conscious that others want to speak so I shall keep my comments short. I am particularly conscious that the Chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee wishes to speak. Monterrey has focused national Governments on international development, but they now need to focus their minds on more money for international development.

The World Bank estimates that something up to $60 billion will be needed to meet the 2015 targets. Non-governmental organisations have estimated that figure at $100 billion. At Monterrey, the US and the EU, the developed world, pledged an investment of $12 billion by 2006, well short of what the Government acknowledge in the Budget Red Book is needed. It is worth noting that current GDP spending on overseas aid reflects only one fifth of that provided to Europe under the Marshall plan.

It is essential that countries do not simply produce a wish list of action points at Johannesburg. They must ensure that they will the means to achieve those action points. There is a clear correlation of objectives between Monterrey and Johannesburg, which is succinctly expressed in the Environmental Audit Committee's report on Johannesburg, to whose comments about poverty eradication I referred. It went on:

"We therefore hope that the Government will endeavour to ensure that any additional resources agreed at Monterrey are linked explicitly to key action programmes to be discussed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development rather than relegating the Summit to a rehearsal of old stalemates on development policy."

I certainly support that view.

After Johannesburg, three important UN conferences will have taken place this year. They form part of a process, but there is a danger that the international community will merely keep on coming up with new initiatives for international development. Instead of doing that, it should deliver on the pledges made at Doha, Monterrey and—it is to be hoped—Johannesburg. We should have a process that is monitored. I hope that either in an annual debate on international development or on some other occasion, we in the House can monitor the progress that our Government have made on meeting the commitments that we as a nation entered into at Doha, Monterrey and Johannesburg.

We must concentrate on that process, rather than on running around for ever trying to dream up new initiatives. We need continually to ensure—this a point that we must all bang on about—that we will the means. The Environmental Audit Committee said:

"we welcome the Government's commitment to achieving the 0.7 per cent ODA target and, in line with the International Development Committee, recommend that a clear timetable be set".

I do not understand why it is not possible for the Government to find a ministerial form of words about when the 0.7 per cent. target can be met.

I understand the Chancellor's reluctance not to be hijacked into making what he might see as too early a commitment. He said yesterday in the International Development Committee that when the comprehensive spending review was published, he would give a commitment for the life of that review on the extent to which he could raise international development spending. Why not find a form of words that gives some meaningful commitment to the 0.7 per cent. target, rather than a statement that we are pledged to meet it some time? We have been pledged to meeting it some time for some very considerable time.

The Chancellor also acknowledges that the international community is short of what is needed to meet the pledges made at Monterrey. We have heard a lot about the international development trust fund, although we discovered yesterday that it is not a fund but a facility. On listening to the Chancellor's evidence, it struck me that the fund resembles a reinvention of part of the World Bank. I am not entirely sure why we need to reinvent the World Bank, because there is a shortfall in the funds that are necessary for international development. The point is simple: Johannesburg is part of a process of UN conferences and we need to ensure that we deliver on the commitments, but we will not be able to do so unless the international community collectively pledges and provides the funds that are necessary to take those commitments forward.

Time is short, but I should like briefly to speak about the need for realism at Johannesburg. I hope that we will not see a split or spat between what one might describe as environmental NGOs and developing countries that are concerned about their development. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) made an interesting point that we all need to address. We in the west and north—the developed world—have had centuries of investment that continues to bring us rewards and riches. This week, Christian Aid brought to the House a number of witnesses from Africa who told us about the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi and Ghana. People in such countries are living in desperate poverty and for them, the debate is not about wind power, fusion or nuclear energy; very often, is it simply about how to find firewood and the means for getting through the next day. That is what constitutes sustainable development for them. We must not patronise them by suggesting that the only way of ensuring sustainable development is by somehow suppressing development in the developing countries. They, too, are entitled to sustainable development and should be encouraged to that end. I hope that we can find a language and a vocabulary at Johannesburg that ensures a truly sustainable world while allowing poor countries to break off and emerge from the grinding yoke of poverty that has borne down on them for far too long.

8.50 pm

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): The journey from Rio to Johannesburg is the journey from policies to programmes. It is important for hon. Members to recognise that that is what people expect the United Kingdom delegation to contribute to and to deliver as an outcome of the Johannesburg discussions. To put it on a global scale, it is an agenda of targets and time scale. I shall not labour that point, because the Minister is aware of the importance of targets and time scale as regards a

[Alan Simpson]

matter to do with the home front—more specifically, the warm homes front, where the issues of targets and time scale are an exact local reflection of what must be addressed globally in Johannesburg.

We should pay tribute to the achievements of this Labour Government, while not seeking to duck the challenges on the path ahead of us. For me, the starting point remains the Deputy Prime Minister's important achievement in delivering the Kyoto agreement. It was he who, at the very last minute, managed to pluck an agreement out of the fire that was constructed around the phrase "contraction and convergence". That is based on the belief that we in the industrial and developed world have to find a way of living differently: not living poorer lives, but living less wasteful, polluting and destructive lives. It is in many ways a path to a different sense of richness. The convergence principle is based on allowing the developing world to share in the sense of the possibility of sustainable lifestyles based on dignity and opportunity. There is a rightness about the symmetry of that contract.

When the Deputy Prime Minister succeeded in bringing back the Kyoto agreement for ratification and laying it before the House, that was the right thing, not only for a Labour Government, but for this country, to do. I have no doubt whatsoever that we will ratify it, nor that we will meet and exceed those targets. That will be an enormous challenge, but we will get there. We should put on the record our thanks to the Deputy Prime Minister for standing on that ground and continuing to do so.

For billions of people in the developing world, the other side of the agenda is survival. For the 1.2 billion people who live on less than $1 a day, the question of survival in a more sustainable future will be judged on whether they are there tomorrow, the day after that and the week after that. It is not possible to say that in 10, 20 or 30 years' time everything will be different. For many of those people, the difference will be between being alive and being dead.

I am sure that there will be anti-globalisation protesters in Johannesburg, and I encourage the UK delegation to attempt to understand what they are trying to tell us. They will say that the 49 poorest countries on the planet currently contribute less than 0.5 per cent. of global gross domestic product—a pitiful sum that is made even worse by the recognition that 20 years ago those countries contributed twice as much to global GDP. The protesters will also point out that the nature of globalisation has made the poor poorer. We need to understand the transition—almost a sea change—in international trade in the past 50 years.

The point where that dramatic change began was 1980. In the previous 30 years, the poorest countries on the planet had made genuine gains in per capita gross national product that improved the quality of their lives. Per capita GDP increased in Latin America by 73 per cent. and in Africa, by 34 per cent. However, in the subsequent two decades, GDP growth in Latin America was almost static—6 per cent. in 20 years. In Africa, GDP has fallen by 23 per cent. So much has been driven by the sacrifices that the poorest parts of the planet have been required to make on the altar of globalisation.

The ability of the poorest countries to say that they would produce to meet their needs first led to almost all the achievements in genuine per capita growth. They were based on assumptions about import substitution, not production for export, and on the notion that those countries could construct protective barriers. I believe that the tariffs were deemed acceptable because they were perceived as an effective barrier against the spread of communism. They were therefore allowed and encouraged, and that made the countries in question objectively richer.

Post-1980, in the era of market liberalisation, all the rights of the poorest countries have been stripped away. Consequently, the poor are now poorer. The anti-globalisation protesters will try to require the rest of us to tackle that. They will concentrate on at least four themes, and this evening I want to try to consider climate change, water, food and sustainable lifestyles rather than sustainable profits.

We must start by making our contribution to tackling climate change. I am pleased that a Labour Government provided the first fuel poverty strategy of any Government anywhere on the planet. We have set a target of eliminating fuel poverty in this country in 15 years. That is an ambitious target, which we will achieve. We will be helped to do that by passing the private Member's Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) has promoted. The time scale has been slightly delayed, but the measure will be passed by the end of July. It has formed the basis of setting and fulfilling our targets. Let us consider the way in which we can share that.

I ask the Minister and the delegation that goes to Johannesburg to take with them a microcosm of a strategy that might work in a different, internationalised future for the 21st century: a lovely programme in this country called the BedZED approach. It is about changing housing standards by design. There is a twinning process between Sutton, where the programme was developed in this country, and Johannesburg. The programme results not only in a 90 per cent. reduction in domestic heating costs, but in the use of sustainable materials in the construction of housing, and building a sustainable infrastructure to support it. It is a wonderful cameo of what we have to share and the way in which approaches can be gifted internationally. I hope that Ministers will derive some credit for that twinning transaction, which we will have to replicate on a bigger scale throughout the century.

We must also tackle renewable energy, which hon. Members are right to discuss. The United Kingdom has set itself a target of 10 per cent. by 2010. It is important to achieve that and go further. Of course it is right to point out that, in the same time scale, Germany will try to develop 100,000 properties that are heated by renewable energy. At the same time, Japan has set itself a target of 1 million homes powered by renewable energy.

We must look at those targets and reconsider, because in the poorest parts of the planet, as well as in the more remote parts of our own lands, this approach will allow us to deliver real savings in terms of a reduction of greenhouse gasses. We must do that if we are to have anything credible to say to the 2 billion people on the planet who have no access to electricity of any sort. They are not in anyone's energy loop. We must reach out and connect them to the more renewable and mobile sources of energy supply.

The Minister pointed out that 2 million people die each year because they do not have access to uncontaminated water. One billion people do not have access to safe water. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations has pointed out that there will have to be an 80 per cent. increase in crop production by 2030, but on current calculations, we shall have access to only a 12 per cent. increase in water supply.

That will present an enormous challenge, and we shall not be able to meet it if we saddle ourselves with the approach adopted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to the debt cancellation programmes that we are attempting to pioneer. We must consider what goes alongside debt cancellation. This is not a question of whether we cancel debt in areas of conflict. Rather, we must examine the conditionality agreements that are foisted on the countries that accept debt cancellation.

Bolivia, for example, was forced to give away its water supply free of charge to a London-based water company. The result was that the company increased its water charges to the poor by 35 per cent. There were riots in the town of Cochabamba, and the armed forces were brought in to suppress a domestic population that was rioting because it could not get access to water that was being priced out of its reach. Similarly, debt cancellation conditions in Tanzania required the Government there to introduce charges for health and education. In Ecuador, the privatisation of the energy industry resulted in an 80 per cent. increase in gas charges.

That is the basis on which the World Development Movement recently issued a report called "States of Unrest II", which documented 77 issues of major conflict around the globe that countries affected by debt relief were experiencing as a result of a fire sale of their primary assets. The poor have a right to be angry with us if we are extracting that kind of price for debt cancellation. That is not debt relief; it is a different kind of indebtedness, and it gives people a different sense of desolation about what the future holds.

We have to go back to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's objective—that the priorities and the connectedness between food and water for the next century must involve our getting "more crop per drop". That is its argument on how we should approach the needs of the developing world, and it must bring with it a recognition that we should not ask the developing world to abandon sustainable agriculture systems based on meeting their own needs in favour of shifting to more water-intensive programmes for intensive agriculture, to produce for export.

A dependency on exporting their primary crops was precisely what got many of the developing countries into real debt. They produced those crops so well that it resulted in a collapse in commodity price and, unable to use hard currency earnings to buy their way out of debt, the only thing that remained unaffected was the scale of the dollar debts that they were expected to pay off in the face of those collapsed commodity prices.

The industrial world has to recognise that we must offer developing countries a different choice. We cannot judge them on the basis of their inability to feed us. They must have the opportunity to feed themselves before they think about doing that. Part of that agenda must include developing countries' right—which we support—to say no to the imposition of GM crop technologies, which will only accelerate the water demands of the intensive agriculture systems that they seek to underpin. We must give those nations the right we would assert for our own citizens: the right to say no to development that would endanger prospects of survival.

Let me say something about sustainable lifestyles as opposed to sustainable profits. In Johannesburg there will be huge corporate pressures for sustainability to be redefined around the notion of profitability. That will provide no answers for the developing world, or for us.

This is the best single example I can give. When Maneka Gandhi was India's Environment Minister, she came to this country at about the time when we were beginning to talk about chlorofluorocarbon and hydrofluorocarbon pollutants in our fridges. I know that this is another sensitive subject for the Minister, and I do not want to rub salt in the wound, but this is what the Environment Minister told us. She said, "We realise you have a problem. I suspect that if the United Kingdom set itself a serious target, it could remove all its polluting fridges within a decade. That would probably require you to replace 20 million fridges. It would create lots of work, and you would feel incredibly virtuous. At the end of the decade, you would look for international praise. At the end of the same decade, however, India alone will contain 200 million households that have legitimately sought the right to own a fridge. According to the development model of the last century, you will have palmed off all your polluting fridges on us and called it aid. What we really need is the opportunity to be part of a sustainable global agenda, but that must be a gift relationship that gives us access to technologies that will allow us to produce better lifestyles without destroying the prospects for others."

That, I hope, is the keystone of any test of any agreement that this country will stand up for and bring back from Johannesburg.

9.7 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I have declared my interests in the Register of Members' Interests.

There is a central tension, referred to in the report accompanying the debate, between development and the need to clean up the planet. I do not think that we heard any serious attempt to reconcile the two—except in the excellent speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry), who said that, if forced to choose, he would choose development and greater prosperity for the world's poorer nations rather than meeting ever more demanding targets for control of pollution.

How, I asked the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce), would the Liberal Democrats resolve that obvious tension? The hon. Gentleman replied that he would want to see a global target for ensuring that pollution fell year on year world wide, whatever the rate of growth and whatever the rate of increase in pollution from the world's poorest countries. That is a noble aim, but a dangerous aim for anyone in government, or serious about governing, to recommend.

We cannot know how successful development policies will be, and we cannot know how many millions of Chinese or Indians will soon have fridges and cars, and far greater energy demands. It would be quite wrong of us in the rich west to tell those people that they have no

[Mr. John Redwood]

right to enjoy the energy-intensive technologies that have powered our prosperity in recent decades, and it would be very difficult for us to say that we will definitely tax and regulate ourselves stringently enough—in the way that Liberal Democrats usually recommend—to offset all the potentially huge growth in energy use in the developing world.

I am sure that those who have spoken today—including the Minister—who are angry about poverty in the third world, about the deaths of children and about the hundreds of millions who have no access to fresh water of a decent standard or to energy of any kind that we would recognise are right to be angry. I am sure that our priority should be to extend the hand of friendship, trade, prosperity and technology to the hundreds of millions in the dozens of countries all over the world who have no access to the most rudimentary of the home and creature comforts that we all take for granted. That surely must be the priority of this mighty summit as, once again, 65,000 people assemble to try to put the world to rights.

If we ask ourselves what the UK Government can do to tackle the monumental poverty that disfigures our world, we realise that the issues are too numerous to mention in this short debate, but let me highlight just a few. The first is surely that where we have influence and the ability to use it for the good, we must try to stem the conflicts and move developing countries towards regimes that put economic prosperity and liberty ahead of war and of declaring war on their own people for their own political ends. There is no credit to be gained by advancing money in the form of grant or loan to regimes that use it to buy new Mercedes for the generals running the country and new military hardware to repress their poor people if they dare to complain about the rotten system under which they live.

I ask the Minister to remind the House of the Government's policy, which I support, of not offering grant or debt retirement to regimes that will clearly abuse our money and our trust. It was not easy for the Secretary of State to defend that policy and I admire the fact that she has done so, but we need to go beyond that and move from the negative to the positive.

We need to use our influence and that of the other rich countries who are our allies and friends both in the Americas and in the European Union to try to move more countries into a position where they can establish a civil society. Without a civil society and the rule of law, there is absolutely no chance of those countries having the opportunity to become better off and have decent food and water. If we cannot support Governments and regimes and forces of legitimate opposition that wish to establish a decent civil society, we will have no chance of doing all the other wonderful things that we would like to do to help their development, such as encouraging private sector investment and money flows, which are usually the best way of securing prosperity.

We should understand that not only does five times as much money flow from the private sector to the developing world as from Governments, but that the money that flows from the private sector to the private sector in developing countries is much more useful in lifting the living standards and aspirations of people than is much of the Government-to-Government money. Many good studies show how much Government-to-Government money is wasted or diverted into less legitimate causes by the Governments who receive it. Even where we believe that to some extent a regime is worth backing, corruption or misappropriation still occurs, making it difficult for the subjects of that country to benefit.

Finally, we should attempt to understand the mighty log in our eye when we look at the moral issue of the world's poor. Surely the biggest log in our eye, collectively, in the European Union and in the UK is the common agricultural policy. Many developing countries are most likely to produce crops for export before they have industrial products for export. I understand the point made by the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson), but one of the best opportunities that these countries have is to sell agricultural exports for hard currency. One reason why the global markets are so depressed is that the EU runs a protection racket in many sectors, so that a big block of the world's most mighty and rich countries is not generating sufficient demand on the world markets to encourage developing economies.

I welcome all the charities and interest groups from outside the House who have been lobbying and will continue to lobby for fair trade. It is a very good idea, but it must also be reflected in Government policy on the EU. We have heard for many years from Governments of both persuasions about reforming the CAP. We have heard from this Government that they have far more influence in Brussels than the outgoing Conservative Government had. Would it not be good if we could be told tonight that at last this influence will work and there will be some reform of the CAP that will be good for consumers and taxpayers here in Britain? It would be very good for the world's poorest countries if some of that protection racket were at last torn down and their farmers given the chance of a decent life.

I believe that we in the rich United Kingdom should make ever bigger contributions to reducing the pollution that we inject into the planet's atmosphere. We have made good strides, and we need to make more. The two most dramatic developments in recent years came about in rather surprising ways. Following the privatisation of the electricity industry, it suddenly became possible to build the combined cycle gas stations that the nationalised monopoly always refused to build. We leapt from about 38 per cent. fuel efficiency to 55 or 60 per cent., which made a huge difference to the amount of pollution that we churn out.

As the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones) pointed out in a thoughtful contribution, this Government now face an even bigger challenge. The previous, Conservative Government were able to implement a super-green privatisation policy, which made far and away the biggest contribution to our success so far in reducing pollution. We now need from this Government a policy on what to do when the nuclear stations need to be replaced. If they are not going to replace nuclear with nuclear—it is very unlikely that they can replace it with non-fossil fuel of any other kind, given the pathetic efforts so far—what else do they intend to do to get us back to where we should be? We will take a mighty step backwards if nuclear stations are replaced by gas, or some other fossil fuel technology.

Paradoxically, the second area in which we have made enormous strides is the pariah—according to the Liberal Democrat lexicon on environmental matters—of the

motor car. Huge improvements have been made in the performance of the typical family saloon in the past decade. Current family saloons pollute to only about 4 per cent. of the extent of comparable vehicles built some 12 or 15 years ago. That has been achieved through a combination of incentive, technology and regulation. Such massive improvement shows that technology in free markets can make a big contribution to cleaning up the planet. We now need to make a similar attack on pollution from old and dirty diesel railway locomotives, and from old and dirty diesel buses. We have not renewed the bus and train fleet as quickly as the car fleet, so proportionately public transport vehicles—particularly those that are not used by enough passengers—pollute more than do the modern versions of motor cars.

I hope that the Government want the car industry to progress from 30 or 40 mpg vehicles to 80 or 90 mpg vehicles. The technology exists, and it can be done. I hope, too, that they want to make yet further progress in cleaning up exhausts through a mixture of incentive and regulation. That brings me to a very important principle. We make so much more progress if we work with the grain of human nature by offering incentive, rather than working against it by trying to stop people enjoying our society's marvellous inventions through a mixture of high taxation and regulation. The two successes in green policy—first, under a Conservative Government, and now under a Labour Government—involved offering a tax discount for good conduct, rather than clobbering people for alleged bad conduct. The Conservatives began getting rid of lead in petrol by offering an incentive to buy unleaded fuel, and this Government are getting rid of sulphur in petrol by offering a similar discount. That is an excellent scheme; let us go on with it.

One major way in which we can contribute to greening our country—and thereby modestly contribute to greening the planet—is to use a similar range of tax incentives to tackle the dirt and pollution generated by the typical home heating system. A generation of boilers that are very old—compared with the average age of car engines—and inefficient remains in use. Many homes are not properly thermally insulated. A few small programmes exist to help people on low incomes get better insulation and achieve better fuel efficiency in the home, but we need to attack the problem much more manfully. In terms of pollution, the space heating problem is far bigger than the car problem. We also need to establish a better tax incentive policy to tackle the abuse of waste, to which reference has already been made.

I am conscious that many other hon. Members wish to speak, so I shall conclude by urging the Government to put development ahead of everything else at the summit. It is the blight of poverty that we should be most appalled at and worried by. The Government should understand that we need to contribute to stronger regimes that can create a civil society, and to back the private sector, which will be the main agent for change and improvement in such countries. We need desperately to deal with our common agricultural policy problem, and with the other remaining barriers to trade within our European trading framework.

We need to make much better strides at home towards greening our own country. However, that should be done by judicious regulation and tax discount, and not by treating anyone who drives a car or behaves in a way that the Government do not like as a pariah who must be taxed out of existence.

We can enjoy the benefits of modern technology, and we can make them ever greener. Wealth and technology will win the battle against pollution, not taxation and backward thinking.

9.20 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). He is always thought-provoking and provocative, but I thought that his declaration of support for the previous, Conservative Government's energy policy omitted mention of the huge destruction caused to many mining communities by the extremely vindictive policies pursued by his party in government. That is a classic example of how not to promote sustainable development and the greening of policy in the UK.

The Government deserve considerable praise for the seriousness of their preparations for the Johannesburg summit. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was the first international leader to commit himself to attend the summit, and the way in which my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretaries of State for International Development and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have engaged in the preparations for it is hardly consistent with the lack of enthusiasm that the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) tried to depict.

I shall support the Government's amendment tonight, but whoever drafted it might usefully have included a series of other policy measures that the Government have introduced. They include, for example, the launch of the renewables obligation, the extra £200 million that will go to develop our renewables industry, and the publication only today of the UK's combined heat and power strategy. They are all examples of other measures that the Government have taken to promote sustainability in the UK.

I want briefly to highlight three specific issues on which more needs to be done. I welcome the good judgment shown once again by Mr. Speaker in selecting for debate in Westminster Hall next week the subject of renewable energy. The debate will be opened by the hon. Member for Harrow, West, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones)—who has rightly highlighted the need for us to stimulate the take-up of sustainable energy in a variety of ways—will participate too.

Combined heat and power is a neglected source of energy. The Government have gone some way towards addressing the matter with the publication today of their CHP strategy. However, there are other things that need to be done when it comes to implementing the strategy.

The decision of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in the Budget to exempt CHP fully from the climate change levy was welcome, but it must be implemented swiftly and effectively if the mood and climate in the CHP industry are to be turned around. I understand that there could be a delay before the measure comes into force, as EU approval for such state aid is required. However, I hope that the Government will act speedily to ensure that that approval is secured.

As I mentioned in my intervention on my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, who opened the debate for the Government, there is urgent need for reform

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

of the new electricity trading arrangements. The way in which Ofgem has tried to drag its feet in the matter is unacceptable. Representatives of the CHPA and Ofgem met only last week, but Ofgem's chief executive, Mr. McCarthy, seemed entirely unable to spell out how Ofgem intended to resolve the problem.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that in its evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, Ofgem said that it had not yet been issued with the statutory environmental guidelines that the Department of Trade and Industry is supposed to issue? Is he concerned that Ofgem's attitude towards NETA and renewable energy has been governed by a narrow interpretation of the legislation and not by the wider context that those statutory guidelines would have helped to create? Will he join me in urging the Government to introduce those guidelines, as there is an obvious failing in Ofgem?

Mr. Thomas: As I indicated, I have grave concerns about Ofgem's behaviour in this context. I do not accept its argument that it is the Government's fault. The Government have made their views on what they want Ofgem to do very clear. Frankly, Ofgem needs to get on with it quickly.

I hope that the Government will take advantage of the powers in the Utilities Act 2000 to create a CHP obligation in the same way as the obligation has been created for renewables. I also hope that there will be a correction of what appears to be a genuine mistake that has imposed the full costs of the renewables obligation on, ironically, CHP schemes, causing unintended significant additional costs for many CHP developers.

My second point concerns steps that could be taken to promote business consideration of environmental issues such as climate change and waste minimisation. My right hon. Friend the Minister quite rightly touched on the importance of promoting corporate social responsibility. Some large businesses have, through the production of environmental reports, already begun to address sustainable development at boardroom level. Over the past 10 years, a whole industry has virtually been created around corporate social and environmental reporting. There are very good examples of businesses reporting on environmental and other issues. However, much more could be done in the business world. The Prime Minister rightly issued a challenge to the top 300 FTSE companies to produce a substantive environmental report. The truth is that some two thirds have not yet responded properly to that challenge.

The time has come for us to consider whether we need to require companies of a certain size to publish meaningful information on their environmental performance every year so that consumers, shareholders and investors can judge how they have performed in that area. It is superficially attractive to argue that voluntary initiatives should be left to work and that simply urging and chiding the business world is enough, but there have been examples of the voluntary approach not working. The energy rating scheme, for example, was developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The then Government declined for several years to set any standards but eventually had to intervene to clarify the confusion that was created. That is an example of the merit of requiring a certain basic level of environmental information to be published by all major companies.

When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was at the Department of Trade and Industry, she quite rightly established the company law review, which published its final report in July last year. A key recommendation of the report was to have a new requirement on most large public companies to produce an operating and financial review as part of the company's annual report. It was suggested that sets of both mandatory and voluntary information should be published in that review. Sadly, it was recommended that the voluntary category should include all policies and performance on environmental issues. I hope that Ministers will not accept that suggestion, but instead require big business to publish certain basic environmental indicators.

Last year, DEFRA published a series of environmental indicators that businesses could use. They set out how businesses could work up information and clear guidance was offered on three key points: greenhouse gas emissions; waste disposal; and water usage. It would be useful if businesses could publish information on those points and I hope Ministers will consider that requirement.

The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) referred to waste. Although I welcome the fact that the performance and innovation unit is considering that issue, there is scope for a debate in this place to reflect the considerable concern in many of our communities about the scourge of litter and the increasingly rapid escalation of household waste.

I hope that Ministers will respond to those points and that we can make further progress on taking up the sustainability challenge in the UK.

9.30 pm

Sue Doughty (Guildford): In February, Margot Wallstrom, the EU Environment Commissioner, said:

> "We cannot keep coming back from world gatherings with impressive commitments and fine words that we then leave in a corner of our offices to gather dust."

Since Kyoto, there has been some danger that, as she feared:

> "Our implementation deficit will quickly turn into a credibility gap".

It is reasonable to expect developed countries to take action before they commit themselves and to pursue economic growth in a way that does not break environmental limits.

The agenda for the world summit has moved on; it is no longer purely environmental but offers the opportunity to provide a framework for the integration of trade, development, environment and social questions. That is understandable given the rapid escalation of issues relating to trade, justice and debt that so affect the poorest countries of the world.

The Government have tended to focus their attention on support for those countries in the key aspects of water, energy, health, food security and governance. How far have we moved towards meeting our responsibilities, however? What has happened since Rio? How can we make sure that we use the impetus of Johannesburg to

energise our initiatives to meet our responsibilities? We must ensure that we do not miss the opportunities offered by Johannesburg.

The UK Government must use the momentum of the Johannesburg process to strengthen their commitment to the centrality of sustainable development at all levels in the UK. We must firmly entrench sustainable strategies and their regular monitoring in national, regional and local government. Too often, there is a gap between central Government, who initiate measures—on waste management, for example—and local government which wants to implement them but does not have the means to do so.

The debate has been wide ranging, although I know that hon. Members wanted to cover many more points. We have many more questions about the Government's plans and we could have done with more time. When we consider what the Government are doing, we find that there are many principles but not much practice. The Government's website defines sustainable development. It gives the history, objectives and guiding and precautionary principles, but instruments and mechanisms, strategies and legislation are yet to come. We need them now.

We need targets and timetables for many aspects of sustainable development. As the Secretary of State for International Development said, we do not merely need the odd renewable energy project. We need to ensure that, as the poorest nations develop their economies, they do not make the same mistakes as we did with fossil fuels.

We need to strengthen our own renewable energy businesses so that we can offer development help to those who need it. We have been missing a trick; Germany has moved much faster than us and is offering such help—we should be doing the same.

We can do much more to promote green electricity, perhaps with publicity. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones) thinks that we are not doing enough. Perhaps he does not read our strategies for green energy by 2050—we have the long term in view. I wish that I could persuade London Electricity to do what I say and give me my green tariff. I have pleaded with London Electricity for that tariff. We want it; we try to deliver.

Energy is fundamental to economic and social development. It is fundamental to human economic activity and access to services. We need those services not just for ourselves; we must demand them for others as well. Some 2 billion people lack access to modern energy services. If they are to achieve decent standards of living by using traditional fossil fuels, the impact on the planet will be totally devastating.

What are we doing at home? We still have concerns at home. People are saying that the Home Energy Conservation Bill is wonderful. Yes, we know that it is wonderful. Like everyone else, we have been asking for the Bill, yet it is like being left waiting at the church. On Second Reading, the Government said that they support the Bill. HECA officers—the people who implement the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995—want to deliver the proposals at local government level. They are waiting for the Bill and they are saying, "What is the point if there are no targets? We might as well not bother."

We have a letter from the Minister without Portfolio in which he says that the Government have supported that Bill at every stage and will continue to do so, yet we have a problem every time that we try to include targets in the Bill. It was intended to deliver sustainable energy targets to reduce greenhouse gases, but the Government have moved amendments to remove those targets.

On 14 January, in response to the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed), the Minister for the Environment said:

> "The hon. Gentleman made a just point about whether the Bill was adequately funded. I am glad to assure him that, in our view, it certainly is."—[*Official Report*, 14 January 2002; Vol. 378, c. 125.]

However, he also suggested that the Bill could not be funded because the money was not there. So the Bill will come back and we will all troop in again, but I hope that the Government will not persuade the Bill's promoter to talk it out. I hope that it will be enacted. We are debating our role on the world stage, so it will be a matter of shame if we cannot even implement the Home Energy Conservation Bill.

I realise that hon. Members are waiting to hear the winding-up speeches in this very interesting debate, but many other issues could be covered. Hon. Members have referred to waste management and the problem that waste is being created faster than the economy is developing. Plastic bottles are being recycled and made into drainage tubes, but the company that does that work in the United Kingdom is importing bottles from Belgium because the Government have failed to implement a sustainable waste strategy that works.

We still have to deal with the challenges about sustainable timber. Hon. Members will remember that the Government had to back-track on all the comings and goings and silliness about the wood that was used in the Cabinet Office.

Malcolm Bruce: As well as in the Department for International Development's offices.

Sue Doughty: Even DFID, of all Departments, cannot guarantee that it is using sustainable timber. There is a hell of a long way to go before we can hold up our heads. We have got tough challenges ahead. We want the Government to lead the country so that we do well. All hon. Members would support that view, but we must not fool ourselves.

It is a joke to talk about people using cleaner cars in the south-east, when they are sitting in traffic jams, going nowhere and public transport is being dismantled. Listening to people say that we need cleaner buses, when buses have been deregulated and are scarcely economic to run, will not do a lot about fuel emissions, which is an important issue. We wish the Government well; we will measure them on their performance, but we will support all that they do in their work in Johannesburg.

9.39 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): This has been a very good debate, but, sadly, not nearly long enough. Many hon. Members still want to speak, and I hope that, between the Bali preparatory conference and Johannesburg, the Government will have a proper debate on sustainable development on the Floor of the House. There is so much to be said which has not been said this evening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) talked about genuine partnerships between rich and poor, in which he was echoed by many other

[Dr. Jenny Tonge]

Members, and about the fact that we must not take the lion's share of the Earth's resources. He made his point strongly about the lack of consultation by the Secretary of State and the lack of information to the House about what will happen at Johannesburg, which is disgraceful, and he criticised the USA for turning its back on the poor of the world.

The Minister for the Environment, who said many good things and made a very interesting speech, was nevertheless very much on the defensive about the meeting at Bali. He told us that, amazingly, 65,000 people will be at Johannesburg. I do not know how many aeroplanes that will involve, but I do know that, in terms of CO_2 emissions, one flight to Johannesburg and back is the equivalent of one car driven for a whole year. I hope that Johannesburg is worthwhile because it will contribute hugely to global warming.

The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) gave her usual careful and meticulous analysis, and especially emphasised the amount of waste in the north and in developing countries. I have never lost my car keys in a black bag, but I did drop them down a street drain in Birmingham once. The street cleansing department became involved while my children bawled inside the car because they could not get at their mother. Looking back, it was quite fun.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) rightly said that there are too many conferences and too many pledges. The processes take place all over again, but who monitors our progress? That point was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Sue Doughty), who said that we must monitor ourselves and look at where all the agreements and treaties are going, rather than just making more of them.

I am glad that renewable forms of energy were mentioned by many hon. Members—the subject dominated the debate. The Minister for the Environment talked at length about renewable forms of energy, which were also mentioned by the hon. Members for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones), for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas)—he always makes a good contribution, but, unfortunately, was not able to make a speech tonight—and my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon, who mentioned the Greenpeace and Body Shop campaign for more renewable forms of energy in the third world, of which I hope that the House will take note. The issue was also mentioned by the hon. Members for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) and for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas).

The hon. Member for Nottingham, South mentioned problems with water, too, as did the Minister for the Environment. Getting clean water to the people of this world is crucial, and is as important as education. If we can rank factors in development in order of importance, clean water is certainly very high on the list.

Trade and the common agricultural policy were dealt with by many hon. Members, but particularly by the Minister for the Environment and the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who made a useful and thoughtful contribution.

One of the less publicised international development goals in all our documents and White Papers is the implementation of national strategies for sustainable development in all countries by 2005 to ensure that current trends in the loss of environmental resources are effectively reversed, at global and national levels, by 2015. That is very difficult in poor countries. My gut reaction, which I am sure that other hon. Members who have been to third world countries share, is to want to give those countries as much as possible as quickly as possible.

As the right hon. Member for Wokingham said, people in third world countries want electricity, fridges, hot water and cars, just as we do. The lifestyle that they lead may sometimes look picturesque to us, but it is not much fun for them. If we point out the problems of sustainability, environmental damage and child labour to them, they will say, "You did all those things in the 19th and 20th centuries. Nobody preached to you about the damage you were doing to the world. We want what you have." If they are to get those things—which they deserve and should get—we must make sacrifices ourselves. We must give way and use less energy. Above all, we must lead by example on issues such as renewable sources of energy.

How many of us have seen examples of projects that have been supported by UK Government aid or by Export Credits Guarantee Department and World Bank loans and have not been sustainable? I remember that members of the Select Committee on International Development visited the Jinja dam in Uganda. It was a fine project, but the dam was crumbling because it had not been properly maintained. Only last week, I was studying the water supply system in Accra which, over the past 30 years, has been funded by the World Bank and the UK. The Ghanaian water authority is maintaining the system so badly that 52 per cent. of the water is wasted. No wonder the World Bank and the Department for International Development are talking about looking for private contractors.

However, as I have said, there are difficulties with privatisation. It is fine but we must remember the poor. There is no point in privatising if the poor cannot afford the commodity provided. That point must be borne constantly in mind. All future projects must be sustainable over the long term. The main aim should be sustainability and relief of poverty and not profit for companies in the north, although I appreciate that that is a factor.

We have not heard much about the behaviour of transnational companies and the multinationals. I want to touch on that point briefly, because some of them have a turnover that is much larger than that of many countries. Those companies have a huge responsibility on their shoulders for the future of the environment, global warming and the planet. Many guidelines, compacts and codes of conduct deal with their behaviour, but they must be made compulsory. In particular, the guidelines of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development must be enforceable. Could they not be incorporated into the criteria for licence applications considered by the ECGD? There must be some way of ensuring that large companies behave.

I thought that there was going to be no mention of forestry, but my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford referred to the subject just before I rose to speak. I thank her for that. I and other Members will remember the regions and rivers in Colombia where illegal logging and deforestation is going on apace. It is difficult to travel on the rivers in Colombia because they are silting up. Whole tracts of south America have become filthy marshland

because the trees can no longer hold back the soil. Enormous environmental damage is being caused and the trees are not there to absorb the CO_2 that we produce.

The forests in that region are not sustainable. My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford alluded to the wood used in the Cabinet Office and the Department for International Development. We do not wear furs, even though the animals are already dead, and we should not use wood from unsustainable forests even though the trees have already been cut down. That only encourages others to do likewise.

This has been a good debate, but I hope that we shall get some sense from the Government of the big idea. What lead will they take in Bali and Johannesburg? Let us not have another talking shop with nothing to show for it in five years' time. Let us have a treaty with firm commitments on water, energy, tourism and forestry. There are so many things to do if we are to save the planet. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us on all the points raised.

9.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Hilary Benn): Like my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, I congratulate the Liberal Democrats on initiating the debate even if part of the speech of the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) and the words in the motion have been rather churlish in not recognising the role that the Government have played in supporting the world summit for sustainable development. The views expressed did not square with the good report produced by the Environmental Audit Committee. It sets out clearly the facts about the leadership that the Government are providing. For instance, referring to the fact that the Prime Minister was the first major world leader to say that he would attend, the report said:

"Such high level leadership is crucial to advancing the sustainable development agenda both domestically and abroad."

It also said:

"We find UK preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development to be comprehensive and well organised . . . we commend the Government for its strategic and inclusive approach."

That clearly reflects our approach.

Mr. Simon Thomas: I agree that the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) might have over-egged the argument about preparations, but the Bali conference, which the Minister for the Environment said might be even more important than Johannesburg, is vital to how we consider the role of the summit. Will the Under-Secretary ensure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs gives a statement after the Bali conference, to which we have the opportunity to respond?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will carefully consider the suggestion that the House have a further opportunity, before Johannesburg, to consider what we want the summit to achieve.

The debate has been valuable because it has given the House a chance to focus on the two biggest challenges that we face: reducing world poverty and ensuring that that is done sustainably. Every contribution reflected on those challenges: how can we as human beings live within the earth's environmental means and, at the same time, tackle the problems of poverty, inequality and injustice? It is not a choice between the two. That came across clearly. We have to do both, which is what the world summit is all about. If it is to succeed, it will have to embrace both perspectives.

We have moved on from the days when it might have appeared that conservation was more interested in the trees than in the people who lived in the forests where those trees grew. We understand the importance of finding ways of earning a living that are consistent with sustaining the environment. As many hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), said, providing opportunities for trade will make a major contribution to lifting people out of poverty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) mentioned genetically modified crops. That is a matter for all Governments—our Government, the Governments of developing countries or wherever—to make their own decisions on, weighing up the benefits and risks of their approach.

We also know that the poor suffer most from environmental problems. Let me give one statistic. Every year 2 million children under five die from acute respiratory infection. Two thirds of those deaths are thought to be related to indoor air pollution, which is caused principally by burning fuel in confined spaces for cooking and heating. That is a form of pollution that many people in the rich and developed world would not know of as a risk, yet it kills all those children every year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones) rightly referred to the rise in the sea level. If it rises around Bangladesh, the homes of the people who live on the delta will disappear. The people who live on the shifting sands of the shorelands of Bangladesh experience that every year. When the rains fall in the north and the water floods down, they have literally to pick up their homes and move. When I was in Bangladesh recently, I met a woman of about 45 who told me that she had moved 30 to 35 times in her life because of flooding.

Over the next generation, we will also have to face the urban challenge in developing countries. Most people in the rich world live in urban areas. In the developing world, with the exception of Latin America, there is a relatively low level of urbanisation, but that is about to change. While the rural population of developing countries is expected to remain at roughly 3 billion over the next 25 years, their urban population will double from 2 billion to 4 billion. To illustrate that, let me use as an example the city of which I have the honour, in part, to represent. That increase is the equivalent of 112 new cities the size of Leeds being created each year, every year, for the next 25 years across the globe.

One has to pause for a moment to contemplate the need for water, to which many hon. Members referred. I agree with the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) that water has to be affordable. We must also recognise the role that water provision plays in other aspects of development. If one puts a pump in a village, more girls will go to school because they will not have to spend time fetching and carrying water—a burden that falls particularly on women and girls.

[Hilary Benn]

We must think of the need for sanitation and of the need for energy, which was mentioned by many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) and the hon. Member for Guildford (Sue Doughty). On energy, if we can get investment into developing countries—it is investment, and the ability to earn a living and to trade, that they need above all—the technology, which we now have the ability to use because of advances in science and understanding, will follow.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Is not one way of accelerating the investment to which my hon. Friend refers to build on the commendable progress that we have made in meeting the UN's target for aid of 0.7 per cent. of GDP? Does he agree that economically we are in a strong position to set an international lead by developing and publishing a timetable for this country to achieve that target? Is not that a possibility in this Parliament?

Hilary Benn: As my hon. Friend will know, after 20 years in which the UK aid budget declined as a share of our national wealth, we have started to reverse that trend and are now on an upward path. I hope that the comprehensive spending review will demonstrate further progress towards the UN target, which we want to achieve.

I am referring, however, to the investment that will make a major contribution to improving economic prospects in developing countries. Much of the aid that we give focuses on assisting Governments who want to get their kids into school, and on helping them to improve their health care and to achieve the right framework and environment so that investment will come to the country and give their people the opportunity of a better future.

We know from this debate that we in the rich world have to use less of the world's resources so as to create the environmental space for poorer countries to develop. I was much taken by the elegant phrase used by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South, who talked about the need to take

"a path to a different sense of richness".

As a number of hon. Members have rightly said, developing countries will not for one second buy the argument that because we in the rich world have used up so much of the Earth's resources, they must wait for another life to enjoy the same benefit.

The other point to remember about the world summit is that it is part of a process, and we need to get our expectations right. It is not a make-or-break event, but part of a series. The hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry), who chairs the International Development Committee, rightly pointed out that it is part of a process in which the world is trying to address sustainability and poverty reduction. We hope that it will be able to build on the success of Doha in launching a new trade round, and on Monterrey, which has produced more aid.

Above all, we want to see practical outcomes. In a thoughtful speech, the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) reminded us that change is possible. I want to take just one example, which concerns the issue that the hon. Member for Richmond Park raised at the end of her speech, timber and forestry. Illegal logging is a major problem that uniquely brings together the two issues that the world summit is all about.

Illegal logging is estimated to involve the loss of resources from public land in those countries affected by it of between $10 billion and $15 billion a year, which is more than all the aid that the world gives for health and education, so it really matters and it is a big issue. It involves corruption and it affects the livelihoods of people who live in the forest and rely on it for their existence. There is rising public concern about illegality and sustainability. The recent experience of two Departments has shown how difficult it is to turn the good intentions that we all have into practical action. With illegal logging, however, we have a chance to do that. The Government of Indonesia, which is a very good example of a developing country that has taken a courageous lead on the issue, are seizing shipments. Indonesia's new Forestry Minister is keen to change the way things work in that country, but in the end there will have to be a deal—

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 56, Noes 282.

Division No. 242] **[10 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L
Bruce, Malcolm
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Callon, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Gregory *(E Lond'y)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Chidgey, David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Doughty, Sue
Ewing, Annabelle
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Holmes, Paul
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Keetch, Paul
Kirkwood, Archy
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David
Llwyd, Elfyn
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Price, Adam
Pugh, Dr John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and Mr. Paul Tyler.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony

Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas *(Newcastle E & Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Corston, Jean
Cranston, Ross
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Healey, John
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Luke, Iain
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morris, Rt Hon Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purnell, James
Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Ruddock, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, Rt Hon John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Rt Hon Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and Angela Smith.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House applauds the leadership the UK is showing domestically and within the European Union, the G8 and the United Nations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development;

welcomes the fact that the Prime Minister intends to attend the Summit; further welcomes the UK's climate change programme which is estimated to overshoot its Kyoto target of a 12.5 per cent. cut in 1990 levels of greenhouse gas emissions by 2012, reaching a cut of 23 per cent.; commends the introduction in the UK last month of the world's first economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme; further welcomes the commitment in the Budget to significant increases in the landfill tax to promote recycling and waste minimisation; further applauds the fact that drinking water, river water and bathing water are at the highest ever quality; and calls upon the Government to continue to tackle global poverty through sustainable development.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Landfill (England and Wales) Regulations 2002, which were laid before this House on 26th March, be approved.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

PET TRAVEL SCHEME

That this House takes note of European Union Documents numbers 11596/00 and 12488/01, draft Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the animal health requirements applicable to non-commercial movement of pet animals; and congratulates the Government on securing for the United Kingdom, during the subsequent negotiations, the continuation, for at least five years, of arrangements similar to those contained in the successful United Kingdom Pet Travel Scheme.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Question agreed to.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Mr. Frank Field, Mr. George Howarth and Mr. Nigel Jones be added to the Committee of Public Accounts.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Magistrates Courts (Wiltshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Dan Norris.]*

10.13 pm

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): I am grateful to have secured this debate, and for the support of right hon. and hon. Friends, which demonstrates the importance that we attach to this issue. I am also grateful to the Minister for appearing, especially as he is a Wiltshire MP; I hope that he will bring to the debate a particular insight into the issue.

I have learned that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) also has a magistrates court in his county town of Oakham in Rutland that is threatened just as the magistrates court in my county town of Trowbridge in Wiltshire is threatened. However, the problem is country wide.

The county's magistrates courts committee recently announced plans to close the West Wiltshire magistrates court in Trowbridge in my constituency and the Devizes courthouse in the constituency of the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram). Those plans have been put on hold by the timely intervention of Wiltshire county council. I hope that that will provide a breathing space so that the Minister and the Lord Chancellor can reverse a disastrous decision. My right hon. Friend regrets that he is unable to be here, but having campaigned for much longer than I have for the retention of magistrates courts in Wiltshire, he has asked to be associated with my remarks.

Next week, I shall present a petition with more than 2,000 signatures in support of West Wiltshire magistrates court. Despite that measure of strong local feeling, some people have said to me, "What's the point? It's a done deal." We all moan that the public are uninterested in us and in what we do. The Government's response is to devise ever cleverer ways of re-engaging with them, such as electronic voting and polling booths at supermarkets, but the gist of it is that people feel that they cannot influence events that affect them. If the Government are serious about improving the reputation of politics, they must be prepared to be guided by strongly held local views of the sort that I have the privilege to represent today.

My local youth offending team has just produced a map of young offenders in the West Wiltshire and Kennet districts, and found that the majority live in and around Trowbridge and Devizes. What is more, a high proportion of offences in both districts occur within two miles of the two threatened courthouses. What effect does the Minister suppose that the closures will have on those young offenders, who will now have to find their way to the relatively remote and unfamiliar towns of Chippenham and Salisbury?

Before the election, the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said in their rural blueprint that

"market towns"

must be

"the focus of a range of private and public services to which people need access."

The DETR market town template specified the key services that towns with a population of just 10,000 to 25,000 needed, one of which was the presence of a magistrates court. That was reiterated in the Government paper entitled "Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead", which states:

"People should look upon their local Magistrates' Court or Crown Court as a public service in the same way they view hospitals and schools."

The Countryside Agency, in its annual rural proofing report, says that the Government

"should look again at the national policy framework within which decisions are currently taken about the location of magistrates' courts. The closure of magistrates' courts in market and small rural towns may be yielding savings for the Lord Chancellor's Department but is causing concern about higher costs and greater inconvenience for those in rural areas."

That is important, because it comes from the Countryside Agency—a Government quango. It is a great shame that the Government are not minded to take that sound advice.

In Wiltshire, the situation has already sparked the resignation of one of our longest-serving justices of the peace, and I fear that more resignations may be in the pipeline. The fact is that our magistracy are to be packed off to vast justice factories in the large urban centres. Farewell, then, to the notion that justice should be dispensed locally by those with some knowledge of the context in which a crime has been committed and in which a sentence handed down would ultimately be served. Farewell to any chance that the convicted will feature in the local press, so that justice can be seen to be done.

The Auld report endorsed a system of lay magistracy that has existed since 1361. I hope that the Minister will forgive me if I detect a desire to draw that to a close by way of the Government's centralisation of justice. Only this week, we have heard that magistrates are to be discouraged from using their JP post-nominals, a practice that I recall at least one Minister was pleased to follow until fairly recently. In itself that seems pretty unimportant, but it is symbolic of an attempt to downgrade the office. The implication behind the move may well add to the disillusion that is by stealth eroding the lay magistracy, paving the way for more stipendiaries in large sub-regional courthouses. We hear that Ministers are turning their backs on stealth. Let them come clean about their intentions for the bench.

In a previous debate on a similar issue, the Minister used in his defence a quote from the Government's document "The Way Ahead". He said:

"A criminal justice system must be effective at preventing offending and re-offending, efficient in the way in which it deals with cases, responsive to the needs of the victim and the law-abiding community and accountable for its decisions."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 31 October 2001; Vol. 373, c. 270–71WH.]

I hope that that is not in his speaking notes again. It strikes me on rereading *Hansard* as something of an own goal.

My comments are couched mainly in general terms, but Wiltshire's case is put extremely well in the county council's paper, which was sent to the Lord Chancellor in March. Wiltshire is a deceptive county. Its population lives in a doughnut around Salisbury plain, which, as the Minister knows, is the size of the Isle of Wight. That means that transport is far more difficult than the uninitiated imagine. To compound that, we learn that the closure of Trowbridge and Devizes would mean that the number of petty session divisions and courthouses would be far fewer than in other rural counties. Given that in some courts more than 40 per cent. of adjournments occur because defendants fail to turn up, I foresee grave difficulties for Wiltshire with far fewer courthouses than average, and unique geographic and transport challenges.

Of course, we must upgrade our courthouses. In particular, we must make them more accessible to disabled people. We must also ensure that they are healthy and safe for all who have business in them. There is no doubt that Charles Dickens would recognise Trowbridge courthouse, which needs to be brought kicking and screaming into the 21st century as a matter of urgency. The fabric of the building is inadequate and needs serious attention.

However, Ministers should be careful for two reasons. First, they should be careful when using the human rights agenda to proscribe, for example, the appearance of accused in handcuffs as they walk only a few feet from the police van to the courthouse door. If that constrains the rights of those who are not well off or who live in remote areas to equal access to justice, I wonder what, on balance, has been gained. Secondly, the Minister should note that disabled people are more likely than average to lose out if they are forced to travel to gain access to justice. Closures based on the cost of upgrading court rooms may be unhelpful.

We must recognise that those who have business in magistrates courts—the accused and their families, witnesses and victims—tend to be at the poorer end of the social spectrum. Many are on benefit, and many do not have ready access to transport. The hurdle that the closures present will be far higher for them than for the better off. The hurdle for those who live in remote rural areas will be higher than for those who live in towns. How does that square with the Government's stated desire to create an equitable and fair society?

A local policeman said to me that it is already difficult enough getting people to attend court in Trowbridge. If he had to get them to attend in Chippenham, there would be little chance. The well-off urbanite therefore presents himself at Chippenham in a timely fashion and the poor man from a small town or village does not, for a complex variety of reasons—and the Government believe that they are creating a fairer society.

The Minister cannot hide behind the decisions of the magistrates courts committees, as I regret that he did in his letter to me of 8 April. He knows that Wiltshire magistrates courts committee is caught between a rock and a hard place. In his haste to indulge an expensive taste in wall coverings, the Lord Chancellor has neglected to furnish magistrates courts committees with the necessary funding to cover the crippling extra burdens that he has imposed on them.

Although £600,000 buys mighty fine wallpaper, it would also renovate six court houses such as Trowbridge and ensure that people in areas like mine continue to have ready access to justice. Lord Chief Justice Auld is clear where the responsibility lies: in his opinion, courthouse closures are

"driven by the Lord Chancellor's Department."

It is important to remember where the blame lies. It is reprehensible of Ministers to pretend that that is a matter for magistrates courts committees when the responsibility lies firmly with Ministers.

[Dr. Andrew Murrison]

I hope that the Minister will take home some of those points. I recognise that he is a Wiltshire MP; he will therefore know the geography of the area. I also hope that the Countryside Agency's point about the rurality of the area, along with the need to ensure access, the special situation of Wiltshire with regard to transport, and the large area of Salisbury plain in the middle which means that access from north to south is extremely difficult, will convince him that we have a case for keeping the Trowbridge and Devizes courthouses open. A particularly telling revelation was made by the county council, which showed that, were those courthouses to close, we would have far fewer courthouses than one might expect, compared with similar rural counties in the south-west and nationwide.

This is an important issue that affects us all, wherever our constituencies may be. It is about access to justice, one of the most fundamental tenets that we value in this country. My strong concern is that, with the closure of those two courthouses and a move towards a system of justice based in large urban centres and housed in vast justice factories, that access would be denied, particularly to the most vulnerable and to those who live in rural areas. I am sure that the Minister does not want that to happen, and hon. Members on this side of the House certainly do not. I hope, therefore, that he will be able to give us some reassurance today about these two important courthouses and, more generally, about courthouses in other parts of the country.

10.26 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): May I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) and the Minister for allowing me a few minutes to speak in this traditional Adjournment debate?

There have been courts in Salisbury since the city was founded in 1220, and I hope that there will be for a long time to come. I have not actually represented Salisbury since 1220: only since 1983. In that time, however, I have seen courts close. We lost the court in Tisbury, but we learned to live with that. My late mother was a magistrate in Salisbury in her day. I am old enough to recall the Assizes sitting in the Guildhall courts in Salisbury; the judge's procession from his lodgings in the close provided a moment of awe. The city came to a standstill, the traffic stopped and people stood still on the pavement as the judge walked past. Those days have gone, but I suspect that the quality of justice may have been better then.

My hon. Friend is wholly right to campaign for local access to justice in his constituency, and in that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram). These proposals are a Treasury-driven exercise, and I understand and respect the position in which the Minister finds himself. I have to thank the magistrates in my constituency for upholding the law, and the dignity of the law, in picturesque but antediluvian surroundings. I also have to thank the solicitors, the Crown Prosecution Service and the police. They, too, make the law work in facilities that are not at all appropriate to modern expectations. Salisbury magistrates courts also fail to meet the standards set as a result of the Government's decision to introduce the Human Rights Act 1998 to British law.

The problem facing us all is: who is going to pay and when will this happen? We were told some years ago that the Lord Chancellor's Department would pay, but it always seems short of money and living hand to mouth at the end of the financial year, with the result that perhaps only a few crumbs might slip towards Wiltshire. Our constituents deserve better than that. They deserve to have their courthouses in Devizes and in Trowbridge, as well as in Salisbury.

I was interested to see who supported the magistrates courts committee proposals. Of course, the Crown Prosecution Service, the probation service, the prisoner escort services and most of the Wiltshire justices of the peace support the Lord Chancellor's proposals, as, of course, do I. I was surprised, however, to see that the Wiltshire police authority apparently opposes them. I got that information in a written parliamentary answer from the Minister on 10 April 2002, at column 45W of *Hansard*.

The assistant chief constable of Wiltshire police wrote to the justices' clerk on 27 September 2001 as follows:

> "We would not be in favour of the number of court sites in the County being reduced to less than three, preferably at Swindon, Salisbury and Chippenham."

He also wrote to the justices' chief executive on 23 January this year to say:

> "We support the closure of the Guildhall at Salisbury and its relocation to a purpose built building as this can only improve the administration of justice in the south of the county."

I wonder why the police authority has acted against the advice of the police, but that is not a matter for me; it is a fact that I hope the Minister will bear in mind.

I am disappointed by the county council's decision to oppose the proposals. It has not had the courtesy to offer me any explanation, or to show me the submission that it sent to the Lord Chancellor, but it must be a partial case. We in Salisbury hope very much that the Lord Chancellor's Department will accede to the suggestions of the magistrates court committee.

Perhaps I can offer a crumb of comfort to my hon. Friend, who I hope will be able to persuade the Minister to change his mind and save the courts. It is significant that the magistrates court committee intends, if the proposals go ahead, to ensure full integration of magistrates court staff with Crown and county court staff at the Salisbury courthouse. It also intends—this is, perhaps, more of an innovation—to install live video links in other rural community facilities, such as libraries, police stations and schools, particularly for the benefit of witnesses and victims in the more rural parts of Wiltshire such as my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Westbury.

I think that system could work. I have seen it work very well in the context of the new proposals for courts martial. In Cyprus, for example, I have seen successful links between courtrooms there and courts martial centres in Aldershot.

I thank my hon. Friend again for allowing me, briefly, to support his case, but also to point out that we in Salisbury hope very much that we will get our new courthouse.

10.31 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Michael Wills): Let me begin, as is traditional, by congratulating the hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) on securing the debate. I seem

to have been replying to a number of debates on magistrates courts and Crown court closures in recent months; this is the second in the current month.

When courts close, local Members of Parliament—understandably, and reflecting the understandable concerns of their constituents—become rather agitated, and often seek debates such as this. I entirely understand the hon. Gentleman's legitimate anxieties, although I was slightly surprised that he used a fair amount of his precious parliamentary time to engage in what I considered to be irrelevant party political knockabout. I certainly failed to see the relevance of some of his points.

These are serious issues for all concerned, and we take them seriously. As everyone knows, we are about to embark on measures to implement the recommendations we will accept from Lord Justice Auld's report on the review of the criminal court system. That will inevitably have implications for the magistrates courts, and I think it important for us to discuss them with the seriousness that they deserve.

I think that before I deal specifically with Wiltshire—as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, I am a Wiltshire Member, and as such I am familiar with much of the background—I should deal with the context in which decisions are made. The hon. Gentleman's speech demonstrated that he has not wholly understood the process, so I want to clarify it. As he probably knows, magistrates courts are managed by locally based magistrates courts committees, each of which is solely responsible for the efficient and effective administration of the courts in its area.

The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. Either, as he alleges, we are hell bent on centralisation, or—as he also alleged—we are trying to duck out of decentralising responsibility to the local courts. It must be one or the other. Being in opposition, the hon. Gentleman has the privilege of being able to make two contradictory allegations at the same time.

Dr. Murrison *rose—*

Mr. Wills: I am happy to give way, but I should point out that as we must finish in nine minutes, my important remarks about Wiltshire will inevitably be curtailed if I do so.

Dr. Murrison: Removing Trowbridge and Devizes magistrates courts and sending cases to Chippenham must be viewed as centralisation. I also think the Minister must not duck the issue of the Government's ultimate responsibility for closures. That is the issue that faces him now.

Mr. Wills: There is no question of ducking anything. Courts have to close under all Governments and the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) gave an example from his constituency. It is regrettable, but courts have to close for particular reasons that are not all Treasury driven. To dismiss the needs of disabled people and other perfectly fair human rights considerations does no credit to anyone.

The remarks that the hon. Member for Westbury made about the use of handcuffs are irrelevant. I do not want to take up precious time now, but I will be happy to discuss the matter with him on another occasion and explain the true position about the application of human rights measures to the courts.

It is the responsibility of magistrates courts committees, which are locally based and know their areas best, in consultation with the relevant paying authorities, which are also locally based, to determine how many courthouses, whether urban or rural, as well as other types of accommodation, are needed locally. In discharging this statutory responsibility, the Government expect magistrates courts committees to undertake regular reviews of their accommodation requirements. In doing so, they follow set guidelines which take into account crucial factors such as the strategic aims of each magistrates courts committee, the facilities that are needed, and the results of user surveys. They have to strike a balance—I appreciate that this can be difficult and that there is sometimes strong local opposition—between providing an efficient and effective service to their users and maintaining secure, well equipped court accommodation, and ensuring reasonably full utilisation of court facilities.

It is slightly ironic to be lecturing Conservative Members about the proper use of taxpayer's money, as for many years we heard them use this rhetoric but never fulfil it in practice. We believe that we have to be prudent custodians of taxpayers' money and I would have hoped that, at the very least, the hon. Gentleman could have agreed with that.

Dr. Murrison: I was being a little facetious about wallpaper, but the point was well made. I was referring to the inefficient use of funds. I was also trying to point out that magistrates courts can be renovated relatively cheaply. I agree with the Minister that it is not just a matter of resources, but I am afraid that resources are a large part of the efficient use of public money, and I used a fairly good example.

Mr. Wills: I am happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman that he was being facetious, but not about much else. Owing to the constraints on time, I shall have to omit the remarks that I was about to make about the general background, since I want to say something about the situation in Wiltshire. Although I register the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has expressed, he has not recognised the complexity of the case and has—understandably—left out a number of salient facts.

An extensive consultation process has continued for some time. The second period of consultation conducted by the magistrates courts committee started in September 2001. As a result of that, it revised its original proposal, accepting that the convenience of victims, witnesses and defendants is more important than strict petty session area boundaries. That will allow cases to be heard at one of the three courts that the MCC proposes to retain, whichever is more convenient to the parties concerned. It is also prepared to stagger court hearings throughout the day for those who have to travel greater distances. That shows the responsiveness of a local body to local needs.

The magistrates courts committee investigated the possibility of upgrading the three courthouses, but found that much of the necessary work on the two, town centre, grade 2 listed buildings at Trowbridge and Salisbury was impossible and prohibitively expensive. I remind the

[Mr. Wills]

hon. Gentleman that the third is a temporary mobile construction on a restricted site at Devizes which was acquired second-hand from what was then the local education authority. That is hardly the standard of accommodation we want for our courthouses. In the circumstances, one has to examine carefully whether value for money and the interests of justice will be best achieved by keeping the courthouses open. I hope that we can at least agree that this is a legitimate case for study. We have to explore the options and we expect the MCCs to do that.

The overwhelming consideration is to reduce the number of under-used courtrooms. The degree of use in Wiltshire is under the national average by a considerable amount, as I suspect the hon. Gentleman knows. Between October and December last year, the national average utilisation figure was 60.5 per cent., but the figure for Wiltshire was 49.4 per cent. In the interests of everybody, we have to consider how to increase that figure.

On 8 February, Wiltshire MCC made a final determination, under section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997, to close Trowbridge courthouse with effect from 1 April. In accordance with that Act, Wiltshire county council formally lodged an appeal against the determination on 11 March. The appeal process is continuing, and each party is being given the opportunity to make its case for closure or retention of the courts. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that responsibility for deciding whether the appeal should be upheld resides ultimately with the Department.

Once both parties have confirmed that they have no further representations to make, I will be asked to make a decision, which will be final and binding on all parties. The hon. Gentleman will doubtless be aware that the MCC has recently requested a meeting with me, and in my response I will point out that I am happy to meet all interested parties separately to discuss the matter in detail. If the hon. Gentleman wants to discuss these issues seriously—unfortunately, for reasons of time I have been unable to address several of them this evening—I am happy to invite him to the meeting, or to meet him separately. *[Interruption.]* I think that he is indicating some form of assent, so my office will get in touch with his to arrange a mutually convenient time in the near future. At that meeting, I hope that we can discuss these issues in rather more detail than was possible today.

The hon. Member for Salisbury commented on his constituency, so perhaps I might spend a few moments on that. The MCC has submitted a business case, and as a result officials in the Lord Chancellor's Department have submitted a bid for additional funding in the spending review to support small court schemes. If the MCC's determination to commission a courthouse in Salisbury is permitted, it will be procured via a route known as the "2 stage design and build", which is used by Government Departments for acquiring new buildings when capital becomes available.

I hope that my brief remarks have shown that these issues are complex. We must take account of everything and ensure that courts are fully utilised. Apart from anything else, that allows business to be conducted efficiently. It is in no one's interests—and certainly not of local justice—if people are unable to have their cases heard in court at the appointed time. The hon. Member for Westbury made many fair points about travel times and convenience for victims and witnesses, but it is also convenient for those people that their cases be heard when they are scheduled—a point that relates to the efficient use of court space.

These are complex issues to which there is never an easy answer. Any decision to close a court is always going to evoke local opposition. We must find a right way forward, but that can be done only through dialogue—hence my offer of a meeting. In the end, we are looking to provide a modern system of justice, with well equipped and secure courtrooms. We want to reduce delay in the time taken for cases to proceed through these courts—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, Mr. Speaker *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at seventeen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 16 May 2002

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON DEVELOPMENT AGENCY BILL (BY ORDER)

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Thursday 23 May.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Illegal Imports

1. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): What recent steps she has taken to prevent the passage of illegally imported meat and plants at United Kingdom sea ports and airports. [55113]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): On 21 March I hosted a forum on illegal imports at which all key interests were represented, including farmers, the food industry and enforcement agencies. Subsequent discussions agreed the range of measures included in the detailed action plan, published on 28 March, to reduce the risk of exotic animal and plant disease. That plan included commitments to, for example, giving enforcement officers new powers to search luggage for illegal imports of meat and improving co-operation between agencies. We are pursuing the action plan as a matter of priority.

Mr. Winterton: The dairy and livestock industries of our country were devastated last year by foot and mouth, which is thought to have entered the country in imported meat or meat products. The countryside and farming remain in crisis. What action is the Secretary of State prepared to take following the recently reported comments of Professor Peter Smith, chairman of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, one of the Government's own bodies, who warned that imported meat products such as pâtés and sausages could contain BSE or other diseases because they are not subject to the same stringent controls as meat produced in this country?

Margaret Beckett: I have not seen Professor Smith's comments. We have strict controls on meat imports. I will not list them, but all consignments of fresh meat are subject to veterinary inspection, and various documentary and physical checks are applied. If Professor Smith has evidence to suggest that there are problems with those checks, of course we will look into it. We are taking steps to strengthen the controls and their enforcement, and we are also carrying out a substantial risk assessment to guide us to where we should put further and more effective measures if those are required.

It will always be the case, however, that we cannot reduce risk to zero. We have to reduce it to the lowest possible level, however. We also have to ensure that arrangements are in place to tackle disease outbreaks, should they occur. It is a twin-sided problem and it has to be a twin-sided approach.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Five growth stimulants are banned under European Union directives because they are considered to have an adverse effect on the food chain. What action is taken to ensure that there is a level playing field when it comes to imports, so that we can be sure that those growth stimulants have not been used on poultry or other meat products imported to this country?

Margaret Beckett: There is no special regime for growth hormones, as I am sure my hon. Friend accepts, but there is a regime for control of material for human consumption that comes into this country. That depends heavily on local authority inspection and controls, and every effort is made to ensure that those controls are effective. The enforcing authorities do watch out for the use of growth hormones.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Can the Secretary of State assure us that meat plants outside the United Kingdom are subjected to the same level of random and notified inspections as our meat plants, to ensure that the highest possible standards are maintained at all times?

Margaret Beckett: Obviously there are slightly different arrangements depending on whether the plant in question is elsewhere in the European Union or in a third country. There certainly are stringent checks, however. With regard to third countries, the European Commission's food and veterinary office is responsible for carrying out such inspections. Within the European Union, there is a common regime, of which Britain is a part.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is futile to expect any Government to seal our borders? In spite of the strenuous and expensive efforts made by Governments, they have all seen a huge increase in contraband—cigarettes, alcohol and illegal drugs—flowing into this country. It is impossible to ensure that no infected meat gets through. If there is another outbreak of foot and mouth, or some other disease, surely the best way to combat it is by restricting unnecessary animal movements and by the judicious use of vaccination?

Margaret Beckett: All the issues that my hon. Friend raises about controlling disease once it is detected are kept under careful consideration. On his opening remark, I fear that he is correct. As I told the hon. Member for

Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), it is not possible to devise a regime that can eliminate all risk. It is a case of reducing that risk to the lowest possible level.

My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point about the flow of meat and other products within the European Union. Under single market rules, there are not routine checks of every consignment. However, there are random and non-discriminatory spot checks, which are carried out at the place of destination.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The Secretary of State is right to say that we cannot eliminate risk. However, anyone who has travelled to the United States, Australia or New Zealand, for example, knows that there is a huge gulf between the precautions taken in those countries to minimise the risk of illegal imports and the precautions that are taken in the United Kingdom. Does the right hon. Lady understand that it is a matter not only of powers, important as they may be, but of diligence and commitment on the part of the Government to try to ensure that people understand fully that they should not be bringing in the produce, and that if they do so they will be detected and stopped?

Margaret Beckett: I have some sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's remarks, but, the circumstances in the countries to which he has referred are different. I am not entirely sure whether there is as great a discrepancy in the precautions that we take as there is in publicity. I hope that the hon. Gentleman appreciates that we are doing what we can to increase public attention, and I hope that we will continue to do more.

There may not be the same gap in enforcement as there is in perception. We are continuing to discuss with airlines, for example, whether there is more that can be done in terms of travellers, whether at the place where they board, during the flight, or whatever. We are having discussions with other transport operators. They were all part of the discussions that took place at the general meeting that I held.

There is a major difference between us and the countries to which the hon. Gentleman referred. If he thinks of his experience, information and guidance for travellers is often given through the completion of a landing card. But European Union travellers, including British citizens, do not have to fill out landing cards. We are discussing with the airlines whether there is a procedure that can be adopted. We could not introduce landing cards per se without primary legislation.

Many of the other players are not keen to take further action, which would be costly and involve a good deal of work for them. Risk assessment is the key to getting their co-operation, if we conclude following that assessment that further action is needed. I hope that we shall obtain that co-operation in the not too distant future.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): The Department's Minister in the Lords has said that last year, despite the devastation wrought by the foot and mouth outbreak, there were only three prosecutions for offences involving illegal meat imports. Why does the right hon. Lady think the total was so low?

Margaret Beckett: I would have to examine individual cases. There is the issue of whether controls and operations should be directed primarily at enforcement or prosecution. There is scope for prosecutions, and such prosecutions occur from time to time, not least of commercial importers.

The reasons for the risk assessment are twofold. One is to determine whether the greatest risk comes from commercial imports that are illegal, or from individual imports. The second is to ascertain exactly how we can best target the enforcement that we undertake.

Perhaps the few prosecutions that take place are evidence of successful deterrence and detection more than anything else. We agree and accept that it is important to keep the right balance. I shall now do what I should have done at the outset, and welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box.

Mr. Lidington: I thank the right hon. Lady for her kind remarks. I place on record my appreciation of the work done on this brief by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton).

Surely more than 12 months after the foot and mouth outbreak started, the right hon. Lady should realise that when we have more than 800 seizures of illegal imported meat and only three prosecutions, when the Department's Minister in the Lords is admitting that since the outbreak of foot and mouth disease no additional resources have been allocated for meat import controls at Heathrow airport, and when responsibility for controls and checks on meat imports is still divided between six different public agencies, it is hardly a surprise that the Department, in the view of farmers, especially livestock farmers, has become a byword for delay and incompetence.

Margaret Beckett: I am sorry to tell the hon. Gentleman that his question may be based on a misapprehension. I do not have the detailed answer given by my noble Friend in the House of Lords, but I have now turned up the figures on prosecutions and think that the hon. Gentleman may be referring to prosecutions for trade in endangered species, which also involves illegal meat imports and is a completely separate matter.

Mr. Lidington *indicated dissent.*

Margaret Beckett: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that, from memory, I am not aware that there is any evidence of imports of things like bush meat, wrong as they are and much as we must stamp them out, leading to outbreaks of animal disease. However, I repeat to the hon. Gentleman that there are two sides—

Mr. Lidington: It is in *Hansard.*

Margaret Beckett: Well, with great respect, the fact that the hon. Gentleman has it on paper does not mean that it is right. My figures on the three prosecutions in the past year are specifically for international trade in endangered species. Yes, the hon. Gentleman is right that there is a diversity—if he likes, a plethora—of agencies

dealing with those issues, but that regime was not introduced by this Government. We are dealing with the issue as we find it.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): Blame it on someone else.

Margaret Beckett: I was not blaming the previous Government; I was simply making a statement. The fact is, the Conservatives presided over the regime of divided responsibilities that we have inherited. We are doing more to give effective powers, for example, to local authority inspectors—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady's reply is far too long. I call Mr. Chaytor.

Sustainable Development Summit

2. **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North): What action she has taken to influence the agenda of the world summit on sustainable development. [55114]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): As my Department has the policy lead on sustainable development, I have taken every opportunity both within the European Union and internationally to put across the United Kingdom view so that we can ensure that our priorities influence the agenda for the summit. Earlier in the year, I visited South Africa, the host country, to see for myself how the preparations for the summit were progressing. Most recently I held bilaterals with key players in the margins of the G8 environment meeting and will shortly attend the final ministerial Prepcom hosted by Indonesia.

Mr. Chaytor: I thank my right hon. Friend for her reply. May I draw her attention to early-day motion 1299, which states the case for making programmes of clean energy a priority of the Johannesburg agenda? Does she agree that it is not a question of environmental objectives being in competition with social and developmental objectives at Johannesburg, and that clean energy programmes are the fundamental prerequisite for successful poverty reduction?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point; there is every prospect of clean energy programmes being a priority at the summit, as that has a great deal of support in the EU and beyond, in the United States and the G8. My hon. Friend is right about what sustainable development means, but it is important that environmental issues be balanced against social and economic issues. I certainly share his view that that is an important and basic issue in tackling poverty; one is not in competition with the other.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor). There is a real will in the developing world for a positive commitment to providing renewable energy for the poorest people, and I hope that the British Government will be instrumental in bringing that about. Given that the right hon. Lady is about to go to the final ministerial preparatory meeting in Bali, will she undertake to return to the House and make a full statement about its results and the preparation that will be developed at Johannesburg? We had a good debate in the House yesterday, but seven Members from four political parties were unable to speak because time ran out. It behoves the Government to provide time to tell us what is going on and ensure that the House plays a full part.

Margaret Beckett: The hon. Gentleman should know that the control of the agenda of the House is no longer a matter for me. To a certain extent, he should make his appeal to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. Of course, I take the hon. Gentleman's point, and I am more than willing to consider making a statement to the House if I feel that there is something of substance to say when we return from Bali. I certainly hope that there will be.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and look forward to her return from Bali and a statement thereafter. What provision will her Department be making to ensure that not only Members of Parliament, but members of non-governmental organisations in the UK, will have the opportunity to be consulted between the meeting in Bali and the conference in Johannesburg in September?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Preparations for the summit go back a considerable time, and from the outset, representatives of the business community, non-governmental organisations and others have been involved in preparations for the world summit. My hon. Friend asks me to ensure that that continues. He and the House may like to know that we have kept places on the official UK delegation not only for members from the devolved Administrations, the business community, local authorities and the Sustainable Development Commission, but also for NGOs. We anticipate continuing to keep them briefed during the meetings, as we have done in the past.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): We wish the right hon. Lady well at the forthcoming summit and hope that there is international agreement that brings about a marked increase in the well-being and quality of life of people throughout the world. We look forward to the right hon. Lady's report back to Parliament on her return. I draw her attention to the recent report of the Labour-dominated Environmental Audit Committee, which pointed out that few Government Departments consider sustainable development central to their activities. Given the importance that the right hon. Lady rightly attaches to that agenda, why have her Cabinet colleagues been so reluctant to take seriously what she and the Deputy Prime Minister have been urging them to do?

Margaret Beckett: That is not quite what the Environmental Audit Committee's report stated. However, it correctly drew attention to the fact that it is extremely important that sustainable development should be a key goal for all Government Departments, and that there is progress to be made and work to do. We fully

endorse that and accept that it is part of the job of the Environmental Audit Committee to monitor our progress. We shall, of course, respond to its report in due course.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): Further to her first answer, does my right hon. Friend agree that export credits from G7 countries have greatly added to polluting carbon technologies around the world? Will she speak to her colleagues about that issue and support Globe's campaign to ensure that 10 per cent. of export credit finance is devoted to the support of renewable energy?

Margaret Beckett: That is certainly an interesting campaign. My hon. Friend is right to say that, in putting sustainable development at the heart of what all Government Departments do, one of our goals must be to ensure that such issues are taken into account, whether in the award of export credits or in other fields. She will know that the Export Control Bill, which the Government have sought to put on the statute book, makes reference to the importance of sustainable development issues, which indicates that we are making progress in the right direction.

Egg Production

3. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If she will make a statement on levels of egg production in England in 2001. [55115]

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Alun Michael): Some 22 million cases of eggs were produced in England and Wales during 2001.

Mr. Brady: The Government have commissioned research on the potential welfare benefits of enriched cages for egg production and have also promised consultation before introducing regulations. Can the Minister give a guarantee that the consultation will not begin until the outcome of that research has been published; and can he give an assurance to an egg producer in my constituency who has invested £1 million during the past three years in providing four cages that can be enriched, that the regulations will not be gold-plated above the standards demanded by the EU directive when they are introduced?

Alun Michael: I do not think that I can guarantee that nothing will happen while the research is being undertaken. Improvement in a situation often continues in parallel with specific research. The hon. Gentleman rightly referred to the project to evaluate the effect of stock density and cage height on bird behaviour, welfare and performance, as well as to investigate innovative material suitable for dust bathing in enriched cages. This is an important issue, but I am not sure that it would be wise to separate the two.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I urge the Minister not to forgo the opportunity of consultation with the industry before the research is completed. It is essential that we have a dialogue between the industry and the Government from day one because, as he knows, the industry faces serious competition from the outside world and substantial investment decisions during the next few years. Is it not the case that we need to maintain a dialogue between the industry and the Government, and at the same time have the absolute assurance that requirements will not be put on our domestic industry that are not applied elsewhere by competitor nations?

Alun Michael: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Regulations are being implemented to ensure not that they are gold-plated, but that they are consistent with those applied across Europe. I certainly understand the concern about threats to the industry's viability resulting from the imposition of higher animal welfare standards. The EU has made proposals to the World Trade Organisation to deal with that, and recognition of non-trade concerns within the WTO Doha declaration provides a sound basis on which to pursue it. The hon. Gentleman points to an important consideration.

Agricultural Tenancies

4. **Mr. Simon Thomas** (Ceredigion): What proposals she has to review the law regarding agricultural tenancies. [55116]

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Alun Michael): My noble Friend Lord Whitty is currently considering the report produced by the policy commission on the future of farming and food and the report produced for DEFRA by Plymouth university on the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995. Both include a number of recommendations that could lead to changes in the law on agricultural tenancies.

Mr. Thomas: Does the Minister share my concern that only 7 per cent. of land let under the 1995 Act is to genuine new applicants? In the review of the law, will he consider allowing tenants to have more scope for farm diversification than is currently allowed? Will he also take this opportunity to reject the proposal to increase stamp duty on long-term lets? Will he assure the House that any review of this law will focus on helping new entrants and sustainable family farms, particularly in Wales?

Alun Michael: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that many of those issues are devolved to the Welsh Assembly, so I shall respond with regard to England. I have met the Tenant Farmers Association, as has my colleague Lord Whitty, and I am particularly concerned about one of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises—the apparent difficulty for some tenants of entering into arrangements to be part of the agri-environmental schemes and to access other schemes under elements of the England rural development programme, which we very much want to address. The Plymouth report confirms that the latest legislation has delivered benefits for tenants and has facilitated restructuring within the industry, but we are carefully considering the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): The report by Seale-Hayne college of agriculture, Plymouth university, is very welcome, but does my right hon. Friend agree that a dialogue should be entered into with tenant farmers, in particular those on county farm estates, to see how those farmers who are most vulnerable to current problems can be helped? Will the Government take a lead and call a conference to bring together local authorities to talk about

issues such as investment and the future of their tenants, to ensure that this important part of farming continues into the future?

Alun Michael: I shall draw my hon. Friend's specific suggestion to the attention of my ministerial colleague, Lord Whitty. Many discussions are going on at the moment. I have attended two of the regional conferences to consider the outcome of the Curry commission and the implementation, with stakeholders, of the recommendations in its report.

On the Plymouth inquiry, if changes can be made to agricultural tenancy legislation to give landlords and tenants more flexibility to respond to the challenges faced by the industry, we will consider them carefully. We shall discuss the way forward with stakeholders in a variety of ways over the coming months.

Marine Environment

5. **Lawrie Quinn** (Scarborough and Whitby): What measures she is taking to protect the marine environment for future generations. [55117]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): The first marine stewardship report was published on 1 May. It sets out our strategy for the conservation and sustainable development of our marine environment. Copies have been placed in the Library.

Lawrie Quinn: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I think that he is aware of the important work that is being done locally in Scarborough and Whitby and along the coastline by Yorkshire Water, in its coast care project. Will he congratulate all the people involved, including those at Yorkshire Water, the contractors, and many members of the local community? My constituency has a long, historic and respectful relationship with the sea. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when the Johannesburg summit considers these important issues in a global context, projects such as Yorkshire Water's coast care should be viewed as the way forward in protecting the sea for future generations?

Mr. Meacher: I am glad to offer the tribute that my hon. Friend requests. It is very important that the water companies recognise their coastal management responsibilities. We have instigated a review of coastal management, but it is for those companies to establish responsible care regimes such as Yorkshire Water's. We certainly intend to draw attention to the matter at the world summit, and we have already established internationally based partnerships between several of our water companies and Governments, to try to encourage in many developing countries the services and skills at which those companies excel.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): The Minister may be aware of the irony of the situation whereby draconian measures will almost certainly be introduced by the Commission for the recovery of cod, hake and other species, yet the total allowable catch of sand eel has been set for at least double the amount that is currently being caught. Although I appreciate that the United Kingdom is impotent to do anything about that, other than using our 10 votes in the Council, does the Minister agree that if the sand eel catch—it is industrial trawling, which is extremely damaging to the marine environment—is not dramatically reduced, those draconian measures on cod and hake recovery will be totally meaningless?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Lady refers to draconian measures on cod and hake, but I would say that they are largely necessary. Eight stocks, including North sea cod, are fished in quantities that give rise to a severe risk of collapse. Last year, a recovery plan was implemented that closed 40,000 square miles of the North sea to preserve the spawning fields.

I agree with the hon. Lady about the sand eel fishery. Denmark is the European Union country that engages most in industrial fishing. Our scientists have had extensive discussions with its scientists about its impact. I understand that last December the Agriculture Council agreed that limitations should be placed on industrial fishing, and that certainly applies to the sand eel fishery.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): Will my right hon. Friend bear in mind the anxieties of the fishing industry about the threats to the marine environment posed by wind farms at sea, excessive depletion of aggregates and the discharge of pollutant water from oil and gas platforms? Will he ensure that the effects are fully researched and more tightly controlled? Will he also ensure that industrial fishing, which is a major threat to marine ecology, is not more tightly regulated but banned completely?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend's last point is a matter for the EU and the appropriate Council under the common fisheries policy. A complete ban would have wider implications than he suggests, but everyone agrees that the size of nets and fishing methods have to be reviewed if they are not to be utterly counter-productive.

I agree that coastal management is not only about preserving marine ecology but about trying to ensure a better balance between economic interests and conservation. Discharges from offshore oil platforms, the amount of produced water and other effects of industrial development around coasts can have dramatic consequences. The purpose of our review is better integration of environmental and economic interests, and to get all the players involved in forming policy.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): I would like to ask the Minister a question of which I gave him a modest amount of notice. He mentioned the review of the regulatory scheme and system that affect developments in coastal waters, which was announced in the recent marine stewardship report. What does he hope that it will achieve? What is its geographical scope? Will it cover all territorial waters out to 12 nautical miles or be more restricted? If the Government are committed to a review of regulations that affect development in coastal waters,

what plans do they have for a similar review in waters further from the coast? If they have such plans, what are their likely time scale?

Mr. Meacher: I am grateful for the notice, albeit after Question Time had started. Perhaps that marks a new concordat in the quality of exchange of information between those on the Front Benches.

The hon. Gentleman asks a serious question, and I shall try to give him a serious answer. I hinted at it in my previous reply. The purpose of the review of the regulatory system that affects development in coastal waters is to reconcile the divergence of interest that has been apparent so often in the past between economic development and marine conservation. The Marine Wildlife Conservation Bill that the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) promoted is designed to do precisely that: designate marine sites of special interest and involve all the economic players—for example, those who want port development, offshore oil development and wind farms. They all need to be involved in developing policy. It is not one or the other; we can do far better than in the past in reconciling interests.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the extent of the review. It does not cover our territorial waters but only to 12 miles but to 200 miles. We propose to extend and apply the habitats directive to that distance. Britain is the first country to do that. *[Interruption.]* I can see that there are further ways of exchanging information; it is slightly novel to receive a further question when answering a question. I shall stick to what I have been asked formally.

The hon. Gentleman asked about time scale. We will undertake the work in the autumn and we plan to complete it around the end of the year.

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): My right hon. Friend knows that the marine stewardship report received a warm welcome from environmental organisations such as the wildlife trusts and WWF-UK. What is his view of the proposal from those organisations for a marine Act for the UK? Will he confirm that he and his colleagues will continue to press for radical reform of the common fisheries policy to ensure that it takes account of environmental considerations, which are so important to fulfilling the report's objectives?

Mr. Meacher: I absolutely endorse my hon. Friend's latter point that the common fisheries policy needs a much stronger environmental dimension. Indeed, I would like to see a much closer relationship between the respective Environment and Fisheries Directorate-General in Brussels and the Councils.

On my hon. Friend's point about a marine Act, the Marine Wildlife Conservation Bill is already going through the House. There has been talk of an oceans Act—we shall certainly raise the issues of world governance and the better protection of our oceans at the world summit—but that possibility would depend on its contents. We have already instigated a more integrated system of coastal management, and we are working under the terms of the Oslo and Paris conventions to tackle pollution from hazardous and radioactive substances. We are also proposing to pilot a framework for nature conservation in the Irish sea.

At the North sea conference in Bergen, which I attended in March, we proposed—and obtained agreement—to designate marine protection areas belonging to a network of well-managed sites. This is not to say that there are not still gaps in the mosaic, but before we embark on further legislation, the important requirement is to digest and implement effectively the series of measures that have recently been put in place.

Bovine TB

6. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If she will make a statement on bovine TB. [55119]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): TB in cattle is one of the most difficult animal health problems we face, and the increase in its incidence is continuing to give considerable concern. The Government are seeking to proceed on the basis of sound science drawn from independent scientific and veterinary experts. Action is centred around a five-point strategy that involves protecting human health, developing a TB vaccine, carrying out research into bovine TB, testing cattle for TB and putting controls in place, and the badger field trial.

Dr. Lewis: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. Outbreaks of bovine TB more than doubled between 1995 and 2000. Does she think that that had anything to do with the decision in May 1997 to abandon the interim badger culling strategy?

Margaret Beckett: No, I do not. We are examining the risk factors now, but there is strong scientific support for carrying out the long-term research programme that is now under way, to settle once and for all whether there is a reservoir of disease in badgers specifically and in wildlife more generally, and whether there is cattle-to-cattle transmission—something that has not been looked at much in the past. We want to identify the problems once and for all so that we can tackle them.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): My right hon. Friend will be aware that, before the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, Cumbria was a bovine TB-free zone. Since we started to restock, however, there have been 20 reactor cases in the county, which is very worrying. I understand that the Ministry is carrying out major tests on the farms involved, but is being hampered by a shortage of at least 20 Ministry vets in the area. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is essential that we eradicate bovine TB from Cumbria, and that, to do that, we need money to employ more vets? The cases are a consequence of the restocking following the foot and mouth outbreak, so the cost should surely be borne by the Treasury. Let us do this quickly, before the disease gets into the badger population.

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I am grateful to him for raising it. He is quite right to say that there is a different set of concerns following the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, in which so many animals, sadly, had to be killed. I am grateful to him for giving me this chance to encourage farmers who are restocking to ensure that they buy from herds with known disease-free status and that they get their animals tested. As my hon. Friend said,

there is a testing programme in place to try to detect any incidence of the disease. It had not been drawn to my attention that there might be a shortage of vets to carry out the tests in Cumbria, and I shall look into that.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The number of cows affected by bovine TB is now a multiple of those affected by BSE. What will happen if the present rate of increase continues, so that the timetable set out in the Krebs research is overtaken by the pace of the disease? The Secretary of State mentioned finding out "once and for all" whether there is a link between badgers and bovine TB. What will happen if, as is entirely possible, we do not get such an outcome once and for all? In that unfortunate eventuality, at what stage would the Government start to draw up an alternative approach?

Margaret Beckett: Let me begin where the right hon. Gentleman ended. I did say that we were looking at other issues—not just at the badger trial, but at cattle-to-cattle transmission and so forth.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the greater incidence of TB. I think he must have been referring to the results of the recent testing. The programme was of course suspended during the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. Although we are paying close attention to what is happening, it is a little early to conclude that some major unforeseen development is in progress.

I hope the House will accept that it was sensible for the Department to act as it did. Once the testing programme was able to resume, the Department naturally began with the areas where the highest incidence was anticipated.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I agree with my right hon. Friend's answers. It is clearly important for us to continue with the Krebs trial and do so with determination. It would be unwise to alter that strategy radically in mid-stream. I do, however, suggest two further steps. First, I think the compensation arrangements for those affected by TB should be reviewed. It has been demonstrated that although they seem generous to outsiders, they are insufficient to meet the costs of the outbreak. Secondly, I think the scale and frequency of the testing exercise itself should be reviewed. That, too, has been shown to be insufficient.

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. It is of course unfortunate, as ever, that there is an economic as well as a disease consequence where TB is detected. I fear I cannot tell my hon. Friend that the Department will always be able to compensate for every incidence, but, as he says, we must do all that we can to maintain the variety of testing and identification programmes and learn as much as we can about what is a very damaging disease, not only in cattle but in humans.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): The Secretary of State has rightly emphasised the seriousness of the issue. She is aware of what has been said by Members in all parts of the House, and her hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State recently spoke of a serious and growing animal health problem.

Farmers, animal welfare groups and many Members of Parliament fear that the Government—I emphasise "the Government"—may be failing to devote enough resources to dealing with a problem that continues to grow. Is the Secretary of State satisfied that her Department has enough resources to cope with that growing problem, and can she tell us what is the current backlog of tests for bovine TB, in terms of both the number of tests and the delay?

Margaret Beckett: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman those figures, but I will send them to him in writing. As for the general issue, it is always possible to argue that more resources would be helpful. Let me repeat what I said to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), who chairs the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: although we await the outcome of the recently resumed testing programme with considerable concern, it is not yet clear that we are experiencing a major unexpected incidence of the disease, as opposed to its emergence after a period during which studies did not continue. It is also not clear that we lack resources to deal with it. Obviously, however, we will keep the issues under review.

Beaches

7. **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes): What progress her Department is making in making Britain's beaches cleaner. [55120]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): We have made excellent progress in making Britain's beaches cleaner, with a record 95 per cent. of UK beaches complying with the European bathing water directive last year. Compliance in England is even better, with 98 per cent. of bathing waters complying in 2001. Further improvements to meet higher standards will include action to reduce diffuse pollution from agriculture.

Shona McIsaac: Is my right hon. Friend aware that Cleethorpes beach recently won a prestigious seaside award in recognition of its cleanliness? Will he extend his praise to all who worked so tirelessly to that end? I know that he visited Cleethorpes back in 1997; what plans has he to visit my wonderful beach again to see how effective his Department's investment has been in creating one of Britain's best beaches?

Hon. Members: Answer!

Mr. Meacher: That is a very difficult question. Obviously, I sincerely congratulate Cleethorpes and the other towns that have achieved those extremely pleasing results, which are the consequence of a great deal of work by a wide range of partnerships. I will try to arrange a visit to Cleethorpes.

The biggest cleanliness problem for the UK was Blackpool, and in a rather rash moment several years ago, I did say that when it passed on all counts, I would go up there, don my bathing trunks and plunge into the sea. I was rather alarmed to find out that, last year, that is exactly what happened, so this year I am looking forward to a bathe—at Blackpool, if not at Cleethorpes.

The subject causes much mirth and merriment, but there is a serious point. By 2005, as a result of successive periodic reviews, we will have invested more than £5 billion in cleaning up rivers and beaches in this country. We should all be proud that the waters—seas, lakes and rivers—in this country are the cleanest since before the industrial revolution.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): Is the Minister aware that Hunstanton—or Hun'ston, as the locals call it—also has an extremely clean beach and, incidentally, that it is a much nicer place than Cleethorpes? I hope that he will find time to visit Hunstanton and to pay tribute to the local staff, who played a very important role in the beach's winning several awards. Does he agree that this country's beaches would be cleaner still if we made greater use of renewable energy? Does he also agree that, although the offshore wind farm applications for the Wash are good news, they must be balanced against the interests of fisheries?

Mr. Meacher: I am getting a little alarmed by the number of places that I am expected to visit in order to plunge into the sea, but the hon. Gentleman rightly draws attention to a very successful effort in his constituency. On balancing the interests—a point that relates to an earlier question—I strongly support offshore wind farms and the principle of offshore development of renewable energy, so long as such wind farms are carefully sited and careful consideration is given to balancing the interests involved. Such development has a major contribution to make.

I think that the first application for a major offshore wind development was at Scroby bank—

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Sands.

Mr. Meacher: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend; it is always helpful to have present hon. Members from all over the country who can offer corrections. The development at Scroby sands was the first, but there will certainly be many others. They contribute to the increase in renewable energy that we want to see, but I doubt whether they have much effect on the quality of beach waters. The big issue that we must now deal with is agricultural diffuse pollution, and that is what we are doing.

Compost Heaps

8. **Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): If she will exempt domestic compost heaps from licensing requirements; and if she will make a statement. [55121]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): The waste management licensing requirements under section 33 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 do not apply to householders dealing with their own household waste, including domestic compost heaps, on their own property.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Minister for that answer. I was going to suggest that he might care to make a ministerial visit to a compost heap, on top of all the coastal duties that he has to perform. It is obviously good news that hordes of local authority inspectors will not be wandering around looking at domestic compost heaps in an effort to define a compost heap, difficult though that would be. However, will my right hon. Friend encourage local authorities to give advice to householders on how to make compost heaps, because they are the best form of recycling of green waste? It is simple, easy to do and does not cost anything. Will he also see what his Department can do to encourage local authorities to provide composting bins free or at very low cost, so that food waste can be composted free of the danger of attracting vermin, which happens when people put food waste on a normal compost heap? If the Minister wishes to see a compost heap, I am sure that many hon. Members could assist him.

Mr. Meacher: I can assure my hon. Friend that I make a weekly, if not more frequent, visit to my own composting heap. He is right to say that composting is important. The whole thrust of the Government's waste management strategy is to have a major increase in recycling, reuse and recovery, and that certainly includes composting. It is a way to gain better value from biodegradable waste. It improves soil quality and replaces non-renewable products such as peat. I am keen that local authorities should understand the potential and provide advice and support to people. I am also keen that a standard should be agreed between the Waste and Resources Action Programme, the Environment Agency and the Composting Association, because that would create a real market for organic waste-derived products.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): If the Minister would care to join me on Sunday on my allotment he would see the importance of compost to Fylde allotment holders as a key ingredient to successful growing. However, he would also see in vivid terms the difficulty that Fylde and many other local authorities have in providing sufficient resources to sustain and develop the allotments of which they are the stewards. Will he review the support that is given to local authorities to ensure that our allotments remain attractive and not the subject of land sell-offs?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Meacher: I can feel widespread support for me to travel the country in my bathing trunks, carrying my gardening togs. I support the right hon. Gentleman's wish for allotments to be encouraged and, indeed, composting should take place on all well-kept allotments. If he is aware of particular problems, I would be glad to investigate them, because composting can play a major part in the Government's recycling and waste management strategy.

Tail Docking

9. **Mr. Chris Bryant** (Rhondda): When she will bring forward legislation to outlaw the unnecessary docking of animals' tails. [55122]

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Alun Michael): We have just completed a consultation exercise on animal welfare law and know that there is considerable concern

about the practice of tail docking of dogs. We are now considering whether any changes need to be made to the law.

Mr. Bryant: I do not wish to hound the Minister on this point, but is not the practice of cutting dogs' tails off purely for cosmetic reasons unnecessary and barbaric? Is not it time that we acceded to the European convention on the protection of pet animals and gave dogs back their right to wag?

Alun Michael: I shall not refer to the dogged determination with which my hon. Friend pursues his point. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' code of professional conduct states that docking should not be carried out except for therapeutic reasons or to protect the dog from disease or injury. Given the prevalence of dogs with docked tails, it would appear that the royal college's guidance is not being followed uniformly by the profession, and that is one of the issues that we will consider as the outcome of the consultation is considered by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Nitrate Vulnerable Zones

10. **Paddy Tipping** (Sherwood): If she will make a statement on the introduction of nitrate vulnerable zones. [55123]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): We are currently considering the responses made by individuals and organisations to our recent consultation paper, before taking a decision on how best to implement the nitrates directive in England. I hope to announce a decision shortly.

Paddy Tipping: I accept that the 1991 directive needs to be implemented more comprehensively and there are strong arguments for 100 per cent. coverage across England. Given that, however, will my right hon. Friend do what he can to help farmers and landowners by allowing them sufficient time to resolve the planning issues and to construct storage? Secondly, will my right hon. Friend maintain and extend the existing grants system?

Mr. Meacher: We certainly will do what we can to give assistance, and to allow as much time as possible. My hon. Friend is right to point out that the directive went through in 1991. We are subject to infraction proceedings if we do not implement it in full, and non-compliance fines could run as high as £135,000 a day.

Those constraints are unavoidable, and we have delayed implementation as long as possible over a period in which agriculture has been hit by foot and mouth, but we now risk fines and therefore have to act. However, the first closed period for spreading certain organic manures on vulnerable soils will not begin until the autumn of next year.

My hon. Friend asked about assistance. To assist farmers—especially intensive livestock and dairy farmers—we have put in place the farm waste grants scheme, which covers up to 40 per cent. of costs, to a maximum of £85,000. That will go a long way towards assisting farmers in this difficult situation.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the Leader of the House give the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): The business of the House for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 20 MAY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Adoption and Children Bill.

TUESDAY 21 MAY—Opposition Day [14th Allotted Day]. Until 7 o'clock there will be a debate on "Truancy and Discipline in Schools" followed by a debate on "Special Educational Needs". Both debates arise on an Opposition motion.

WEDNESDAY 22 MAY—Consideration of Lords Amendments to the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Bill followed by a motion relating to the House of Commons Members' Fund.

THURSDAY 23 MAY—Remaining stages of the State Pension Credits Bill *[Lords]*.

FRIDAY 24 MAY—Motion on the Whitsun recess Adjournment.

The provisional business for the first day after Whitsun recess will be:

MONDAY 10 JUNE—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the National Insurance Contributions Bill.

I shall announce the business for the remainder of that week next Thursday, depending on progress in Committee.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for June will be:

THURSDAY 13 JUNE—Debate on the report from the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee on passenger rail franchising and the future of railway infrastructure.

THURSDAY 20 JUNE—Debate on equal opportunities in the Armed Forces.

THURSDAY 27 JUNE—Debate on the report from the Science and Technology Committee on the research assessment exercise.

The House will wish to know that on Wednesday 12 June 2002, there will be a debate relating to the strategy for a future chemicals policy in European Standing Committee A. Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

[*Wednesday 12 June 2002:*

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Union document: 6671/01; Strategy for a future chemicals policy. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee Report: HC 28-xii (2000–01)].

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the Leader of the House. May I remind him that on 7 May, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport made a statement on Wembley stadium? In it, she said:

"I fully recognise the public and parliamentary pressure for an end to the process and the start of the construction of a world-class stadium. I will therefore make a further statement to the House before the Whitsun recess."—[*Official Report*, 7 May 2002; Vol. 385, c. 22.]

I am sure that the Leader of the House will recall that undertaking. Will he reassure the House, and give us his guarantee, that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will not come to the House on Friday 24 May with that statement? Although I and all other Conservative Members will be in our places here, I suspect that the Government believe that many of their friends and supporters may not be in theirs, as that is the day before the recess. Will the right hon. Gentleman say definitely that the statement on Wembley stadium promised for before the Whitsun recess will be made in Government time, and before Friday 24 May?

On 14 May we had a series of votes on resolutions concerning House matters. One motion stated:

"That this House considers that there should be no differences in remuneration among Members who are not Ministers of the Crown beyond those already authorised."

Some 197 Members voted against it and 175 voted in favour, so the motion was defeated. I think that the right hon. Gentleman will agree that the House has opined that it is proper that there should be differences in remuneration among Members who bear different responsibilities. I support that proposition, and as I said in interventions during that debate, I will support it going further. Although we voted that Select Committee Chairmen should be paid more, I urge the Leader of the House to consider ways of establishing whether there might not be other categories of Members bearing additional responsibilities—

David Winnick (Walsall, North): The shadow Leader of the House.

Mr. Forth: Modesty forbids me, Mr. Speaker, but if hon. Members were to urge upon me additional pay, I cannot give an undertaking that I would not take it.

The serious point is this: given the view expressed by the House in the two motions of 14 May, will the Leader of the House give some thought as to whether we should look at this in a broader context to see whether it would be proper, reflecting the view of the House, to pay Members who bear additional responsibilities appropriately?

In today's edition of *The Independent*, that highly respected commentator, Donald Macintyre—a man who is familiar with matters within the Labour party—made a shocking statement. I want to quote it at some length, because I want the Leader of the House to look into the matter and come back to the House following his investigations. Mr. Macintyre said that

"on Tuesday, the Labour majority on the Treasury Select Committee caved in to government pressure and decided to delay consideration of the five economic tests of British euro entry. No doubt Gordon Brown feels he needs such an examination like a hole in the head. If he pressed the Labour majority, including the committee chairman, John McFall, not to undertake one, he was probably just doing his job."

That is a reference to the Chancellor. The article continues:

"What is clear, however, is that by acceding to this pressure—on what is after all the biggest issue of this parliament—the Labour members of the committee are very definitely not doing theirs."

Given all the praise that was larded on to Select Committees the other day and the fact that we have said that Select Committee Chairmen should be paid more for discharging their responsibilities, this is a very serious

allegation. I ask the Leader of the House to investigate the matter and report to the House on whether the Government put undue pressure on members of the Treasury Select Committee and whether that Committee caved in, to use Mr. Macintyre's words, to that pressure. It is a very serious allegation, and if we are to take our Select Committees seriously, we must be guaranteed that that is wrong and would never happen.

Mr. Cook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming the business for next week. I shall try and respond to the points that came after that point of unity between us.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is well aware of the statement that she made to the House, and the matter is under active consideration. I note the right hon. Gentleman's proposal that there should be no statement on Friday 24 May; I am sure that many of my right hon. and hon. Friends will be here, of course, busily pursuing their duties. I have no doubt that many Opposition Members will be here too, and I look forward to a full report from my colleagues on the number of Opposition Members who attend.

I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point. He will be aware that the matter concerns talks not only inside but outside Government and that others necessarily have to come to agreement before we can make a statement. However, I infer from what he said that he would find it more convenient if the statement were made on Tuesday 22 May, which is the Opposition Supply day.

I note what the right hon. Gentleman said about other people in the House who might merit enhanced pay. I find it slightly mysterious that one of the few people outside the Government who receives enhanced pay is the Opposition pairing Whip. I certainly concur with the right hon. Gentleman that, given the fact that the Opposition pairing Whip receives a supplement, and that he must have at least as much to do as the Opposition pairing Whip, the entitlement to enhanced pay might also be due to my shadow—

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Shadows.

Mr. Cook: I seemed to be carrying my audience with me when I held out a helping hand to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), but I do not detect the same sympathy from the House for going beyond that.

The effect of the decision that we took on Tuesday is that the matter of pay for Chairs of Select Committees will be referred to the Review Body on Senior Salaries—the SSRB. Giving evidence or making a submission to the SSRB is of course open to any Member of the House—

David Winnick: Or the shadow Cabinet?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend really must not pinch all my punch lines. I was about to say that I look forward to the shadow Cabinet coming to a collective view on the matter so that we can know precisely where its members stand and so that the SSRB can take that into account. I warn them that it is often the practice of the SSRB to print the submissions that it receives and we look forward to reading that one.

Mr. Don Macintyre is a journalist of distinction, with a well-crafted and well-pointed pen. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst quoted from a graphic and colourful interpretation of an event, but that event involved a majority on the Treasury Committee deciding that they did not wish to pursue a particular line of inquiry. I must point out that only two weeks ago the right hon. Gentleman stood at the Dispatch Box and praised the Select Committee for what it did. He cannot have it both ways—one week welcoming what the Committee says while in the next week deploring the views reached in that Committee by a majority of independent Members of the House.

Mr. Tyler: Will the Leader of the House consider the mechanism whereby Parliament learns of important new Government developments? There are, of course, statements and written answers, but will he consider topical questions? As an illustration, I understand that yesterday a consultation document on combined heat and power was released on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs website, but it appeared nowhere in the House. Will he consider that?

Reverting to the report in *The Independent* by Don Macintyre, does the Leader of the House acknowledge that I and my right hon. and hon. Friends have consistently supported the Modernisation Committee's proposals to give Select Committees greater independence, integrity and authority, but that, according to my reckoning, eight Ministers, 28 Parliamentary Private Secretaries, nine Government Whips and 12 ex-Government Whips in effect joined the Conservatives in the Lobby on Tuesday night?

Will the right hon. Gentleman comment on the fact that the Prime Minister has to go on television to talk about the euro and Lord Heseltine has to use the pages of the *Daily Express* to talk to his Conservative colleagues to advance the case for it, but that our Select Committee, which reports to this Chamber, has no such opportunity to consider the advantages and disadvantages of entry? Is he aware that the Treasury Committee seems to have been nobbled by the Treasury itself? Indeed, is he aware that the Treasury seems to have access to the private discussions of the Select Committee?

I pray in aid material collected by my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) under the data protection legislation. When I put on my specs I shall read what the Treasury has been saying about my hon. Friend. Not only did the Treasury refer to his questions as "whiskery", which seems a curious description, but, back in January, it identified him as "the prime mover" in the Select Committee behind the request for the "Five Tests inquiry". The Treasury could have known that only if it was receiving leaks from the Committee. What does the Leader of the House have to say about that?

Mr. Cook: I will consider the point that the hon. Gentleman made about the combined heat and power announcement. Websites are available in this building, however—although I should never accuse the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst of having such a thing anywhere in his office.

Mr. Forth: No.

Mr. Cook: I was confident of that. However, websites are widely available in the House, and sometimes putting

[Mr. Cook]

something on a website is a sensible way of ensuring that it can be put before the House. Not everything that a Department does necessarily merits a statement, or even a planted question. It will always be a matter of judgment as to which is the most appropriate way of making an announcement. No one can claim that that was a secret or concealed statement.

Don Macintyre will be intensely flattered by this morning's exchange in that he has been quoted so often. I would not wish in any way to detract from the praise given to him by all three of us who have taken part in those exchanges, all three of whom hope that we will be mentioned in a future column by Mr. Macintyre in suitable terms.

I was glad that, on Tuesday night, we had a Labour majority for the reform that I proposed on the Committee of Nomination, and I regret the fact that the very large Conservative majority against it succeeded in tilting the balance the other way.

Mr. Tyler: Both sorts of conservatives were involved.

Mr. Cook: Indeed, but there was a much larger Conservative balance. An alliance between the Conservative party and old Labour would be formidable. It would, of course, be a matter for wider political comment; Mr. Donald Macintyre might wish to reflect on it in a future column.

If there has been any impropriety in the Treasury Committee, the House has the remedy available through its own Select Committee system. That is not a matter for me in the first instance. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) complained about the Treasury's describing one of his colleagues as "whiskery", but I can only say that, after 40 years of sporting a beard, I think that "whiskery" is one of the highest forms of praise.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I acknowledge that my right hon. Friend is an ardent supporter of proportional representation, but some of us are against it to the point that we do not like what is happening in Scotland, where power has been handed over to the Tories, and in Wales—

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): The Tories?

Mr. Skinner: Yes. The Tories got seats in the Scottish Parliament as a result of PR—they could not have got them any other way.

The new-fangled Select Committee system would have handed over power to the political enemy—the Tories—who were going to sit on a joint committee to select Labour Members of Parliament. They are the same Tories who closed every pit in my constituency. Does not my right hon. Friend understand that some of us do not need official Whips to tell us what to do? As for that tinpot Liberal there, the hon. Gentleman should ensure that he gets his information right. Yes, there were people on the door arguing for old-fashioned socialists to stop the drift to giving power to the political enemy. I was one of them. Unlike the Tories who want money for their shadow Cabinet—that is why they voted for the money—I am an unofficial Whip who declares, "I don't want none; I'll do it for nowt."

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is in fine voice today. I have known him for almost 30 years in the House, and it never once crossed my mind that any improper influence could be brought to bear on how he voted on Tuesday, or any other night in his long, distinguished career in the House. I only remind him—sotto voce, because I see no point in replaying all the arguments of last Tuesday—that I was in the House on 17 July, when it responded to the lists put before it for the nominations to Select Committees, and I do not think that there was a preponderant feeling in the House that night that the existing system was a strong, old-fashioned socialist one. I regret that the House passed up the opportunity for reform when it had the chance on Tuesday.

Of course my hon. Friend is right that I support PR. I make no bones about that. I understand entirely that I have some way still to climb on this side of the House to make progress with that—and an awful long way to climb on the other side of the House. As he mentioned the Scottish Parliament, I should like him to reflect on how the PR system and the fact that the Scottish Parliament represents the whole of Scottish public opinion has helped to build a consensus, which will ensure that no one will ever dare try to abolish the Scottish Parliament.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate early next week on today's alarming news that the Bank of England's reserves are more than $450 million—£300 million, or £26 for every family in Britain—lower than they otherwise would be because of the Chancellor's decision to instruct the Bank to sell its gold and put 40 per cent. of the money into euros? Does the right hon. Gentleman appreciate that this is a serious issue and that, if we do not have a debate, it will give the impression that the Government want to hold debates on things that are going well, but are not prepared to face up to the issues when a horrible mistake that costs the taxpayer a fortune is made?

Mr. Cook: I can say only that the hon. Gentleman has again lived up to his reputation by raising an issue that is three years old. Of course, the sale of the gold had nothing to do with the overall level of the reserve and everything to do with the rebalancing between liquidity and gold. As he raises the issue, let me say that I am delighted, because I feel much more secure and sleep much better in my bed in the full knowledge that a much lower debt hangs over the Bank of England and the Government. Indeed, he gives me the opportunity to remind the House that the Government that he supported, and, from time to time, aspired to be a member of—indeed, that he supported that Government from time to time is also probably a fair rider—doubled the national debt. This Government have halved the national debt. If he is looking for prudence, it lies in our record and not his.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the enlargement of the European Union? He will know that Commissioner Verheugen has published a report indicating that the applicant countries may be in the EU by 2004. Clearly, although hon. Members want to debate the euro and the five economic tests, other European issues can be discussed. Enlargement is an important issue.

Mr. Cook: I fully agree with my hon. Friend on his observation about the importance of the enlargement of the European Union. It depresses me that there is not more

press, media and public interest in what is an enormous historic and strategic change in the European Union. The British Government have sought to be a champion of enlargement, which will be reinforced next week when my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister meets the new Prime Minister of Hungary. We will continue to do everything that we can to make sure that we achieve the targets, for which we argued and secured agreement, that candidates who are ready should be admitted in time for the next European parliamentary elections in 2005. I assure my hon. Friend that everything possible is being done to achieve that, and we would welcome an opportunity, should it arise, of reporting on that to the House.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): The Leader of the House's legendary powers of persuasion persuaded me to vote with him on Tuesday in the Division Lobby.

Mr. Forth: So my hon. Friend was one of them?

Mr. Osborne: Indeed I was. I ignored the advice of the shadow Leader of the House. Has the Leader of the House had the chance to reflect in the last couple of days on why those legendary powers of persuasion failed to persuade a single member of the Cabinet, apart from the Chief Whip, to join him in the Division Lobby?

Mr. Cook: I was about to thank the hon. Gentleman for his support, but I shall put that on hold in the light of his final line. As to the Cabinet, I must admit that, when I was Foreign Secretary, I was rarely present in the House on the occasion of an open vote. I regret that, as one of the things that I enjoy enormously about my current job is the opportunity to be present in the House for all the time that I want. We must be realistic: Cabinet Ministers have a lot of other things to do. Although I was pleased to have the hon. Gentleman's support, I was, if anything, even more pleased to have the support of the majority of the Labour Members who voted that night.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I know that my right hon. Friend is aware of early-day motion 826, which calls for a committee of Members of Parliament to be set up to provide prior scrutiny of certain contentious arms export licences.

[That this House believes that specified defence export licence applications should be subject to prior scrutiny by a committee comprising honourable Members of Parliament.]

The subject of arms licences has caused considerable dissent at various times in the House. Four Select Committees of the House decided unanimously to support a committee providing prior scrutiny, and both the United States and Sweden have such a committee. Next week, in the other place, there is an opportunity on Third Reading to support an amendment calling for prior scrutiny. The early-day motion has been signed by 304 Members of the House, and my right hon. Friend will agree that that is a strong expression of opinion supporting the setting up of such a committee.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend will be aware that I have spent much time debating this matter with her and other members of the Quadripartite Committee. I welcome the interest that has been shown by the Quadripartite Committee in arms exports decisions, and I am modestly pleased that there was only one occasion when there was a substantive difference of opinion between the Quadripartite Committee and the Government on the decision taken by Government.

Prior scrutiny would raise many separate constitutional questions, because the traditional way in which the Government are accountable to this place and to its Committees is to take a decision and to be held to account for it. Involving the House in the decision-making process, particularly in the case of individual decisions and applications by commercial companies, would be a new venture. However, I am proud of the fact that this Government have provided both the Quadripartite Committee and everyone in the House with more opportunity to hold us to account for decisions on arms exports by providing the most transparent, comprehensive and detailed reports on our decisions on such exports of any European country.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Does the Leader of the House share my concern about the results of the Dutch elections yesterday? It now looks likely that the third Government in Europe with an extreme right-wing element will be set up, joining the crypto-fascists in Austria and Italy. While I accept that our Government have to have a working relationship with Governments of that political colour, surely it should not be a special relationship such as that advocated by the Prime Minister with Italy. May we have an opportunity to debate in Government time their relationship with emerging right-wing Governments in Europe, so that we can examine how we can work with those Governments and the people of the countries concerned to persuade the European political consciousness to reject that right-wing ideology?

Mr. Cook: My concern about the elections in the Netherlands yesterday is, if anything, even greater than the hon. Gentleman's, since I have a number of good friends and political colleagues who lost their seats, which I deeply regret.

Mr. Forth: Excellent.

Mr. Cook: While I do not expect any sympathy—indeed, I anticipated that reaction—I do not anticipate that the right hon. Gentleman would have supported the election of List Pim Fortuyn, which is what contributed so much to that defeat.

I hear what the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) is saying. He properly recognises that we will have to have a working relationship with whatever Governments are elected by other European Union member states, but that does not mean to say that we share any of the values or policy objectives of those who were elected from the extreme right. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister never said anything about the special relationship with Italy. If I remember rightly, that language was used by the Prime Minister of Italy, not the Prime Minister of Britain. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will have correct relations with the Netherlands, but he is right that we will want to work with our colleagues throughout Europe to ensure that the poisonous doctrine of the far right is defeated.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): The Leader of the House has worked seriously to improve and increase the powers of the House of Commons and to modernise them. Is it not a matter of considerable regret, however, that on Tuesday when the House was presented with the opportunity of a truly free vote on giving power back to Back-Bench Members to decide the membership of Select Committees, the Whips Office—the Government Whips Office—made a concerted effort to encourage Members of Parliament into the Aye Lobby. Will he consider that interesting definition of the words "free vote"? We seem to have lost an interpretation of the words that could be clearly understood.

Mr. Cook: Of course, I regret the fact that the motion that I put before the House did not command a majority. If I may put in a good word for the Whips, I was delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Keith Hill) joined me in the Lobby on Tuesday. That confirms my judgment that he is a man of discretion, wisdom and vision—if only I had had more such Members in the House on Tuesday night I would have been very content. The House has spoken and I have taken careful note of what was said by those who voted against. The next time that they are unhappy about the membership of a Select Committee, I shall remind them of what they said on Tuesday.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Further to that reply, does the Leader of the House have any plans to revisit the business that the House debated on Tuesday? Does he agree that, whereas last July the House took the view that the Whips had too much patronage, somewhat perversely on Tuesday night the House voted to give them even more? Will he consider with the Modernisation Committee the specific proposition that the House rejected on Tuesday to see whether it might be amended to reflect the concern of the House? Will he then bring a fresh proposition back to the House, so that we can move away from the present position, which is unsatisfactory? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Cook: I should warn the right hon. Gentleman that he is being heckled vigorously by those on his Front Bench. I thought I should put that on the record in case he failed to observe it.

The proposition that I moved on Tuesday was not plucked out of thin air over a few hours; it was the product of several weeks of painful negotiation and compromise with the Speaker and the Chairman of Ways and Means, and discussion with others in the House. During the debate, I offered to rebalance it further to take account of the concerns of newer Members. It was therefore the product of pretty intensive effort. I have to be honest: I do not think it will be possible to come up with a proposal that will command wider acceptance. The House was given an opportunity on Tuesday to vote for a different system or to stick with the present one; it voted to stick with the present system. It will be some time before I feel able to revisit it and will only do so if I am given more encouragement than I am getting from the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst.

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): Two days ago the Government announced a consultation on energy policy. In an accompanying press release, the Prime Minister said:

"I hope that this report will launch a thorough debate."

The Minister for Industry and Energy said:

"I am determined to make the consultation process as open and inclusive as possible."

I have asked the Leader of the House this before, and I ask him again: will he organise a full day's debate on energy policy, either in this Chamber or in Westminster Hall, so that Members can participate fully in the consultation process?

Mr. Cook: I hear what my hon. Friend says and am well aware of the wide interest in the House in the future of energy policy, which has been raised a number of times in business questions. At present, as is common at this phase in the parliamentary Session, we have a great deal of legislative business to take on the Floor of the House in order to maintain the legislative programme. I am aware of the interest in debating energy policy, and I take note of my hon. Friend's comments.

Bob Russell (Colchester): In the spirit of joined-up government, will the Leader of the House find time next week to debate listed buildings, in particular the fact that one Department granted listed building consent as recently as March to buildings at Bishopsgate goods yard, while another Department is planning in the next week or two to sanction sending in the bulldozers? Not only will we lose some of our major national heritage, but many jobs will be lost. Will the right hon. Gentleman arrange for the relevant Minister to find time to come to the House and explain why joined-up government is not working in respect of our listed buildings?

Mr. Cook: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having found a subject on which the entire resources of Whitehall had not thought to offer a brief in advance. In the circumstances, I shall refer his comments to the two relevant Departments and invite them to respond.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the Government's plans to have a single equality commission that will encompass the Commission for Racial Equality, the Disability Rights Commission and the Equality Opportunities Commission, and which will also consider age, sexual orientation and religion? The Government's plans are probably the most practical way to proceed, but there is understandable concern among the different groups involved that their particular interests will be lost. Will my right hon. Friend find time to debate that important proposal?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend draws attention to the fact that we can be proud of the Government's record post-1997 and, indeed, of the record of previous Labour Governments, of taking through all the legislation on the statute book which opposes race discrimination and promotes equality of opportunity for women. We want to build on that fine record of achievement in opposing inequality and discrimination.

My hon. Friend will be aware that the idea of a merger has been floated. At the moment, it is no more than that. It will require considerable debate and I have not the slightest doubt that views will be expressed by people on both sides of the argument, including those who are worried about maintaining the focus of those bodies.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I should like to follow up on that subject. The Leader of the House will

be aware that my Sex Discrimination (Amendment) Bill is listed for Second Reading on Friday 21 June—alas, it is No. 6 and will not be reached. However, an identical Bill was introduced in the Lords on 13 March, when it had its Second Reading. It has completed its Committee stage and will complete Report and Third Reading next week. It received the support of all those on the Front Benches in that House and there are indications of support from Cabinet Office Ministers here. Can the Leader of the House give an idea of how much time he thinks that Bill will require to be passed in this House, and when he is likely to make an announcement on that?

Mr. Cook: I am sympathetic to the substance of the hon. Gentleman's Bill. As he knows, some of my colleagues in government have already expressed their sympathy with the purposes of the measure.

As Leader of the House, I have to say that the hon. Gentleman must be realistic about the prospects of progress for a Bill that is slated as No. 6 on the last day for private Members' business in this Session. I wish him much luck; I will be happy if he succeeds. However, it is not for me to intervene to provide the opportunity for that to happen. If I were to do so, those with an interest would wish Bills Nos. 1 to 5 and 7 to 19 to feature in next week's business statement.

John Cryer (Hornchurch): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 1206?

[That this House commemorates Workers' Memorial Day on 28th April and recognises its value in helping trade unions and work place safety and health campaigners in over 100 countries to draw attention to the one million three hundred thousand people who die annually due to poor working conditions often forgotten and publicly unremembered; and welcomes this year's UK theme of improving public health through stronger safety and health measures, access to effective occupational health services and empowering safety representatives to do an even better job in the work place.]

The motion stands in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham). It draws attention to the fact that 1.3 million people die because of poor health and safety conditions every year throughout the world.

The British building industry has always been notoriously dangerous. At present, two construction workers die each week because of poor health and safety conditions. Some construction workers who have suffered under these conditions, and who will suffer in future, live in my constituency, which provides many construction workers for east London and the rest of the south-east. Will it be possible to have a debate, perhaps in Government time, on health and safety conditions on building sites?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend raises an important and serious issue. I share his view that the legal process, the political process and Parliament should pay more attention to and put more effort into considering serious loss of life at work, including on building sites. It is important that we all back the Health and Safety Executive in its measures to ensure that we provide, as best we can, the safest possible working environment for those who undertake tasks that often turn out to be more dangerous than was anticipated when they were designed. I wish my hon. Friend every success with his campaign. I am sure that he will find other opportunities in Parliament to raise it.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Foreign Office Minister next week to correct the record of the House at column 332 on 9 December 1998?

The House, including the right hon. Gentleman, will recall the murder of four hostages—British Telecom workers—in Chechnya in 1998. One of those people, Mr. Rudolph Petschi, was one of my constituents, and on behalf of his widow I pursued information through debates and questions. After two years I gave up because I felt that the responses I received were inadequate. I referred the case to the parliamentary ombudsman, who has now reported.

As a result of that investigation, I have received a letter telling me that Foreign Office practice in London and in our embassies will be changed in respect of how communications are dealt with at weekends. In addition, on 21 March I received a letter of apology from the permanent secretary, Mr. Michael Jay. He apologised to Mrs. Petschi and me for the confusion in the way Ministers answered my questions. I have sent a copy of the letter to you, Mr. Speaker.

I wrote to the Foreign Secretary on 22 April but have received no response to that letter, let alone an apology. The need for an apology is twofold. First, I obviously accept the permanent secretary's apology, but I do not think that it is correct for Ministers to allow civil servants to apologise on their behalf for what happens in the Chamber. In addition, the very nature—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mrs. Browning: I will be brief, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I understand that the hon. Lady is raising a sensitive matter, but I must stop her. This is business questions. I call the Leader of the House to reply.

Mr. Cook: I shall read the ombudsman's report and the correspondence to which the hon. Lady has referred. She will be well aware of my interest in it at the time. I have not seen the papers, and therefore would not wish to give the House an off-the-cuff response. The matter deserves to be considered fully and in detail. Having said that, I remind the hon. Lady and the House that, from my recollection of events, even if procedure that weekend had been different, there is no evidence that it would have had the slightest bearing on the tragic outcome for those four people.

Mr. James Wray (Glasgow, Baillieston): Given that we are a Government of strong family values, why the haste in introducing the Adoption and Children Bill? We have not had any consultation with any Churches or any of the children's committees. What kind of psychological effect will the Bill have? Will it erode the civil liberties of children who have been adopted by homosexual partners? Is it right for a Labour Government to introduce

[Mr. James Wray]

such a Bill? Because there has been very little consultation, as I have said, will the Leader of the House postpone it?

Mr. Cook: I will not do that. The Adoption and Children Bill, which we shall consider today and next week, is the only Bill this Session that we have dealt with in Special Standing Committee, which enabled everybody with an interest to give evidence to Committee members. Moreover, the proposal before the House to provide for unmarried couples to adopt children is supported, I believe, by every children's charity. If we are serious about providing a home for those children and making sure that we tap those who are willing to work with them and the charities to provide a secure environment in which they can be brought up, we have to move with the times and recognise that a growing number of couples out there are not married, but are living together in a stable, albeit unmarried, relationship. It may not be right for the House to tell them that, for that reason, they cannot adopt a child and at the same time tell the children that we cannot find them a home because we will not work with those people.

Mr. Charles Hendry (Wealden): The Leader of the House, with his characteristic respect for Parliament, won plaudits from both sides of the House when he recently apologised to the House for giving incorrect information, albeit inadvertently. We read in today's papers that the Home Secretary won respect from police officers when he apologised yesterday for the way in which he has treated them in recent months; we look forward to his making a similar apology in the House shortly. Now that we know that the Transport Secretary is on his way out, will the Leader of the House and the Home Secretary take him to one side, preferably in a remote, darkened and sound-proof room, and explain that the only way for him to gain respect in the House is to follow their lead and apologise for his errors and the way in which he has treated the House?

Mr. Cook: I think that I went seven minutes on that question with John Humphrys last Friday, which was as testing as anything that I have encountered during business questions. There is no dispute whatsoever about the fact that at that meeting in February Martin Sixsmith and the permanent secretary discussed resignation; there is a dispute between the permanent secretary and Martin Sixsmith about how far they got in settling the question of resignation. It is the case that I came to the House and apologised; I did so because I had been given misleading information, and the person who provided that information was Martin Sixsmith.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Although recently there has been a welcome trend for Ministers to admit mistakes, it is nevertheless unusual for the Prime Minister to admit that his policy does not work, as he did this week with drugs policy. Will the Leader of the House allow us to have an early debate before the summer recess on drugs policy and what it should consist of, as the Prime Minister has clearly admitted that the policy we have been employing is not working?

Mr. Cook: If I may say so, no one in the Government is more vigilant in guarding against complacency than my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. When we find that a policy is not producing the results that any of us would wish, it is right to look at it again and consider alternative ways of developing it. That is the responsible way to do it, but I must tell my hon. Friend and the House that anyone who pretends that there is an easy, simple and guaranteed answer on drugs has not considered the problem and the reality with which we deal in many of our inner-city communities.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must move on.

Afghanistan

1.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I should like to bring the House up to date on recent developments in Afghanistan.

On Monday, taskforce Jacana—the force based around 45 Commando Group, Royal Marines—completed the first major operation in Afghanistan, Operation Snipe, but before I report on what Operation Snipe has achieved, I should say a few words about the medical situation at Bagram air base.

Over the past three days, 18 military personnel serving with 34 field hospital at Bagram air base have been taken ill with an unidentified feverish illness. The precise nature of the illness is not yet known and medical tests are being urgently conducted to isolate the cause. The symptoms are consistent with enteric febrile illness and the illness appears to be contagious.

Two people are very seriously ill, but fortunately their conditions have stabilised overnight. One has been returned to the United Kingdom for treatment and the other has been evacuated to a United States hospital in Germany. One other person remains seriously ill. He is being cared for by the remaining medical staff at Bagram. This patient and five others are scheduled for aeromedical evacuation to the UK today for further treatment and convalescence. Six other patients are under close medical supervision at 34 field hospital. Four patients have already been discharged.

In response to the outbreak, a number of actions have been taken. As a precaution, the field hospital has been closed to all but similarly infected patients, and strict barrier nursing protocols have been implemented. The occupants of the tent in which the disease first appeared have been placed under quarantine. Fresh rations are no longer being supplied; only operational ration packs are being used. An environmental health officer and his team have been deployed to Bagram, and an infection control nurse has been deployed from the United Kingdom. A consultant in infectious diseases is to be deployed as soon as possible.

Advice has been sought from the consultant adviser in communicable disease control, who in turn has consulted other national experts. An epidemiological study has commenced to investigate the origins of the infection and the pattern of its spread. A consultant physician, an anaesthetist and two intensive care unit nurses have been deployed to reinforce 34 field hospital. In the interim, the German hospital based in Kabul will provide hospital cover for British troops based in Afghanistan.

The situation is clearly very serious. We are, however, encouraged that there have been no new cases over the past 22 hours. We will keep the House informed of further significant developments, as appropriate. I know that all right hon. and hon. Members will join me in wishing all those who have been taken ill a full and rapid recovery.

I should also like to take this opportunity to bring the House up to date on the international security assistance force in Kabul. ISAF has been doing excellent work under British leadership. On 29 April I told the House of Turkey's decision to take over as lead nation. On 7 May, Turkish Foreign Minister Cem wrote to the United Nations Secretary-General to confirm this. We are now discussing the final details of the leadership transfer and are working towards achieving that by the end of June.

On 9 and 10 May, Turkish and UK authorities co-hosted an ISAF force generation conference in Ankara, focusing on the next phase of the deployment. Twenty-six nations made offers covering almost all the force requirements. These nations are now making their final assessments of what capabilities they might be able to contribute. That includes the United Kingdom. It is too soon to say what will be the likely size of our future contribution to ISAF, but it will be a considerably smaller contribution than the number of UK personnel who are now deployed with that force. I am confident that, under Turkish leadership, ISAF will remain the well-balanced and capable force that it is today. I congratulate Turkey on its decision.

I turn now to Operation Snipe. The House should recall the context of the overall objectives of our action in Afghanistan, which we set out in detail when military action began. These are to bring Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders to justice; to prevent Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network from posing a continuing terrorist threat; to ensure that Afghanistan ceases to harbour and sustain international terrorism; and to effect a sufficient change in the leadership to ensure that Afghanistan's links to international terrorism are broken.

Those objectives still hold and have been substantially achieved. The Taliban have been removed from power and replaced by the Interim Administration under Hamid Karzai. He is moving Afghanistan along the road towards the Loya Jirga, which will shape the Government of Afghanistan for the next stage of their constitutional development.

We have gone a long way towards ensuring that Afghanistan ceases to harbour and sustain international terrorism, and we have made progress towards preventing al-Qaeda from posing a continuing terrorist threat elsewhere, but these objectives have not yet been fully secured. Previous offensive operations, including the US-led Operation Anaconda, did real damage to al-Qaeda and Taliban forces, which have been effectively destroyed as dominant organised forces in Afghanistan.

But al-Qaeda and the Taliban have not completely disappeared. The terrorists have not been finally defeated. Elements of these organisations continue to pose a threat inside Afghanistan. The enemy still exists. We need to keep up the pressure and prevent them from re-establishing themselves in Afghanistan. We have good evidence that small groups of terrorist forces continue to prepare for and conduct operations and to attack opportunity targets. In recent weeks there have been a number of—fortunately ineffectual—attacks against coalition bases throughout Afghanistan. Left to regroup, these terrorists would easily pose a direct threat—even, ultimately, to the people of the United Kingdom.

That is why ISAF has been deployed to Kabul, to help the Interim Administration to maintain security in these difficult early days. That is why, with allies, we continue to work with the Interim Administration on wider security sector reform, to ensure that the Afghan people are able to take on the responsibility for the long-term security of their country.

It is also why there is a continuing need to prosecute offensive operations against al-Qaeda. It is why, in March, we deployed the 1,700 strong group formed around 45 Commando, Royal Marines, to Afghanistan to play its part, with other coalition forces, in countering the threat

[Mr. Geoffrey Hoon]

from al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants. And that is why these Royal Marines carried out Operation Ptarmigan, from 13 to 18 April, and Operation Snipe, from 1 to 13 May.

The decision to deploy the Royal Marines on Operation Snipe was taken on the basis of clear military advice. As the Chief of the Defence Staff has set out, its strategic objective was to ensure that al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants were not able to regroup and launch new offensives against the Interim Administration or coalition forces. This is even more important as the country moves towards the Loya Jirga.

Operation Snipe's objectives were to search the area of operations, 220 sq km of land, for terrorists and terrorist infrastructure—the caves and bunker complexes, the arms caches, and supply dumps—and, when found, to destroy them. Had the Royal Marines encountered any terrorist groups, they would have dealt with them. The area of operations for Operation Snipe was chosen carefully as part of a wider coalition plan to deny space in Afghanistan to the terrorists. The area was chosen specifically because we knew it was where terrorist forces had operated, and where they were still capable of operating. It was chosen because it was somewhere that coalition forces had not previously operated.

This was a major operation, the largest offensive ground operation UK forces have undertaken since the Gulf conflict. In all, around a thousand personnel were involved—mostly drawn from 45 Commando, Royal Marines, ably supported by 3 Commando Brigade's brigade reconnaissance force; the 105 mm guns of 7 Battery, 29 Commando Regiment; 59 Independent Commando Squadron, Royal Engineers; the Commando Logistics Regiment; and Chinook helicopters from 27 Squadron.

This was a powerful, balanced, and capable force operating in close co-operation with other coalition forces. They worked closely with the Afghans, who provided guides, and also with American forces. They came under the local command and control of the United States 10 Mountain Division. US forces also provided helicopter support and, had it been required, were ready to provide close air support, a divisional reserve in the event of serious opposition, and medical support in the event of casualties.

The Royal Marines who deployed on Operation Snipe displayed the skill and professionalism that we have come to expect. Once again, they proved just how fortunate we are to possess forces of such high quality. They scoured terrain as rugged as any in the world, at extremely high altitudes—between 8,000 and 13,000 ft above sea level for two weeks.

The success of Operation Snipe should not be measured by the number of dead al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters. No terrorists were killed or detained by the Royal Marines. There were no close contacts with the enemy, but to say this means that somehow the operation was a failure or a waste of time, as some have suggested, is quite wrong.

One obvious and tangible proof of the operation's success was the destruction of a massive arms cache. The Royal Marines found 2,300 rocket-propelled grenades, 1,200 mortar rounds of varying calibre, 200 land mines, and 30,000 other types of munitions ranging from heavy machine gun bullets to 155 mm artillery shells, spread over 10 caves, bunkers and other sites. Other than a small quantity of bullets and mortar rounds that were transferred to the new Afghan national army, this has all been destroyed. That means that Afghanistan is a safer place, as a direct result of Operation Snipe. The cache belonged to al-Qaeda or the Taliban, not to a local warlord. The types of munitions found, the fact that the area is one where we know that terrorists have operated in the past, and the location of the weapons and munitions at a point where the territories of three rival warlords intersect all indicate that they belonged to terrorists.

But it was not just the discovery of those weapons that made Operation Snipe a success. Two hundred and twenty sq km of land that provided a safe haven for terrorists has been checked and cleared for the first time in this campaign. Also, taskforce Jacana gained valuable intelligence, which is still being assessed. Moreover, al-Qaeda and Taliban members have been prevented from carrying out offensive operations from the areas covered by Operations Ptarmigan and Snipe. That is particularly important at a time when the country is moving towards the Loya Jirga. I ask the House to bear it in mind that the direct distance from Khost to Kabul is just under 100 miles. Operation Snipe therefore achieved its objectives.

There are those who may have been disappointed that there were no contacts with the enemy. Certainly, some Royal Marines were frustrated by that, but that does not detract from what they have achieved. Clearing country like this is hard, slow, difficult and dangerous work. It is not glamorous, nor is it spectacular, but it played, and continues to play, an important part in denying a large area of Afghanistan to the remnants of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

On 16 October last year, when some were questioning the shape of the military campaign, I explained to the House that what was in prospect in Afghanistan was not a classical military campaign—because we were not, and are not, facing a standing army—so the phasing, tempo, and scale of operations differed from what would be used against a conventional opponent. That remains the case. One of the lessons of unconventional campaigns of the past is that ultimate success depends on action on many fronts—political, social and economic, as well as military—and cannot be measured in days. At the military level, comparable campaigns have been marked not by pitched battles, but by prolonged periods of patient, painstaking patrolling and information gathering. At times, direct offensive action may be required—Operation Anaconda was an example of such action—but that tends to be the exception, rather than the norm.

Operation Snipe must be seen in the context of a developing pattern of operations. Those operations will be intelligence-led and will vary in scale and intensity. Brigadier Lane, the commander of taskforce Jacana, was right when he said that offensive operations like Operation Snipe were drawing to an end. Taskforce Jacana is now in a period of recovery and preparation for further operations. The House would not expect me to set out where or when those operations will take place. They may look rather different from Operation Snipe—sometimes there may be no visible activity—but they will all be focused on the destruction of the terrorist infrastructure and, where terrorist groups are encountered, of the terrorists themselves. By conducting such operations, we will seek to ensure that al-Qaeda and

Taliban remnants cannot regroup in a way that allows them to launch operations to undermine the stability of Afghanistan or to disrupt the emergency Loya Jirga—or, indeed, to threaten lives elsewhere.

To ensure that we are able to carry out continuing operations, we are announcing today the compulsory call-out of medical reserves. Five anaesthetists and two surgeons will be called out in mid-June for deployment in early July, and a further four surgeons will be called out in mid-July for deployment in early August. The period of call-out will be three months—they will then be replaced by others. Reservists play an increasingly important part in current operations. Those personnel will provide essential medical support to operations.

Ultimately, the future of Afghanistan is a matter for the Afghan people. It is their right, and ultimately their responsibility, to govern themselves in a society free of oppression or the malign influence of terrorists. We shall continue to support the Afghan people as they begin the long process of restoring the stability and prosperity of their country.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and I am grateful for sight of it in advance.

I shall not dwell at length on the outbreak of illness among personnel attached to 34 field hospital, but I entirely echo the sentiments expressed by the Secretary of State and his concern for those infected and for their families. We wish them a speedy recovery, and I am sure that the Secretary of State will do everything that can be done to assist them. There will inevitably be questions to answer about the cause of the outbreak. For example, is there any connection between this outbreak and the soldier who contracted something similar two weeks ago? Could a local person who was being treated in our hospital have brought in the infection?

Although the Army takes pride in lightly equipped deployments, as they extend from weeks to months are we cutting corners and adding to health risks by refusing to replace trench latrines and basic washing facilities with portakabins containing proper showers and flushing toilets? The contrast between our operations in Kabul and those of other nations brought that matter to light when I was there a month ago.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that an inquiry will be undertaken into the outbreak, and that it should not rule out any possible source of the infection? I look forward to its conclusions.

Is not the compulsory call-out of Territorial Army medical staff a good reminder of the valuable role that the TA plays in our armed forces?

The statement has much greater import, too; I suspect that the Secretary of State felt the need to make it so as to respond to the chorus of media disenchantment with recent operations in Afghanistan. Many commentators share the palpable frustration of the Royal Marines, to which the Secretary of State referred, because they did not get the engagements with the enemy that we had been led to expect. However, I agree with the Secretary of State and the Government that that does not mean that Operations Ptarmigan and Snipe have been a waste of time.

In the areas at the heart of al-Qaeda's state within the state, those operations have denied the ground to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Is not al-Qaeda dispersed and disrupted a much better prospect than al-Qaeda massing to destabilise the new Government in Kabul? Is that not a success? The terrorists ran away from the British Royal Marines, whereas previously they felt able to stand and fight. Is that not a testament to the fearsome reputation for bravery and professionalism of our Royal Marines? We should congratulate all those in taskforce Jacana on a job well done.

What now? Where does the war on terrorism go from here? The Secretary of State referred to the continuing need to prosecute offensive operations. He said that we were not considering a classical military campaign and stressed the need for better intelligence. He mentioned the varying scale and intensity of operations, and said that there was sometimes no visible activity. He described the focus on terrorist infrastructure and the disruption of the terrorists' ability to operate. Is that not a description of what is becoming a classic counter-insurgency war? Is not better intelligence the key to successful operations?

What is the Secretary of State's assessment of the strength, capabilities and current activities of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and especially in Pakistan and elsewhere? It is obvious that its members are not simply hiding in Afghanistan; they have fled. What is his latest assessment of the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden? As the right hon. Gentleman reminded us, his capture was the Government's stated objective at the outset. Where does all that leave our future commitment?

What relationship will the United Kingdom and ISAF have with the new permanent American headquarters, which is being set up with 500 staff at Bagram? That signals a long-term United States commitment to Operation Enduring Freedom. What is our commitment? What is its duration? What progress is being made on training an indigenous Afghan army? It has been said that Afghanistan needs an army of 60,000.

The Secretary of State referred to action on many fronts—political, social and economic. What further military and other activities will the UK undertake to continue what the Government have started—the stabilisation of the Government of Afghanistan? I remind the right hon. Gentleman of the frustration that the British military expressed when I was in Kabul last month. They said that it was often hard and complicated to use British aid money to fulfil projects such as getting the electricity back on or repairing the water supplies. Those are projects for the population among whom our soldiers have to live and work. We promised so much that any failure to deliver may make them a focus for frustration and ultimately a target for public disappointment and protests.

We welcome the fact that Turkey will take over the leadership of ISAF, but when will the Government make a clear statement about the way in which a military civil aid programme will be delivered? All we hear is that the Secretary of State for International Development is reluctant to co-operate with projects led by the military—and that the problem is not that she cannot help, but that she will not help.

Is the Secretary of State aware that many of our soldiers feel a bit used because of the involvement in what might be called "eye-catching initiatives", while small sums are denied for less glamorous projects that could make a big practical difference to the people whom the British armed forces are there to help? Will he explain to the House how this frustration can be resolved?

[Mr. Bernard Jenkin]

The lessons of previous successful counter-insurgency operations in Kenya, Malaya, Borneo and Oman teach us the need to win over the hearts and minds of the indigenous population. If that is the road that the Government are choosing to go down, that is the task that we must put at the top of the agenda.

Mr. Hoon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his thoughtful and considered comments on the medical outbreak at Bagram. I know that his good wishes will be well received by the people affected and by their families. I assure him that, as I said in my statement, a determined effort will be made to identify the cause of the outbreak. Obviously, we need to understand its cause to ensure that no similar outbreak can occur again.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the invaluable role played by the Territorial Army; that is a subject to which we are likely to return shortly. I want to emphasise the commitment that the Government give to reservists of all kinds, and how much we appreciate the efforts that they make.

The key to the general military operation is certainly intelligence. The extent of al-Qaeda and Taliban activity, particularly along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, continues to cause concern. Any future operation will be specifically directed towards dealing with the ability of terrorists to operate freely in that area. I can confirm that Osama bin Laden and the leadership of al-Qaeda and the Taliban continue to be targets for our operations.

I am not in a position to be able to answer directly the hon. Gentleman's question about the duration of the commitment; I am sure that he did not expect a specific answer. All I can say is that we have a continuing responsibility to prosecute offensive operations against those who would seek to destabilise not only Afghanistan but the peace and security of the world, and we will ensure that ours is an appropriate contribution.

As for the other activities being pursued right across government, there is a significant aid programme and we have pledged economic support to the Interim Administration, policing training is being provided by Germany, and we are involved in an extensive programme of military training—although the United States is firmly in the lead there. There is, therefore, a determined joined-up effort right across government to ensure that there will be a reconstructed Afghanistan. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept, however, that the key to this lies with the Afghans themselves, which is why it is so important to give such strong support to the Loya Jirga and to the process of rebuilding the Government and the Administration of that country.

If I may say so, I think that the hon. Gentleman was unfair to the Department for International Development and inaccurate in his comments about the co-operation between the Ministry of Defence and that Department. On a number of occasions it has been possible for forces that arrive early in a situation that requires stabilisation to carry out reconstruction tasks with funding from DFID. That is perhaps the best example of joined-up government that I can give. Such activities also occurred in Sierra Leone, and I anticipate that they will occur again in Afghanistan. I have seen for myself the British forces in ISAF engaged in rebuilding schools and creating the conditions in which the people of Afghanistan can again live a full and peaceful life in that society.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for giving me notice of his statement. I also thank his colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Defence for the consultations and the advice that I received on this subject yesterday.

May I also send my best wishes and those of my colleagues to the people involved at Bagram and their families? Our first hope is that they all make a speedy recovery. Those affected and their families will want to know whether this outbreak could have been prevented. Our forces have encountered medical problems on deployment before. In Sierra Leone, for example, 159 of them returned with malaria. Were any lessons learned from that incident, and can the Secretary of State assure us that all our forces in Afghanistan were fully inoculated before they left? Are other nations also involved? Are troops from other nations suffering such problems?

The Secretary of State mentioned the defence medical services. The shortages have been highlighted by many Members, not least my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). We understand that there are only enough staff from the regular forces to maintain one field hospital, and that, given a strategic defence review target of 14 deployable field hospitals, we can muster only five at a push for the reserve forces. Is it not the case that unless we get the manning in the defence medical services right, there may come a time when we will not be able to deploy on combat operations because we will not have proper medical support?

May I give the Secretary of State a chance to scotch some of the more ridiculous rumours that appear to be coming out of Bagram, especially those about the number of people in quarantine? I have heard journalists mention figures ranging from 60 to 300. Can the Secretary of State tell us roughly how many people are in quarantine? Can he confirm that all those in quarantine are medical staff, and that none are combat staff—or even special forces, as has been suggested in the press? Is it not the case that if our combat staff were being detained in quarantine, Operation Veritas would be considerably affected?

I am pleased that Turkey is taking over the leadership of ISAF. How long does the Secretary of State expect that to last, and what preparations are being made for another nation to take over? Does the Secretary of State share my hope that some of our European partners will consider taking over, as they have the ability to do so?

I join the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), in congratulating our forces on Operation Snipe. They did an excellent job. The Secretary of State mentioned other nations, however. Do we not know that many al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists are hiding in Pakistan? What possibility is there of cross-border co-operation with Pakistan? Might our forces have hot pursuit into Pakistan, or would there be Pakistan forces on that side of the border to deal with the terrorists?

I welcome the call-up of reservists from the Territorial Army. It shows once again how heavily we rely on the TA.

Finally, let me assure the Secretary of State of our continued support for the operations in Afghanistan.

Mr. Hoon: As I said in answer to earlier questions, it is vital for us to understand the cause of the outbreak to ensure that no further difficulty occurs in future. The hon. Gentleman specifically mentioned the way in which malaria affected operations in Sierra Leone. I assure him that checks have been made in relation to the forces in Afghanistan to ensure that appropriate medication has been available.

As far as we know, this is an isolated outbreak not affecting the forces of other countries. We are, however, working hard to understand the nature of the illness, and we will take appropriate steps.

Let me emphasise that all appropriate action has been taken in relation to quarantine measures. I have described a series of steps that have been taken. The hon. Gentleman has had a copy of my statement, and I assure him that the best possible medical and prevention advice has been made available and acted on.

As for the defence medical services, I have spoken a number of times in the House about the difficulties that we inherited with regard to that vital contribution to our armed forces. We are making determined efforts to improve the position—which indeed already has been improved. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) is muttering about the time that that has taken. He knows, or should know, how long it takes to train doctors and others with appropriate experience; if he does not know, I must tell him that it takes rather longer than five years. None the less, we are taking appropriate action to resolve the problems affecting that important contribution to the health and success of our armed forces.

I hope that the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), and the House, will bear with me, but ensuring that Turkey takes over the ISAF leadership has been a long and careful process. If the House will forgive me, I will not speculate on what further negotiations might be necessary in the future. I congratulate Turkey on its decision, and feel that, as a European nation, it is making an important contribution to ISAF.

As for co-operation with Pakistan, it is important that we work with Pakistan's forces, as we have done in the recent past. They have played a valuable role along the border, and in that regard I should like to see improvement.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his observations about reservists.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I join others in congratulating our forces on their work in Afghanistan, and on their efforts to liberate the Muslim people of Afghanistan from Taliban tyranny. The Secretary of State mentioned the wider, non-military aspects of the campaign. Does he agree that one of those is the information campaign, and that it is vital that we redouble our efforts internationally to correct the distortions and downright fabrications put out by some organisations? In particular, I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to ummahnews.com—a website edited by Faisal Bodi, terrorist apologist and columnist for *The Guardian*—which includes articles claiming that the attacks on 11 September were carried out at the instigation of the CIA or Mossad. Will my right hon. Friend therefore ensure that the international information campaign is redoubled so that, in the Muslim world in particular, such lies are taken into account?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who clearly has rather more time available for surfing the web than I do. He raises an important issue that is not limited to websites; difficulties with information distortion also occur rather closer to home. He rightly points out that it is crucial that we set out our aims and objectives, and that they are properly understood and represented.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The Secretary of State is right to highlight the successes of Operation Snipe, but he will be the first to admit that such an operation will necessarily be less effective without the existence of operations of equal, or greater, intensity on the other side of the border. He touched on that matter in his reply to the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), but could he tell us more about operations conducted by Pakistan's military, or by other forces, on that side of the border to root out al-Qaeda terrorists?

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand if I do not go into too much detail about the precise nature of those operations. However, with his characteristic common sense on such matters, he has identified an important change in the way in which those particular deployments will be made. They will be much more responsive to intelligence on the ground, and the concept of operations will reflect not only the nature of information about current conditions, but the importance of co-operation of the type that he rightly identifies as necessary.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I agree with my right hon. Friend that by destroying weapons and terrorist infrastructure our troops are playing a valuable role, and I join others in wishing those who are ill in quarantine a speedy recovery. Does the announcement that medical reservists will be called up imply that our troops are likely to be involved in combat in the near future, and is it still a campaign objective to apprehend and bring to justice Osama bin Laden and other terrorist leaders? My right hon. Friend said that had the troops engaged in Operation Snipe found terrorists, they would have dealt with them. What does he mean by that phraseology? How will the British Government ensure that terrorists who might be detained in such circumstances receive justice by due process?

Mr. Hoon: I assure my hon. Friend that medical reservists have been called up to ensure that appropriate medical cover is available to our armed forces in the event of their being engaged in combat and requiring appropriate treatment. There is no specific connection between the two issues, other than the importance of having available the right people to deal with any problems as they arise. The specific reasons for the call-up at this stage are to give those who have been serving in the area so far a break, to allow us to rotate new people into that theatre and related theatres, and to ensure that we have appropriate resources available for the length of the current operation.

[Mr. Hoon]

In connection with encounters with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, I used the words "dealt with" advisedly. In the event of suspect terrorists surrendering, they will be dealt with according to proper procedures under international law, which has always been the British Government's position. In the event of the terrorists offering resistance to our armed forces, we have robust rules of engagement that will allow them to deal with any threat effectively.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I thank the Secretary of State for his very long-winded statement, and I agree with him that Operation Snipe was clearly a success in that it denied the ground to al-Qaeda. An important role remains to be played—not dissimilar to that carried out with great brilliance and distinction by British troops in Sierra Leone—in the increasing stabilisation of Afghanistan, and allowing its fledgling Government to take root and their writ to run throughout the country.

However, all the indications and suggestions from this end that this was to be a major operation, in which it was likely that casualties would be sustained and contact would be made with the enemy, were ill judged. The hyping of military operations is unhelpful, and causes great anxiety to the families and frustration to the soldiers. There was no reason to assume that they would bump into al-Qaeda. On this occasion our intelligence was not good, because it is difficult to have good intelligence on the ground in Afghanistan.

Will the Secretary of State consider bringing the Royal Marines home and allowing some of our other first-class infantry regiments of the line to go out and gain some experience in harsh terrain?

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman, who normally deploys good sense and sound judgment in his military observations, has allowed himself to make an uncharacteristic misjudgment of the nature of the operations. Perhaps he has been away from the Ministry of Defence for too long; I would certainly allow him the opportunity to refresh his knowledge and understanding, because he normally speaks with much thoughtfulness.

I invite the hon. Gentleman to return to the statement that I made at the start of the operations and read what I said to the House. He would, rightly, have been the first to criticise me if I had not warned the House of the potential risks of such an operation. If he thought a little more carefully, he would bear in mind that it followed Operation Anaconda, in which the United States conducted a similar sweep through territory in Afghanistan in order to conduct the same sort of operation as the Royal Marines have recently undertaken, but instead of taking to the hills or fleeing to Pakistan, al-Qaeda stood its ground and fought fiercely. That was the context in which I made the statement to the House. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, whose statements are not usually long-winded, will reflect on what I have said and return to his normal good humour and good form.

Mr. Marsha Singh (Bradford, West): It would be a serious mistake to look at the present situation and claim that al-Qaeda had fled in the face of the brilliance of our Royal Marines—although I have no doubt that they are brilliant. It is clear that al-Qaeda and the Taliban are in Pakistan and other countries waiting to launch raids and attacks across the border when the time is right. If those raids start and we do not have the right of hot pursuit into Pakistan or other countries, how will we deal effectively with such incursions into Afghanistan? The long and medium-term aim should be to equip Afghanistan with its own army and security forces, because we cannot be there for ever.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has touched on two vital points. It is right to say that al-Qaeda and the Taliban are still operating in Pakistan, and that they are also operating across the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The purpose of my statement was in part to inform the House of the need for further action to deal with that. As my hon. Friend noted, co-operation along that border between allied forces and the forces of Pakistan is vital.

That is why it is important that Afghanistan should ultimately be in a position to deal with security issues itself. In my statement, I mentioned the help and support that we have received already from Afghan nationals. We are participating in a training programme for the Afghan army, which is being led by the US. In due course, we want Afghanistan to be in a position to be responsible for its own security, especially along its borders.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Does the Secretary of State agree that close co-operation between the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development is vital to the future development of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan? Will he confirm absolutely that there has been no breakdown in communications between the two Departments?

The Secretary of State has access to information from more than 3,000 pairs of eyes in the area, so will he comment on a report that I received late last night from Kabul that there are acres and acres of poppy fields alongside the road between Jalalabad and Kabul—the road that all visitors travelling by the overland route use. That report directly contradicts what the Foreign Office said on Tuesday.

Mr. Hoon: On the aid point, I have mentioned the nature of the co-operation that existed in the past between the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development. The Department for International Development now has a specific liaison officer based with the ISAF headquarters, whose specific task is to resolve matters such as those that the hon. Gentleman and others have raised. I therefore anticipate that co-ordination will not be a problem in the future.

As for the poppy fields, the House knows the difficulties suffered by the international community at the hands of those who grow, transport and supply the products of Afghanistan's poppy fields. It is thought that 90 per cent. of the heroin sold in the UK originates in Afghanistan. Britain and other members of the international community have achieved considerable success in reducing the supply from the current crop. Recent estimates suggest that about one third of the crop has been destroyed, but it is clear that we need to maintain the pressure and deal with the problems that poppy cultivation has caused not only in recent times but over a very long period of Afghanistan's history.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): My right hon. Friend may not be aware that a delegation of

parliamentarians from the Iranian Parliament has been meeting British parliamentarians this week. The Iranian delegation strongly made the point that unless security is established across Afghanistan, the 2 million refugees from Afghanistan who are currently in Iran will not feel able to return home. Will my right hon. Friend say what steps the British component of the next phase of ISAF deployment will take to help the Afghan Government to establish security across the whole country?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend is right to say that security is crucial in Afghanistan, and is also vital for refugees. I am not so familiar with the problem on the border with Iran as I am with the situation on the border with Pakistan, but I can tell my hon. Friend that refugees are streaming away from the camps in Pakistan and returning to their homes and livelihoods in Afghanistan. That is an enormous and positive contribution to their country. I shall look at the situation along the border with Iran to see whether more action can be taken in the parts of Afghanistan that are close to it to give refugees the security and confidence that they require to return home.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): On behalf of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru, I should like to add our good wishes for those who are ill in Bagram. I also thank the Minister of State, who last night made the effort to tell me personally about the outbreak. Although no members of 45 Commando, based in my constituency, are affected, the Secretary of State will appreciate that their families are concerned about the outbreak. I know that the Minister of State was due to visit Arbroath today to meet the families, and I hope that he will rearrange that visit for the near future.

As for Operation Snipe, despite what is said in some sections of the media, I—and, I am sure, the families of the troops involved—greatly welcome the fact that the Marines have been able to deny territory and ordnance to the enemy without suffering any casualties themselves. What is the Secretary of State's assessment of the ability of al-Qaeda to come back into that area, given the amount of ordnance that has been destroyed in the operation?

Mr. Hoon: In fact, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State is not in the House today because he has gone to Arbroath to fulfil the commitment that he entered into previously. I take this issue seriously, because of the support that members of our armed forces receive from their families, and I am grateful for the way in which the hon. Gentleman has raised it.

The destruction of the arms cache has denied a valuable prize to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. It is part of the reason why I am confident that we can say that Operation Snipe was a considerable success. It clearly undermined the ability of al-Qaeda to deliver its threat—but that does not mean that we can lessen our vigilance, because there may be other caches or stores to deal with.

David Hamilton (Midlothian): I should like to pass on my congratulations to all our armed forces on the work that they are doing in the region. I have supported this campaign from the beginning—although I am not likely to support others—and they are doing an excellent job.

My right hon. Friend indicated that the reservists have been pulled across because they are needed in the area. Does that mean that our armed forces are overstretched? If so, would it not be better to diminish our nuclear capability so that we can pay our armed forces a decent wage and give them decent conditions?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his observations. On his specific point about reservists, I emphasise that it is unlikely that any who have been called out by the announcement that I made today will go to Afghanistan. The important point is to have enough people available to cover the requirements of our armed forces in their various deployments across the world. Certainly, we have never tried to disguise the fact that when it comes to medics and medical support, we do not have as many people as we would like. We have to improve the necessary degree of support for our deployed armed forces.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): Our thoughts are very much with those who have fallen ill in Bagram. I suggest that the Royal Army Medical Corps must by now have a fairly good idea of what is causing the illness. It is very important to have our troops vaccinated properly. I should like to draw the Secretary of State out concerning a comment made by the Under-Secretary of State for Defence in the armed forces personnel debate on 11 April. In answer to an intervention by me, the hon. Gentleman said:

> "Nowadays nobody is deployed who has not had their vaccination and health status properly checked."—[*Official Report*, 11 April 2002; Vol. 382, c. 220.]

Does that advice still stand?

Mr. Hoon: There are considerable advantages in having ministerial experience of the medical world in dealing with this kind of outbreak. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the work that he has done in dealing with this difficult issue. There are a number of ideas about the cause of the illness but, as I said earlier, it is important that we get to the bottom of the specific cause of the outbreak if we can, so that we can take appropriate action in future. I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that he requires regarding the preventive steps that are taken elsewhere.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. I realise that these are important matters but we must move on to the main business.

Adoption and Children Bill (Programme) (No. 4)

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Before we discuss the programme motion, I wish to draw the attention of the House to the fact that three amendments on today's amendment paper have been incorrectly numbered. Two amendments tabled to clause 58 on page 1676 in the name of Kevin Brennan have been incorrectly numbered as 309 and 310. They should instead be numbered as 320 and 321. An amendment tabled to schedule 3 on page 1701 in the name of Mr. Secretary Milburn has been incorrectly numbered as 308; it should instead be numbered as 322.

2.5 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): I beg to move,

That the Orders of 29th October 2001 (Adoption and Children Bill (Programme)), 23rd January 2002 (Adoption and Children Bill (Programme (No. 2)) and 20th March 2002 (Adoption and Children Bill (Programme) (No. 3)) shall be amended by substituting for the Table, so far as relating to the second and third allotted days, the following—

Proceedings	*Time for conclusion of proceedings*
Second allotted day	
Amendments relating to Clauses Nos. 1 and 17 to 40	3.45 p.m.
Amendments relating to Clauses Nos. 41 to 51, 53 and 64 to 74	6.00 p.m.
Amendments relating to Clauses Nos. 52, 54 to 63, 75, Schedule No. 1, Clauses Nos. 76 and 77, Schedule No. 2, and Clauses Nos. 78 to 80	7.00 p.m.
Third allotted day	
Amendments relating to Clauses Nos. 81 to 88, 121, 122 and 125	Three quarters of an hour after the commencement of proceedings on the Bill
New Clauses relating to the remainder of Part 1, amendments relating to Clauses Nos. 89 to 100, 105, 106, 114 and 115	One and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Bill
New Clauses relating to Part 2, amendments relating to Clauses Nos. 107 to 113	Three and a quarter hours after the commencement of proceedings of the Bill
New Clauses relating to the remainder of Part 3, amendments relating to Clauses Nos. 101 to 104, 126, Schedules Nos. 3, 4 and 5, Clauses Nos. 127 to 134, Schedule No. 6, Clauses Nos. 135 to 137, remaining new Clauses, new Schedules and remaining proceedings on consideration	Four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Bill.

I hope that I shall not disappoint the House, as I rose only to move the motion. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I doubt that I shall get a similar cheer even if I speak for only a little longer than the hon. Lady.

The Opposition do not intend to oppose the programme motion, although we are against programme motions in principle. We are grateful for the additional allocation of two full days for consideration of the Bill after the abortive first day when, due to an emergency debate—also on Afghanistan—our deliberations were curtailed and we had only two hours for debate.

I want to record, however, that we are not entirely happy with the events of recent days, which have led to our having to confront a large number of amendments and new clauses during the allotted two days. A total of 319 amendments and 16 new clauses were tabled previously and a good many of them were dispatched during the two-hour debate on 20 March, including many Conservative amendments on substantial subjects. Those amendments were not debated and were all subject to the guillotine that fell after two hours.

Nevertheless, during the rest of today and the next allotted day on Monday, there are still left for debate 210 Government amendments and five Government new clauses, 11 Conservative amendments and three new clauses, seven Liberal Democrat amendments and one new clause—although they are purely on the subject of adoption by unmarried people—and 47 Back-Bench amendments and four new clauses. A total of 275 amendments and 13 new clauses are to be debated—more than all the amendments tabled during the entire Committee stage.

We are especially aggrieved because the vast majority of the Government amendments have appeared only during the past few days: 136 were tabled last Thursday, 18 on Monday and a handful on Tuesday. We only received on Monday a letter from the Minister, dated 10 May, by way of explanation of some of those amendments. We have had only a few days to start studying some detailed and extensive new amendments.

I remind the House that the Committee stage ended on 17 January—four months ago. There were 24 Committee sittings between 6 November 2001 and 17 January 2002 when the Government could have considered those matters in more detail. We tried to start our consideration on Report on 20 March, so why have the Government taken so long to come up with all these new amendments? Why have they tabled them at such a late stage in the Bill's proceedings, thus giving the Opposition very little time to scrutinise them properly before the two days on Report?

The Bill is not party political. We have supported it throughout its passage and we intend to continue to do so. We have made many constructive and positive amendments to try to improve it. However, the current situation is extremely unsatisfactory. There are some huge groups of amendments—the third group contains no fewer than 59—but we have only limited time to debate them. We have many meaty subjects to debate today, but all the Conservative amendments have been timetabled today, leaving less contentious issues for debate on Monday, so that timetabling is questionable.

I do not want to detain the House any longer because, for the reasons that I have mentioned, we need to get on and maximise the time that we have to debate the Bill. In the few minutes that I shall take, it is worth putting on record that this is not the most courteous way in which the Government could have treated the House, particularly those hon. Members who have spent many weeks and months living and breathing the Bill. We have done so for the past six months, but debate is now being curtailed to just two days even though we have an extraordinarily

large amount of work to do—much more than was originally intended. I will not oppose the programme motion, although we have problems with it in principle.

2.10 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I should like to take this opportunity to associate myself with the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) about the number and the short notice of the Government amendments, and therefore the crowding of today's agenda in particular.

In addition, many hon. Members will think it regrettable that it is not possible to vote today on amendment No. 158, which deals with the substantive definition in relation to unmarried couples. Unfortunately, it appears that, by virtue of the programme motion, the decision on that amendment can be taken only on Monday, so dissociating the decision from the debate. For those reasons, I, too, am concerned about the programme motion, but for the same reasons as those given by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, we do not propose to press the motion to a Division.

Question put and agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Adoption and Children Bill

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

As amended in the Standing Committee, further considered.

Clause 1

CONSIDERATIONS APPLYING TO THE EXERCISE OF POWERS

2.11 pm

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): I beg to move amendment No. 162, in page 1, line 9, after "life", insert—

', and that of any sibling or half-sibling of the child, having regard to their age and relationship.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 159, in page 2, line 16, after "the child" insert—

'(4A) The court or adoption agency may not have regard to any estrangement of the child from his parents caused wholly or substantially by the application of provisions of this Act or of the Children Act 1989.'.

No. 1, in page 2, line 19, after "background", insert—

', subject to the proviso that such consideration shall be secondary to the matters to be considered in subsections (2) and (3).'.

Mr. Turner: When I became a Member of Parliament, I did not expect to have to deal with a large number of inquiries in my constituency surgery relating to child care and adoption issues; but, in my first few months here, they were some of the most significant issues that came before me. I am glad therefore to have this opportunity to move an amendment based on my experience before and after my election.

It is said that hard cases make bad law, but it is certainly true to say that bad law makes hard cases. I hope that amendments Nos. 162 and 159—the two very simple amendments that I have proposed—will alleviate two possible injustices in the Bill. Indeed, if such provisions had been effective previously, they may have alleviated injustices that may have taken place.

It is obviously not my intention to refer in detail to any case, but I shall refer to my long association with one of the families involved—it dates back to 1999. It is almost difficult to understand, certainly from my lay position on such matters, that a decision on a child taken into care at the age of nine months in 1997 was not taken until September 2000. In other words, he spent three years and four months in a sort of limbo because of the toings and froings of the judicial and child care process, which concluded with the decision that he should be adopted.

The Bill could address two issues that may or may not have made a difference to the decision in that case, but they would certainly have made the proceedings fairer, and I address those issues in my two amendments. Amendment No. 162 relates to families where one child is being put forward for adoption, but other children may not be. Clause 1 clearly states:

"The paramount consideration of the court or adoption agency must be the child's welfare, throughout his life."

[Mr. Turner]

Of course, if children come from a family, there may be more than one child whose welfare should be considered. The fact that one child is being put forward for adoption does not in any way diminish the responsibility of the court to take account of the interests of the other children. The clause, however, refers to the child who is the subject of the proceedings; it does not refer at all to children who may not be the subject of proceedings.

My first amendment therefore proposes that the interests of a sibling or half-sibling should also be of paramount consideration, having regard to their age and relationship to the first child. Clearly, if the sibling is an older brother who is away at university and has little contact with a child of nine or 10 months, the court may wish to place less emphasis on that relationship than on that of, say, a twin, particularly if the twins were six years old. If one is put forward for adoption and the other is not—I realise that this may be unusual—it seems wrong that the second child should not be considered on an equal basis with the first. That is the reasoning behind amendment No. 162.

2.15 pm

Ms Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley): Does not the hon. Gentleman think that it is important for each child's concern to be considered individually? Their needs in relation to their family relationships with siblings and other family members are dealt with in subsection (4)(c) and (f). That is the appropriate way to consider the needs of siblings.

Mr. Turner: I agree with the hon. Lady's first proposition but not with her second. The reason for that is to do with the word "paramount". If one child's interests are paramount, those of the other child are, by definition, of less importance—they must be taken account of but they are not equal. I see no reason why two children in the same family who may be of the same age should be treated unequally by the courts in relation to such proceedings. Clearly, an effect on one may be equal on another; indeed, it may be equal and opposite on another. I accept the intention of subsection (4), but it does not deal with the issue of the word "paramount".

Amendment No. 159—my second amendment—considers the length of time that proceedings can go on and the effect of that estrangement on the natural parents of a child. I should like to refer to the judgment in the case that I have in mind. Among other things, it states:

"There has been delay in this case"—

three years and one month's delay. It continues:

"The obvious consequence of this is that"—

the child—

"has been able to become more firmly settled in the home of"—

the prospective adopters—

"whilst contact with his parents and"—

his sister—

"has continued at a level which would usually be regarded as inconsistent with a plan for adoption."

That is the judgment. It seems incredibly unfair to parents who are simply pursuing their rights, as the local authority is pursuing the rights of the child, under this and other legislation, that the passage of time should lead to the estrangement of the child to such an extent that the court may consider that nothing may have been wrong in that relationship except the passage of time. In the case that I have in mind, no charge has ever been preferred against either parent, and no arrest has ever been made of either parent. The only reason that I can see, in reading the judgment, is the passage of time.

I accept, of course, that three years and one month in the case of a child who was four at the time of adoption is a very long time. That period allows much time for the formulation of bonds with the foster parents and prospective adopters. However, the parents concerned feel deeply that it is unfair that the court should take into account that estrangement, which is not their fault, when deciding on adoption.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): Unfortunately, I feel that the amendments are unnecessary, although I listened with great interest to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner). Everything that we need is written down in black and white in clause 1(2):

"The paramount consideration of the court or adoption agency must be the child's welfare, throughout his life."

The court is considering the child who is being adopted and must put his or her interests first.

I was moved by the hon. Gentleman's example of a case involving twins, who might be split at birth, which would have a profound effect on them. Ultimately, however, the court must deal with the case before it and put that child first. When considering a placement for a child, the situation of siblings and half-siblings must be taken into account, but all those considerations cannot be paramount.

Similarly, amendment No. 1, which would downplay considerations of ethnicity and religion, is well meaning, but misguided. It is right and proper that some consideration should be given to the religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background of the child. However, that must not become an absolute credo. Perhaps that is what the amendment is aiming at. In the past, social workers have sought a perfect fit. In today's culturally diverse society, one could search in vain, for example, for someone who is one eighth Pakistani, three quarters Welsh and one eighth Scottish. What is far more important is that the child should find a place in a loving home that can provide the best care and love available for a child in need—nothing more and nothing less.

I am not a regular churchgoer, but I recognise that for some people acknowledgement of their religion is very important. If a person or a couple felt that they had to give a child up for adoption, the assurance that religion would be a prime concern would be powerful. Christians baptise their children at a very young age and would want to ensure that that commitment was honoured. They would believe that doing so was fundamental to the child's spiritual welfare. It is important that we retain the religious element, whatever the religion.

Having said that, the amendment would serve a purpose. When a social worker has to decide about a placement, I suspect that it is always a case of balancing all the complex factors and influences in an attempt ultimately to achieve what is right for the child.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Although I welcome the thinking behind the amendments tabled by my hon.

Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner), I cannot say that I support them. On amendment No. 162, my hon. Friend is right that the welfare of siblings is extremely important and I have also dealt with a number of harrowing constituency cases. None the less, those on the Opposition Front Bench support the view of almost all people concerned with adoption that the paramount consideration before a court must be the welfare of the child whose case is being considered. As the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn) said, there is scope elsewhere to take account of the views of siblings.

I shall focus on amendment No. 1, which we tabled. Should we not get the assurances that we seek from the Government, I should like a separate vote on that amendment. Almost every critic of the adoption system has focused on the delays. It is extremely rare that an adoption goes through in the 12-month period that is now the Government's target. Sometimes, they can take three or four years. In most cases, they do not happen at all.

The reasons for the delay are many. One factor that is mentioned again and again is what the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, described as seeking the "perfect fit". No one in this House would disagree with clause 1(5) when it states that the court or adoption agency must pay

"due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background."

The Opposition's concern is that that consideration is being put on a par with subsection (3), which refers to delay, hence our amendment, which would ensure that subsection (5) should be

"subject to the proviso that such consideration shall be secondary to the matters to be considered in subsections (2) and (3),"

that is, the paramountcy and delay provisions.

I shall give the House two examples, the first of which made the national press. A single mixed-race woman of independent means was approved as an adopter. Through the adoption agency concerned she found a child who had been in care since she was a baby. Babies are the easiest children to place and it is disgraceful that there should have been such a delay in placing a baby. The child was two and a half years old at the time. Although the woman was of mixed race, it was a slightly different mixture from the child, but each of them had a middle eastern and a European element. The woman, however, was Christian and the baby came from an Islamic background. Islam has no tradition of adoption. Children who cannot be cared for by their own parents are normally looked after within the extended family. After a lengthy delay, the woman was turned down on both racial and religious grounds. By that time, the child had been in care for three years. No other adopter was in sight.

If a court were faced with that case, is clause 1, as drafted, clear? Is what Parliament intends clear—that delay must override those other considerations if necessary? I do not believe that it is and that is why we want those innocuous extra words added to make it clear which subsection overrides which—that delay is more important than those other factors.

M. Munn: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the fact that one or two cases of that nature, which are indeed a cause for concern, get into the national press shows that common sense prevails for the vast majority of children? Children are placed in loving families that best meet their needs. If those families can match their cultural, linguistic and racial characteristics, that is the best case, but that is not achieved for the vast majority. Therefore, a good match is found and children are placed quickly in loving homes. To suggest that the paramountcy provision is not paramount is nonsense.

Mr. Brazier: I agreed with the last point made by the hon. Lady, for whom I have the greatest respect, but I could not disagree more strongly on these matters. Study after study in the past few years—including the Prime Minister's own review—has identified the delay that is endemic in the system as one of its greatest single weaknesses. The plain fact is that the vast majority of children in care—even those who have been in care for several years—are not satisfactorily adopted. The most recent figures that I have seen show that about 1,500 adoptive parents are still waiting for children. Therefore, I do not accept the hon. Lady's argument.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I am sure that my hon. Friend supports the Government's aim to increase the number of these children who are adopted. Those of us whose friends have tried to adopt know that they have encountered bureaucratic difficulties and delays. Adoption is not an easy process for many people at present. Does he agree that if the Government could streamline that process and deal with the problem of delay, we would be well on the way to increasing the number of children adopted, which would be one practical measure to emerge from our proceedings?

2.30 pm

Mr. Brazier: My hon. Friend is right. Indeed, the Government have stated that it is their purpose to deal with delay.

Let me give one more example. A couple who contacted the Adoption Forum lived in a racially mixed area of central London, which was reflected in their circle of friends. In 1996, they successfully adopted a seven-year-old white English boy into their family. In 1999, they applied to adopt his mixed-race older half-sister who wanted to live with them. The local authority concerned—I will not name it, but it has one of the poorest records on adoption and is at the bottom of the adoption league table—refused the placement on the grounds that she was of mixed race and the couple were white. The ruling has had a detrimental effect on their relationship with the son and, even more so, between the son and his sister. The girl remains in foster care and has suffered because of having to had move many times.

Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): We discussed that matter in Committee. One of the key things that we picked up from the evidence sessions, which were many and worth while, was that we do not want hard and fast rules when we deal with adoption. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the keys to increasing adoption to meet the Government's target of 40 per cent. is for adoptions to be successful? I do not want delays in the process, but it is crucial that we get assessments right. Nothing could be worse for a child than to be placed with an adoptive family and for that placement to break down. The consequences of that are perhaps even worse than a

[Jonathan Shaw]

delay. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that assessment is crucial and that it is vital and paramount to take account of matters in the Bill?

Mr. Brazier: Assessment is important, but cross-racial adoptions do not always fail, a point repeatedly made by a number of Labour Members. The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety made that point when he was Minister of State, Department of Health. In the debate on the Adoption and Children Bill that fell just before the election, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) asked that Minister's successor, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the right hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), to note that

"a requirement to match the religious background of a child with that of would-be adoptive parents has previously made it difficult to find adoptive parents."

The Minister replied:

"We have always made it very clear that we want the system to operate as efficiently and speedily as possible, and that we shall not allow issues to do with political correctness to get in the way of a child's best welfare interests."

I intervened to say:

"Just now,

the Minister

"was absolutely clear about the need to eliminate unacceptable delay in the process. However, clause 1(4) omits anything about that need. Instead, that subsection includes the words 'due consideration', which, legally, are not absolutely clear cut."

I then asked the Minister:

"Could not those words make it possible for courts to return to the very political correctness against which he has rightly and repeatedly spoken?"

The Minister assured us:

"Ultimately, however, we have made it very clear that we believe that there should not be unnecessary and unacceptable delay in the process. If that is one of the issues that can give rise to delay, the Bill should address it."—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2001; Vol. 365, c. 704–705.]

All we want to do is to ensure that considerations are secondary to the paramountcy principle and the problem of delay.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) highlighted some worrying cases from his own experience, but other hon. Members reinforced the Government's position on the amendments. It is clear—we have widespread support for this—that clause 1 ensures that foremost among the principles that govern decisions on adoption is the welfare of the child throughout their life. That should be the paramount consideration. It is not to say, however, that the interests of siblings and, in particular, the relationship that adopted children have with their relatives should not be considered.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn) said, subsection (4)(f) explicitly states that courts and adoption agencies are obliged when considering a child's welfare, to consider the relationship that he or she has with relatives and any other relevant person. The definition of relatives makes it clear that that includes siblings. There is a wide-ranging obligation to consider the views and wishes of siblings and parents, which is the focus of the hon. Gentleman's amendments. As hon. Members made clear, however, it is not possible both to have paramountcy for the adopted child and to give equal consideration to another issue. That is the fundamental problem with amendment No. 162.

Government amendment No. 163 suggests that estrangement is a function of delay and should be taken into consideration. The Bill sets out important safeguards to ensure that delay does not happen. In relation to bearing down on delay, it is clear in clause 1 that courts must have regard to delay and welfare. Clause 105 introduces for the first time timetables in court to avoid delay.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that when children have been placed for a long time, the decision is, in effect, a fait accompli when they get to court. The point of the placement provisions is to bring forward either the time when parents consent to their children being placed for adoption or the time when that is determined by a placement order so that it happens much earlier in the process. In that way, we expect to avoid the problems that the hon. Gentleman identified.

On amendment No. 1, the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) mentioned delay. We rightly debated that at length in Committee. I share his concern and desire to eradicate delay from the process wherever possible. However, clause 1 sets out the general principles that apply across the adoption provisions. Subsection (3) places a duty on courts and adoption agencies to bear it in mind at all times that any delay in reaching a decision is in general likely to prejudice the welfare of the child. Subsection (5) places an obligation on the adoption agency, when placing a child for adoption, to give due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. It is the interaction of those two subsections that is the focus of amendment No. 1.

The starting point in considering the issue has to be that the subsections need to be read together. That is their legal effect. Subsection (5) cannot override the obligation in subsection (3) to have regard to possible harmful effects of delay. That overarching provision applies across all decisions relating to the adoption of a child, including the placement decision. However, during the debate in Committee and in interventions today, my hon. Friends the Members for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson), for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw) and for Sheffield, Heeley made the important point that we must give due weight during the adoption process to the factors set out in subsection (5) that could have a significant impact on lifelong issues of identity—for example, the child's racial and cultural background.

The clause ensures that that will happen and that there is appropriate consideration. However, the Government share the concerns that have been expressed about eradicating unnecessary delay from the system. We are determined to bear down on that delay. That is why our new national adoption standards make it completely clear that while a child's ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language should be recognised, we need also to target our recruitment efforts to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of people wishing to adopt to enable children to be placed with families that reflect these factors.

The standards are equally clear on the harmful effects of delay. They provide explicitly—almost in the words that the hon. Member for Canterbury used—that children will not be kept waiting indefinitely for a perfect family. They set challenging time scales for matching children. They state that a plan for permanence must be made once a child has been in care for four months. That plan must have clear, monitored time scales. We have issued binding statutory guidance to local authorities to enforce that.

Mr. Brazier: I am well aware of the circulars. The Minister will know how many local authorities ignore these binding instructions. Many children did not have care plans for many years after such plans became a statutory requirement, for example. Why will the Minister not put such provisions into the Bill so that the court rather than the social services department will recognise its duty?

Jacqui Smith: There is delay before we get to the court. The importance of adoption standards, and the statutory basis for them, is that we ensure that adoption agencies bear down on delay. The standards are not optional extras, which seems to have been suggested. They are statutory guidance, and they will be expected to be in place from April 2003. We have already begun to focus on eradicating delay from the system so that we might make some progress. The average time for which a child is looked after before being adopted has fallen from three years and four months in 1996–97 to two years and nine months in 2000–01.

That is still too long, and that is why we are taking action—we began to do so after we debated these matters in Committee—to set a challenging new time scale to our adoption PSA target. Our aim will be to ensure that nationally by 2004 95 per cent. of children should be placed for adoption within 12 months of the decision being taken that adoption is in their best interests. That is a further signal of our determination to tackle harmful delay.

Through legislation and through the wider action that the Government are taking, there has been progress in reducing delay. We shall monitor progress and we shall ensure that continued progress is made to tackle harmful delay. On that basis, I hope that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight will feel able to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Andrew Turner: I am happy to withdraw amendment No. 159 on the basis of the Minister's response. The hon. Lady's response to amendment No. 162, and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), who speaks from the Opposition Front Bench, illustrates a simple difference of opinion. She and my hon. Friend believe that the interests of one child should be paramount over those of another child. I believe that the interests of two children should be equal and should be considered as such. However, I realise that perhaps this is not the time to press the issue. I hope that it will be considered in another place. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We will move on to discuss Government amendment No. 26, with which it will be convenient to take Government new clause 6.

Mr. Brazier: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What will happen to amendment No. 1?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We have not missed the opportunity to vote on amendment No. 1. We take amendments in the order in which they appear on the amendment paper. The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to vote on his amendment in due course.

Mr. Brazier: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you tell us when we are likely to take a vote? We are not clear.

2.45 pm

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Amendments and new clauses are debated in certain groupings, but they are voted on in a different order. Amendment No. 1, on which the hon. Gentleman wishes to vote, will be dealt with after we have debated Government amendment No. 26 and Government new clause 6. He will then have an opportunity to vote.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Ms Rosie Winterton): I beg to move amendment No. 26, in page 2, line 5, after "harm", insert—

'(within the meaning of the Children Act 1989)'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government new clause 6—*Meaning of "harm" in the 1989 Act.*

Ms Winterton: I am pleased to move the amendment and to discuss the new clause, which I believe will assist in tackling the scourge of domestic violence and the terrible effect that it can have on children. One woman in four experiences domestic violence at some point in her lifetime. A survey undertaken in 2001 showed that one in five applications for contact with children involved allegations of serious domestic violence. We know also that 70 per cent. of children in care are likely to have experienced violence at home at some point.

I thank in particular the Women's Aid Federation of England, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardo's and the NCH for the candid and constructive way in which they have entered into discussions with me and officials from the Lord Chancellor's Department on this important subject.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Margaret Moran), my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley), who have all campaigned for greater protection for the victims of domestic violence.

As a result of the campaigning and our own research, the Government are acutely aware of the concerns that have been raised. We believe, as many organisations have made clear, that it is right that the interests of the child are protected and are paramount in the court process. That is why we want to clarify the provisions in clause 1, which set out the key principles that are to apply throughout the adoption provisions.

Clause 1(4) sets out a checklist of factors to which courts and adoption agencies must have regard in considering the welfare of the child. Government amendment No. 26 makes it clear that the meaning of

[Ms Winterton]

"harm" in subsection (4)(e) of the checklist is to be the same as that used in the Children Act 1989. In other words, harm includes ill-treatment or impairment of development. We think that it is the interpretation that the courts would use anyway, but one of the aims of the Bill is to bring adoption law into line with the Children Act. It is appropriate that we spell it out for the avoidance of doubt.

During the proceedings of the Special Standing Committee, a number of children's charities and organisations, which I have already mentioned, expressed concern that not enough account was being taken of the impact on children of domestic violence. On 17 January, in Committee, I made it clear that the Government were seriously considering how these concerns could be met. First, the Government considered the approach in Northern Ireland, which seeks to ensure that domestic violence is considered in all applications for contact or residence. However, we want to go further and ensure that the impact on children of witnessing abuse is considered in all proceedings under the Children Act when the welfare checklist is used, in both public and private law. As I said, Government amendment No. 26 would extend that to adoption proceedings.

At present, a court, when deciding whether to grant contact between a parent and child, has to take into account the welfare checklist in the Children Act, which includes considering whether a child has suffered or is at risk of suffering any harm. New clause 6 amends the definition of harm in the checklist to include a harm that a child has suffered or is at risk of suffering as the result of witnessing the abuse of others, including domestic violence and violence which, while not domestic, may nevertheless have affected the child, such as a parent continually being harassed or intimidated or a parent harassing or intimidating others.

The definition of ill-treatment is already provided for in the Children Act; it is broader than physical violence, and includes sexual abuse and forms of ill-treatment that are not physical. However, the Government recognise that amendments to primary legislation are not enough on their own; I certainly accept concerns that existing provisions in primary legislation are not being applied consistently. We therefore have in hand a broad programme of work that will provide more effective protection for children and victims of violence. I pay tribute to the president of the family division, Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, who has done a lot of work to ensure that it is aware of action that courts should take.

We hope to take a number of steps, such as amending court application forms to include specific questions about violence or ill-treatment of children. We shall also amend court rules to oblige courts to determine whether violence or ill-treatment has taken place if an allegation has been made and, if so, what impact that has or is likely to have on the child. We are also looking at the way in which we can disseminate more effectively the guidelines on parental contact with children in cases of domestic violence, which were produced by the Children Act sub-committee of the Lord Chancellor's advisory board on family law.

We are aware of the many concerns about the availability of support at contact centres. We are working with the National Association of Child Contact Centres, and the Lord Chancellor's Department has launched a consultation so that we can define more effectively the support provided by such centres.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Will the hon. Lady give the House an assurance that she is satisfied that the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service will have sufficient officers on the ground if supervision is required? I agree entirely with what she is saying and accept wholeheartedly what the Government are doing in that area, but will she nevertheless assure the House that there will be sufficient funding and manning in that part of the CAFCASS operation?

Ms Winterton: When meeting CAFCASS staff, I have been extremely impressed with their ideas on contact centres. Our priority is to ensure that we are using existing funding for contact centres effectively. Many cases involve possible domestic violence or violence against a child, so we have to make sure that proper services for supervised contact are available. We are therefore working with the National Association of Child Contact Centres to make sure that we have a good definition of such contact and eventually, through CAFCASS, can ensure that there are clusters of contact centres in each region.

I accept that we need to undertake further work, but we can make immediate changes with the amendments and secondary legislation. I hope that we will continue to work with voluntary organisations, making use of their experience and expertise to develop our proposals. The amendments send a clear message about the Government's determination to tackle domestic violence and protect children. I very much hope that that message is reinforced by support from Members on both sides of the House.

Mr. Llwyd: I wholeheartedly welcome the amendments, which, if overdue, are based on good research. A 1999 survey of 130 parents by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found that during contact 76 per cent. of the children were abused; 10 per cent. were sexually abused; 15 per cent. were physically abused; 62 per cent. suffered emotional harm, with which I suspect we are dealing in the amendments; 36 per cent. suffered neglect; and 26 per cent. were abducted. There is therefore a clear need for the amendments, and I am sure that they will receive wholehearted acceptance. The hon. Member for Luton, South (Margaret Moran) has campaigned long and hard on this issue, as have other Members.

The Minister said that the thrust of the Bill was to bring a particular area of law into line with the Children Act 1989; the checklist and the proposals in the amendments are both useful and helpful. Experience tells me that some of the most damaged children have witnessed violence being perpetrated on others—typically, but not exclusively, violence by the father on the mother. Often, those youngsters have not suffered physical violence per se, but have undoubtedly suffered emotional damage. I therefore welcome the amendments and the consequent change to the Children Act.

The amendments will go some way towards addressing the awful problem of emotional harm inflicted on young people and children. Like me, other Members may have

received a letter from a lady from Essex. I do not have her permission, so I shall not give her name, but last week she wrote to me:

"My ex-husband received five years' imprisonment for GBH."

During his imprisonment, her ex-husband applied for contact. There were obviously good grounds for objections but, in due course, he gained unsupervised access, which is ridiculous. A violent person with a history of violence against many different people who breached a number of undertakings is unfit to have any contact at all. The lady concludes:

"Remember, contact/residence is the child's right, not the parent's. Children should never be forced to have contact."

That is quite right. I know that other Members wish to speak, so I conclude by saying once more that I wholeheartedly agree with the amendments, which are a considerable step forward.

Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I warmly welcome Government new clause 6 and the comprehensive set of measures being discussed to tackle a difficult and sensitive issue. The Government have taken a landmark decision to recognise in child protection legislation the impact of domestic violence on a child and the harm that a child may suffer as a result of witnessing domestic violence.

3 pm

The further amendments to which my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary referred require the courts, when they make contact orders, to decide whether domestic violence has taken place and, if so, its present and possible future impact on the child. That is a significant step forward in protecting our children, which is warmly welcomed not just by many hon. Members, but by a coalition of children's charities, including the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, NCH Action for Children, Barnardo's, the Children's Society and the Women's Aid Federation. The wide scope of the measure, which deals with violence and other forms of abuse that may harm a child, is particularly welcome.

The Bill extends the right of contact to unmarried parents. It is right that parents, married or otherwise, should have contact with their children in all normal circumstances, but we must ensure that where such contact takes place, the child's welfare is paramount and the necessary safeguards are in place. I welcome the restatement of that principle in my hon. Friend's remarks today.

The courts must ensure that the welfare of the child is taken seriously. The Government and children's charities recognise that as a major issue. In more than half the cases in which court welfare reports are produced, domestic violence occurs where contact is ordered. The new clause recognises the trauma caused to a child by witnessing ill-treatment.

As my hon. Friend knows, there is concern about whether case law precedents have distorted the intended meaning of the Children Act 1989. I refer to three cases in which that concern has been raised. In re H and R (Child Sexual Abuse) 1995, the House of Lords ruled that a higher standard of proof than the simple balance of probabilities is required in family law cases involving serious allegations of abuse of children. That raises concern about the welfare safeguards in the Children Act.

Similarly, in re O (Contact: Imposition of Conditions) 1995, the Master of the Rolls ruled that contact is almost always in the child's interest. Many children's charities are worried that these cases, alongside A *v.* N (Committal: Refusal of Contact) 1996, have to some extent resulted in the courts, when making contact orders, attaching insufficient importance to the welfare of the child, and particularly the safety of the child. We therefore need to restate the paramount importance of the child's welfare, and consider further ways of making that clear, whether through regulations, best practice or other measures.

We know from research carried out by the Women's Aid Federation and others that despite guidelines intended to tighten up contact proceedings and to prevent contact where there is evidence of violence or abuse to the child, it still takes place. The courts continue to grant contact, frequently unsupervised contact, to violent or abusive parents. A recent survey revealed cases in which orders for unsupervised contact were granted to schedule 1 offenders and to parents whose behaviour had resulted in children being placed on the child protection register.

In two recent cases, three children were put on the child protection register after one of them was assaulted by the father during a contact visit. Despite that, the court subsequently granted unsupervised contact to the father, and recently there has been another violent incident involving the children. The mother, who was diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome as a result of that man's violence towards her, says that she is not opposed to contact, but has repeatedly asked for visits to be supervised. One child told his teacher that he has nightmares about his mother being killed, and that he wants to die.

In another case that illustrates the point, a woman was advised by her solicitor that there was no point in contesting her violent ex-partner's application for a contact order, because the father and child had the right to see each other. The solicitor gave that advice knowing that the father is a convicted schedule 1 offender. The mother reluctantly agreed to an order that specified unsupervised contact every fortnight.

Similar cases go through the courts all too frequently. I welcome the moves in the new clause and, I hope, in subsequent discussions to consider further measures to ensure the safety of our children and to prevent them from being put at risk of severe harm, violence or abuse.

I hope that when we consider the measures that my hon. Friend outlined, we will examine closely the training of the judiciary. I understand that members of the judiciary are required to undertake only 30 minutes of statutory training in relation to domestic violence, even though more than half the cases with which many of them deal are domestic violence cases. Such minimal training cannot be acceptable for those dealing with such difficult and sensitive cases.

Mr. Andrew Turner: I am pleased that the amendments have been tabled, and like many hon. Members, I have been asked to support them. However, I am concerned about a certain imbalance in the hon. Lady's—and, for that matter, the Minister's—presentation, which tended to emphasise violence by the man against the woman. I am sure that the hon. Lady will accept that the reverse is possible. Will she clarify whether the amendment is designed to cover mental

[Mr. Andrew Turner]

cruelty as well? I see that the Minister agrees. Does the hon. Member for Luton, South (Margaret Moran) agree that mental cruelty can be perpetrated by the parent with care against the child by slagging off the parent without care?

Margaret Moran: Of course I concede that there are instances of violence by the mother in the circumstances under discussion, although research has shown that that is infinitely less frequent than violence by the father. The new clause is gender-neutral. We are all endeavouring to prevent violence and harm to a child from either parent. Domestic violence by men against women is more prevalent; one in four women are likely to experience some sort of domestic violence during their lives.

The courts seem to believe that the Children Act 1989 contains a strong presumption of contact almost always being in the best interests of the child, but that needs to be balanced against the possible risks to the child's safety. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that she is doing, in conjunction with her ministerial colleagues in the domestic violence inter-ministerial group, to address such serious issues as the lack of definition and standards for supervised and unsupervised contact.

I warmly welcome the work that is being undertaken to ensure that proper contact centres are available when and where they are needed, given that only 12 per cent. of contact centres currently offer supervised contact, and most are run by excellent and worthy, but possibly less experienced, volunteers. I also strongly agree that we need to ensure consistency in court practice and make it clear to the courts that the welfare of the child means just that. I welcome the amendments and I hope that we shall have continuing dialogue on how to ensure that every measure is taken to protect our children in these circumstances.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I support the Government's amendments, and I do so briefly, mindful of the fact that we have 94 amendments and one new clause to deal with before 3.45 pm. A later group of amendments also deals with parent contact and I hope that if we do not reach that, this important subject will be revisited in another place.

In Committee, we supported the intentions of the amendments. The Minister did a lot of work subsequently into how they could best become part of the legislation. I am glad of that, and I welcome the resulting Government amendment No. 26 and Government new clause 6. I also fully appreciate the great experience of and work done by the hon. Member for Luton, South (Margaret Moran) in furnishing her own amendments. They are based on much detailed work, and I am sure that the pressure that they have brought to bear has enabled the Government to move further along the road, although not as far as many of us would have wished. However, it is a good start.

We are all aware of horrendous cases of domestic violence and its effect on children—the subsequent break-up of families, homelessness problems and the psychological effects on children who are scarred for many years thereafter—many of which we heard about in Committee. We heard many alarming accounts of the injury that can be inflicted on children during contact with violent parents—mostly men, but not exclusively—resulting, in the most horrendous cases, in the death of a child. We heard some truly awful stories.

I, too, congratulate the women's refuges, the Women's Aid Federation and the Children's Society on their intensive, sensitive and effective lobbying. I declare an interest as patron of Brighton's women's refuge, which does a good job in my part of the world.

I particularly welcome the fact that the amendments extend the definition of harm to include the damage done to children witnessing the results of domestic violence between parents in the home without their having to be an eye witness to that domestic violence. That is domestic violence, although not in the strict sense of the definition that we have had. It is right that the Minister has taken account of that because it all constitutes ill-treatment and abuse, which has devastating effects on children who may then end up being the subject of adoption orders.

I know that there will be problems of definition in the courts. I, too, have spoken to family division judges who have said that it is already a problem. However, the amendment and the new clause send out a clear statement of intent to judges and to the courts that the Government take the problem seriously, as do we. It is right that those factors should be taken into account when considering contact orders and what is best for the child's welfare, which is, after all, what is at the heart of the Bill.

As the Minister says, the amendment goes further than the Northern Ireland model and much of this will also have a bearing on the sort of adoption support services that are structured within the Bill. I echo the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), who was an active member of the Committee, including his concerns about the staffing of CAFCASS, which has been a problem and to which reference was made in Committee.

This is the first time that domestic violence has been legally recognised as a child protection issue, and I associate myself with that development. I realise that much work remains to be done and that we need to go a lot further, but that is for a more specialised piece of legislation dealing primarily with the subject. I hope that, in due course, the Government will revisit the subject, giving a greater airing to the complicated problems of domestic violence. The amendment and the new clause are a good start. They have the Opposition's full support and I congratulate the Minister on them.

3.15 pm

Sandra Gidley: I want to join the love-in and congratulate the hon. Member for Luton, South (Margaret Moran) on highlighting the issue so effectively in Committee. As a result of her work the Minister has been brought on board and introduced the relevant measures.

I was initially pleased to add my name to the extensive new clause 10, but that has been withdrawn because it needs considerable further work. I hope that that will be done in the other place, but I do not know whether there will be sufficient time.

In most cases, I agree that the interests of the child are best served by maintaining contact with both parents, but, unfortunately, as it stands, the system fails to protect children from abusers who are known to them.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned the lobbying that has taken place. I suspect that all hon. Members have been deluged with mail from charities and women's refuges. One cannot fail to be moved by some of the cases. Many of the letters were the same, but there were some heart-rending personal stories, including cases of children who have been murdered during unsupervised contact. That sounds melodramatic, but the 1999 survey of parents found that 76 per cent. of the children of parents interviewed had been abused in some way during the contact visits ordered by the courts. The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) broke those figures down even further. That is a powerful message that we must keep sight of.

In many ways, it is a great sadness that it is necessary to introduce the amendment at all, because it means that in the past we have failed. In particular, we have failed children who are too vulnerable to take care of themselves. Since being elected it has been a huge sadness to me to hear from parents who have just gone through a divorce. Invariably, children are used as pawns in an unattractive game in which the parents score points against each other. It is not uncommon for a parent, or even a grandparent or set of grandparents, to make serious allegations about the behaviour of the other party, which may be unfounded.

It is essential that strenuous efforts are made to establish the truth. I cannot emphasise that enough. If someone gets it wrong, it means that an innocent parent is being prevented from seeing their child. The balance is a fine and difficult one, but it is up to us to try to strike it. The question is vexed. We must protect our young without creating a climate where we encourage ever-escalating litigation and counter-litigation.

I support new clause 6, which improves the definition of harm in the Children Act. It is essential that we highlight the fact that domestic violence is unacceptable. Writing this speech, I was worried that if I banged on about men beating up women I would receive letters from men saying, "Hey, what about us. We get beaten up by our wives as well." But we must acknowledge that domestic violence against women is a bigger problem, and I make no apology for saying that today. However, any violence is unacceptable.

If children regularly witness domestic violence, they believe that it is the norm. Children believe that their immediate environment is the usual one and they have no experience of a kinder world. It is essential that this self-perpetuating cycle is broken and we must do all that we can to achieve that. I welcome new clause 6.

3.19 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I welcome the amendment and the new clause. I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton, South (Margaret Moran) on all the work that she has put in on the subject. I have been pleased to be associated with her in tabling amendments in Committee and new clause 10, which we have now dropped.

These are important amendments. That fact was brought home to me within the past month in my constituency surgery, when a distraught mother came to see me about a contact order that had been granted to her ex-husband although he had a record of violence and sexual abuse. The court welfare officer was indifferent to that, and the judge dismissed it out of hand and granted unsupervised access to the children.

The Government have more work to do, but if we can get this message into the Bill perhaps in time they can introduce further measures.

Mr. Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon): The discussion of contact is welcome because it was one of the most important matters that we did not discuss at all in Committee, owing to Government timetabling. That is an important point to make, not least because members of the Committee received more letters on the topic than on any other. That said, I note that the contact provisions themselves are so far down the selection list that they will probably again fail to be discussed, so it will be left entirely to the other House to review the matter.

I do not want to add much to what has been said, partly because we need to move on. I speak to many people who are not as knowledgeable as hon. Members present about the process of adoption, and they often assume that the question of contact does not often arise, because adoption involves the child being permanently taken away from the natural parents. It is important to place on the record that that is absolutely not the case in this day and age. The norm is that there will always be contact, which is right and proper. We should therefore see this as an issue that affects the vast majority of adopted children and one that it is particularly important for us to address.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment proposed: No. 1, in page 2, line 19, after "background", insert—

', subject to the proviso that such consideration shall be secondary to the matters to be considered in subsections (2) and (3).'.—*[Mr. Brazier.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 115, Noes 309.

Division No. 243] **[3.23 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland & Melton)*
Duncan Smith, Rt Hon Iain
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver

Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell–Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Prisk, Mark
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Laurence Robertson and
Mr. Stephen O'Brien.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Doughty, Sue
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Rt Hon Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Rt Hon Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Holmes, Paul
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Luke, Iain
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Pollard, Kerry

Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr John
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Simon, Siôn
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watson, Tom
Weir, Michael
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Dan Norris and
Mr. Tony McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Jacqui Smith: I beg to move amendment No. 163, in page 2, line 27, leave out from first "order" to end of line 28 and insert—

'(or the revocation of such an order), a placement order (or the revocation of such an order) or an order under section 25 (or the revocation or variation of such an order)'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 164.

Amendment No. 108, in clause 17, page 12, line 19, leave out "section 18 or".

Government amendments Nos. 166 to 169.

Amendment No. 109, in clause 18, page 13, line 1, leave out clause 18.

Government amendment No. 170.

Amendment No. 110, in clause 19, page 13, line 23, leave out from "the" to "may" in line 24 and insert—

'making of a placement order under section 20'.

Government amendments Nos. 111, 172 and 173.

Amendment No. 112, in clause 20, page 14, line 8, at end insert—

'or

(c) each parent or guardian consents to the making of the order.'.

Amendment No. 113, in page 14, line 9, after "order", insert—

'under paragraphs (a) and (b) of subsection (2)'.

Amendment No. 114, in page 14, line 11, leave out paragraph (a).

Amendment No. 20, in page 14, line 17, leave out "section 23" and insert—

'sections 23 and 34(1) and (2)'.

Amendment No. 308, in page 14, line 17, after "23," insert "or 34(1) or (2)".

Government amendment No. 174.

Amendment No. 21, in clause 21, page 14, line 29, at end insert—

'or—

(e) the child has been returned to them due to the circumstances of section 34(1) and (2).'.

Amendment No. 309, in page 14, line 29, at end insert—

'(1A) A local authority must apply to the Court for a new placement order when a child has returned to them due to the circumstances described in section 34(1) or (2).'.

Government amendments Nos. 290, 175 and 176.

Amendment No. 116, in clause 23, page 15, line 33, leave out—

'each of the following conditions'

and insert "the following condition".

Government amendment No. 177.

Amendment No. 115, in page 15, line 36, leave out paragraphs (b) and (c).

Government amendments Nos. 178 and 179.

Amendment No. 117, in clause 24, page 16, line 5, leave out paragraph (a).

Amendment No. 119, in clause 25, page 16, line 14, leave out clause 25.

Government amendment No. 291.

Amendment No. 118, in clause 28, page 18, line 5, leave out clause 28.

Government amendments Nos. 191 to 193.

Amendment No. 123, in clause 29, page 18, line 20, leave out from "is" to "a" in line 21 and insert—

'subject to a placement order'.

Amendment No. 128, in page 18, line 21, leave out "the prospective adopters" and insert—

'any placement made by the adoption agency.'.

Government amendment No. 195.

Amendment No. 124, in page 18, line 31, leave out subsections (3), (4), (5) and (6).

Government amendment No. 196.

Amendment No. 125, in clause 30, page 19, line 10, leave out clause 30.

Government amendments Nos. 198 to 201.

Amendment No. 126, in clause 31, page 19, line 30, leave out clause 31.

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

Government amendments Nos. 202 to 206.

Amendment No. 127, in clause 33, page 20, line 29, leave out clause 33.

Amendment No. 134, in clause 34, page 21, line 26, at end insert—

'( ) Where the actions described in subsections (1) or (2) are taken, any placement order in place at that time shall be revoked.'.

Government amendments Nos. 207 to 210, 250, 251, 220 and 230.

Jacqui Smith: This large group of amendments deals with some of the Bill's most important provisions: clause 1 and the process for placement for adoption, which is set out in the initial clauses of chapter 3. It is worth emphasising that there are so many amendments not only because we are considering an important part of the Bill but because, given the Government's consultative approach through a Special Standing Committee, it was appropriate to respond through Government amendments to some of the anxieties that hon. Members and stakeholders raised.

I shall speak briefly to Government amendments Nos. 163 and 164. Government amendment No. 163 clarifies the important phrase

"coming to a decision relating to the adoption of a child",

which triggers the obligations on courts and adoption agencies that are set out in the provision. That also covers orders under clause 25 for contact while the child is placed, or the revocation or variation of those orders. Amendment No. 164 clarifies the position on consideration of the decision to dispense with parental consent. It makes it completely clear that the decisions on dispensing with consent should be governed by clause 50(1). Paragraph (b) provides for dispensing with consent if

"the welfare of the child requires the consent to be dispensed with."

That is a strong requirement.

It is worth reminding hon. Members that the aim of the placement system is to try to resolve the substantive issues that relate to parental consent to adoption earlier in the process. That will provide greater certainty and stability for children by dealing as far as possible with the bulk of issues before they are placed. It will reduce the extent to which birth families are faced with a fait accompli at the final adoption hearing, and try to reduce the uncertainty for prospective adopters who currently have to confront the possibility of a contested court hearing.

Chapter 3 provides two routes for placement for adoption: placement by parental consent under clause 18, and placement through a placement order under clauses 20 and 21. The second route is available only to local authorities. Some of the amendments try to remove placement by consent to ensure a court hearing in every case. Although I understand some of the anxieties behind the proposals, it is nevertheless wrong or unnecessary for reasons that I shall outline. First, the Bill ensures that there are considerable safeguards around parental consent. They include providing for the consent to be witnessed, taken by a CAFCASS officer and reported to the court. There is, therefore, court consideration of the nature of the consent.

Jonathan Shaw: My hon. Friend rightly says that there has been some concern about these provisions. Does she understand that that is not least because once a person—a mother—makes the decision and crosses the line of consent, there is no going back, even if the circumstances where the child is placed change? For example, if the couple with whom the child is placed split up, the child's circumstances will become very different from those that pertained when the mother gave consent. Does my hon. Friend agree that requiring leave of the court would at least give confidence to people providing consent?

Jacqui Smith: I do not accept my hon. Friend's view that there is no going back. In fact, it is important to stress that placement by consent is intended to be entirely voluntary. If the parents withdraw their consent before the final adoption order application is made, the child must be returned to them unless the local authority is under a duty to apply for a placement order. We have listened to the concerns about the removal provisions, in particular those relating to reducing the time limit for returning a child to a parent who has removed consent if that child is not placed, from 14 days to seven.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): I accept all that my hon. Friend is saying about the way in which the Government have listened to the important issues that have been raised on this complex and difficult part of the Bill. Does she accept that a huge range of children's organisations, as well as Labour Back Benchers, are still extremely concerned about these issues? There will obviously not be time to discuss them today, but will she please ensure that her officials and colleagues in the other place are open to further discussion on this important aspect of this important Bill?

Jacqui Smith: Of course we have to continue to talk about these provisions. My officials have met—and undoubtedly will meet—people to talk about their concerns. I think it would be worth my while to spell out the changes that we have already made in response to those concerns. I have already talked about the removal provisions. We shall also ensure that local authorities apply for placement orders within the time limit rather than simply saying that they have a duty to do so. On revocation, we have recognised that the one-year test was too rigid, and we have reduced it.

I have to say to my hon. Friend, and to those who believe that placements should be made only through the court system, that one of the Government's major concerns is the practical issue of whether that would increase the number of court cases. We do not believe, given the safeguards that are in place, that that provision would be necessary. To give people some idea of the scale involved, 16 per cent. of children adopted out of care are currently adopted with consent. If the Government meet their targets, that could necessitate up to 600 extra court cases if we insisted that placement could be made only through the court system.

Mr. Brazier: I thank the Minister for giving way. We have no time at all to debate this important group of amendments. Does she accept that under the current

provision, with the Government's amendments, a child could in theory be placed with families over and over again following disruptions prior to an adoption order, without any court overview or input of any kind from an independent representative for the child, such as a guardian ad litem?

Jacqui Smith: I will come to that issue in a moment. I want to emphasise our concern about introducing the courts into the situation when we all believe that we need to bear down on delay.

Mr. Dawson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jacqui Smith: No, I will not. I want to respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier). Conservative Members were concerned in their amendments about ensuring that placement orders were more specific. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's contention that we need to move away from the general placement order, which has received widespread support in consultations, to what I suspect he is suggesting—namely, the necessity to return to court every time a placement breaks down. That proposal does not recognise that a placement order is about determining whether placement for adoption is right for that child, rather than determining a particular placement. It would also ensure that delay would be brought into the system—the hon. Gentleman earlier rightly urged us to bear down on delay—because, by necessity, if a placement unfortunately broke down, instead of a local authority being able to place the child in another placement, it would have to return to court—

It being 3.45 pm, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded, pursuant to Order [this day] to put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the proceedings to be concluded at that hour.*

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 164, in page 2, line 38, leave out paragraph (c).—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 17

PLACEMENT FOR ADOPTION BY AGENCIES

Amendments made: No. 165, in page 12, line 19, leave out "only" and insert—

'except in the case of a child who is less than six weeks old, may only do so'.

No. 166, in page 12, line 20, after "is" insert "placed or".

No. 167, in page 12, line 21, leave out "to be treated as".

No. 168, in page 12, line 21, leave out from second "authority" to end of line 22.

No. 169, in page 12, line 36, at end insert—

'( ) References in this Chapter to an adoption agency being, or not being, authorised to place a child for adoption are to the agency being or (as the case may be) not being authorised to do so under section 18 or a placement order'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 18

PLACING CHILDREN WITH PARENTAL CONSENT

Amendment made: No. 170, in page 13, line 16, at end insert—

'or

( ) a care order or placement order has been made after the consent was given'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 19

ADVANCE CONSENT TO ADOPTION

Amendment made: No. 111, in page 13, line 35, leave out "wishes" and insert "does not wish".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 20

PLACEMENT ORDERS

Amendments made: No. 172, in page 14, line 6, leave out "or".

No. 173, in page 14, line 8, at end insert—

'or

( ) the child has no parent or guardian'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 21

APPLICATIONS FOR PLACEMENT ORDERS

Amendments made: No. 174, in page 14, line 27, at beginning insert—

'the child has no parent or guardian or'.

No. 290, in page 15, line 3, leave out "to be treated as".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 23

REVOKING PLACEMENT ORDERS

Amendments made: No. 175, in page 15, line 32, after "than" insert "the child or".

No. 176, in page 15, line 33, leave out from "unless" to end of line 34.

No. 177, in page 15, line 35, at end insert "and".

No. 178, in page 15, line 37, leave out paragraph (c).

No. 179, in page 15, line 40, at end insert—

'( ) If the court determines, on an application for an adoption order, not to make the order, it may revoke any placement order in respect of the child'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 25

CONTACT

Amendments made: No. 180, in page 16, line 15, after second "adoption" insert—

'or placing a child for adoption who is less than six weeks old'.

No. 181, in page 16, line 17, at end insert—

'or a child who has been placed for adoption is less than six weeks old'.

No. 182, in page 16, line 20, leave out paragraph (b) and insert—

'(b) the court may make an order under this section requiring the person with whom the child lives, or is to live, to allow the child to visit or stay with the person named in the order, or for the person named in the order and the child otherwise to have contact with each other'.

No. 183, in page 16, line 22, leave out "The application" and insert—

'An application for an order under this section'.

No. 184, in page 16, line 32, leave out subsections (4) and (5).

No. 185, in page 16, line 42, leave out from "section" to end of line 43.

No. 186, in page 16, line 43, at end insert—

'( ) This section does not prevent an application for a contact order under section 8 of the 1989 Act being made where the application is to be heard together with an application for an adoption order in respect of the child'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 26

CONTACT: SUPPLEMENTARY

Amendments made: No. 187, in page 17, line 7, after "adoption" insert—

'or the child is less than six weeks old'.

No. 188, in page 17, line 25, leave out "affording" and insert "allowing".

No. 189, in page 17, line 28, leave out "affording" and insert "allowing".

No. 190, in page 17, line 31, leave out "that section" insert "section 25".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 27

FURTHER CONSEQUENCES OF PLACEMENT

Amendment made: No. 291, in page 17, line 36, at end insert—

'unless an application for an adoption order has been made and the parent or guardian has obtained the court's leave under subsection (3) or (5) of section 45,

(b) if an application has been made for an adoption order, a guardian of the child may not apply for a special guardianship order unless he has obtained the court's leave under subsection (3) or (5) of that section.'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 28

FURTHER CONSEQUENCES OF PLACEMENT ORDERS

Amendments made: No. 191, in page 18, line 15, after "no" insert "prohibited steps order".

No. 192, in page 18, line 15, after "order" insert "or specific issue order".

No. 193, in page 18, line 17, at end insert—

'( ) Subsection (3)(a) does not apply in respect of a residence order if—

(a) an application for an adoption order has been made in respect of the child, and

(b) the residence order is applied for by a parent or guardian who has obtained the court's leave under subsection (3) or (5) of section 45 or by any other person who has obtained the court's leave under this subsection'.

No. 292, in page 18, line 17, at end insert—

'(3B) Where a placement order is in force, no special guardianship order may be made in respect of the child unless—

(a) an application has been made for an adoption order, and

(b) the person applying for the special guardianship order has obtained the court's leave under this subsection or, if he is a guardian of the child, has obtained the court's leave under section 45(5).

(3C) Section 14A(7) of the 1989 Act applies in respect of an application for a special guardianship order for which leave has been given as mentioned in subsection (3B)(b) with the omission of the words "the beginning of the period of three months ending with".

(3D) Where a placement order is in force—

(a) section 14C(1)(b) of the 1989 Act (special guardianship: parental responsibility) has effect subject to any determination under section 24(4) of this Act,

(b) section 14C(3) and (4) of the 1989 Act (special guardianship: removal of child from UK etc.) does not apply.'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 29

GENERAL PROHIBITIONS ON REMOVAL

Amendments made: No. 194, in page 18, line 20, at end insert—

'or—

( ) a child who has been placed for adoption by an adoption agency is less than six weeks old'.

No. 195, in page 18, line 26, leave out from "authority" to "have" in line 27.

No. 196, in page 18, line 39, at end insert—

'but those sections do not apply if the child is subject to a care order'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 30

SECTION 29: RECOVERY BY PARENT ETC. WHERE CHILD NOT YET PLACED

Amendments made: No. 197, in page 19, line 16, at end insert—

'or a child who has been placed for adoption is less than six weeks old'.

No. 198, in page 19, line 19, leave out from "him" to end of line 22.

No. 199, in page 19, line 23, leave out "14" and insert "seven".

No. 200, in page 19, line 24, at end insert—

'unless an application is, or has been, made for a placement order and the application has not been disposed of'.

No. 201, in page 19, line 25, leave out subsection (3).—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 31

SECTION 29: RECOVERY BY PARENT ETC. WHERE AGENCY NOT OPPOSED

Amendments made: No. 202, in page 19, line 32, at end insert "and".

No. 203, in page 19, line 33, leave out from "withdrawn" to end of line 35 and insert—

'unless an application is, or has been, made for a placement order and the application has not been disposed of'.

No. 204, in page 20, line 5, after "order)" insert "special guardianship order".

No. 205, in page 20, line 6, after "a" insert "special guardianship order or".

No. 206, in page 20, line 9, after "a" insert "special guardianship order or".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 34

RETURN OF CHILD IN OTHER CASES

Amendments made: No. 207, in page 21, line 38, after "order)" insert "special guardianship order".

No. 208, in page 21, line 39, after "a" insert "special guardianship order or".

No. 209, in page 21, line 42, after "a" insert "special guardianship order or".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 40

RECOVERY ORDERS

Amendments made: No. 210, in page 24, line 16, at end insert—

'or

( ) that a person has failed to comply with section 31(2), 32(2), 33(3) or 34(2)'.

No. 250, in page 25, line 5, leave out from "1911" to "(false" in line 6.

No. 251, in page 25, line 15, leave out paragraph (b).—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 41

CHILD TO LIVE WITH ADOPTERS BEFORE APPLICATION

Jacqui Smith: I beg to move amendment No. 211, in page 25, line 25, after "Court" insert "or

( ) the applicant is a parent of the child'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 212 to 218.

Jacqui Smith: I feel a bit like the warm-up act in relation to this group of amendments, so I hope that I will be able to warm people up and get on with it.

These amendments clarify clause 41, which sets out the period that a child has to live with a prospective adopter before an application may be made for an adoption order. They also make minor modifications to the provision in clause 43 that covers the process of giving notice to local authorities in non-agency adoptions.

In the case of the changes to clause 41, amendment No. 211 corrects an omission in the Bill as currently drafted, by providing that in the rare cases in which a natural parent is applying to adopt their own child, the residence period required will be the same as that for agency-approved adopters, as it is under the Adoption Act 1976.

Amendments Nos. 212 and 213 improve the wording of subsection (3), which relates to step-parent applications. They make it clear that, when a step-parent is applying to adopt a child jointly with the natural parent, the six-month residence period for step-parent applications is still to apply, as it does for single step-parent applications.

Amendments Nos. 215 to 218 concern the process of non-agency adoptions. When an adoption is not happening through an adoption agency, the adoptive applicant has to give notice to the local authority in which he has his home, so that the local authority can investigate and report to the court—an important safeguard for children in cases where an adoption agency has not been involved in selecting and matching the adopters for the child.

These amendments allow for cases in which an applicant fulfils the domicile requirements in clause 47, but does not in law currently have his home in a local authority area. It might be helpful to hon. Members if I explain that this problem was brought to our attention by the Ministry of Defence, because it relates to members of the armed services or, for example, to diplomats temporarily stationed abroad. Obviously, we would not want to block such individuals from adopting under British law simply on these grounds. The amendments would allow us in these cases to prescribe, in regulations, which should be the appropriate local authority in cases where the applicant did not currently have his home in the UK.

In addition, Government amendment No. 215 makes it clear that, although the report to the court and the investigation are the responsibility of the local authority, it could arrange for elements of them to be carried out by other suitable organisations. For example, in the case of step-parent adoption applications by service families stationed overseas, we would envisage that the Service Families Adoption Agency—a registered voluntary adoption agency—would conduct the investigation and visit the family, as required by clause 41(7), and pass the results to the relevant local authority. If the authority were satisfied, it would then submit the report to the court.

In conclusion, these amendments clarify the provisions in relation to clause 41, and ensure that an unsatisfactory situation relating particularly to our forces stationed overseas has been satisfactorily sorted out.

Tim Loughton: For fear of becoming a subsidiary to the warm-up act and being booed off the stage, I do not intend to go into any detail. In any event, we were notified of this raft of amendments late in the day.

It is difficult to see anything contentious in the amendments. I am especially pleased that the Minister has taken account of the special position of diplomats and members of the armed forces, which we raised in Committee in regard to other provisions. I hope that it will be taken into account in other parts of the Bill, but for now we have no reason to challenge the amendments. No doubt Members will wish to proceed to the next group.

Amendment agreed to.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I beg to move amendment No. 310, in page 25, line 27, leave out "married".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 311, in page 25, line 36, leave out "married".

Amendment No. 312, in page 25, line 43, leave out "married".

Amendment No. 148, in clause 47, page 28, line 41, leave out "married".

Amendment No. 10, in page 28, line 41, leave out from "couple", to end of line 42 and insert—

'(b) an unmarried couple, or

(c) one person,'.

Amendment No. 18, in page 28, line 41, leave out "or".

Amendment No. 14, in page 28, line 42, after "person", insert—

', or

(c) an unmarried couple.'.

Amendment No. 11, in page 28, line 43, leave out "or 49" and insert—

'49 or [*Adoption by unmarried couples*]'.

Amendment No. 15, in page 28, line 43, leave out "or 49" and insert—

'49 or [*Adoption orders unmarried couples*]'.

Amendment No. 149, in page 29, line 1, leave out "spouses" and insert "couple".

Amendment No. 16, in page 29, line 2, after "section 48)", insert—

'or one member of the unmarried couple (in the case of an application under section [*Adoption orders: unmarried couples*]).'.

Amendment No. 12, in page 29, line 2, after "48)", insert—

'or one member of the unmarried couple (in the case of an application under section [*Adoption by unmarried couples*])'.

Amendment No. 150, in page 29, line 4, leave out "spouses" and insert "of the couple".

Amendment No. 13, in page 29, line 5, after "48)", insert—

'or both applicants (in the case of an application under section [*Adoption by unmarried couples*])'.

Amendment No. 17, in page 29, line 5, after "48", insert—

'or both applicants (in the case of an application under section [*Adoption orders: unmarried couples*]).'.

Amendment No. 24, in page 29, line 13, at end insert—

'(6) References in this Act to an unmarried couple will apply only to a man and a woman living together.'.

Amendment No. 151, in clause 48, page 29, line 15, leave out "married".

Amendment No. 152, in page 29, line 16, leave out "spouses" and insert "of them".

Amendment No. 153, in page 29, line 17, leave out "married".

Amendment No. 154, in page 29, line 19, leave out "spouse" and insert "of the couple".

Amendment No. 155, in page 29, line 21, leave out "spouse".

Amendment No. 156, in clause 49, page 29, line 24, at end insert—

'(1A) An adoption order may be made on the application of one person who has attained the age of 21 years if the court is satisfied that the person is the partner of a parent of the person to be adopted'.

Amendment No. 157, in page 29, line 27, leave out paragraph (a).

New clause 2—*Adoption by unmarried couples*—

'(1) An adoption order may not be granted on the application of an unmarried couple unless the court is satisfied—

(a) that both of the applicants are over the age of twenty-one;

(b) for the period of 2 years ending with the date of the application, the partners have lived in the same household (otherwise than merely by reason of one of them being the other's employee, tenant, lodger or boarder); and

(c) that the applicants are not close relatives of each other.

(2) "Close relative", in relation to any person, means his grandparents, parents, children, step–children, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, brothers and sisters and step–brothers and step–sisters.

(3) In relation to any application made under this section, the court may take into consideration the arrangements which the applicants have made, or intend to make in order to safeguard the welfare of the child involved, should their relationship break down.'.

New clause 3—*Adoption orders: unmarried couples*—

'(1) An adoption order may be made on the application of an unmarried couple where both members of the couple have attained the age of 21 years.

(2) An adoption order may be made on the application by an unmarried couple if the court is satisfied

(a) that they have been living together for at least two years at time of application,

(b) that the relationship between the couple is stable and is intended by each of them to be permanent, and

(c) that the unmarried couple has made arrangements to safeguard the financial and practical security of the child in the event of the ending of their relationship and to meet their joint and individual parental responsibilities.'.

New clause 13—*Suitability of adopters*—

'(1) Regulations under section 9 may make provision as to the matters to be taken into account by an adoption agency in determining, or making any report in respect of, the suitability of any persons to adopt a child.

(2) In particular, the regulations may make provision for the purpose of securing that, in determining the suitability of a couple to adopt a child, proper regard is had to the need for stability and permanence in their relationship'.

Amendment No. 158, in clause 131, page 74, line 51, at end insert—

'(2B) In this Act, a couple means—

(a) a married couple, or

(b) two people (whether of different sexes or the same sex) living as partners in an enduring family relationship.

(2C) Subsection (2B)(b) does not include two people one of whom is the other's parent, grandparent, sister, brother, aunt or uncle.

(2D) References to relationships in subsection (2C)—

(a) are to relationships of the full blood or half blood or, in the case of an adopted person, such of those relationships as would exist but for the adoption, and

(b) include the relationship of a child with his adoptive, or former adoptive, parents,

but do not include any other adoptive relationships.

(2E) For the purposes of this Act, a person is the partner of a child's parent if the person and the parent are a couple but the person is not the child's parent'.

Amendment (a) to the amendment, in (2B)(a), leave out—

'whether of different sexes or the same sex'

and insert "of different sexes".

Dr. Harris: This is an important group of amendments, which if passed could bring hope to thousands of children—hope of a happier life than that provided by serial foster-parenting, notwithstanding the efforts of hard-working, excellent, commendable foster parents; and hope of a happier life than years of childhood spent in residential care. The amendments could give those thousands of children hope of adoption, and of living in suitable homes with loving families.

The amendments are about putting the welfare of children first. They are about looking at the advice offered to us by adoption agencies, children's charities, local authorities and professionals. All those people and organisations urge us to support the amendments, which are about accepting research evidence and having an evidence-based approach—having a rational rather than an irrational basis for adoption policy.

Children, after all, must grow up in the real world. They must grow up in the 21st century, in which, whether we like it or not, 40 per cent. of children are born outside marriage, and in which many people who are committed to each other choose not to marry. That applies to 15 per cent. of households, and the figure is expected to rise to 30 per cent. In this real world, loving stable families—in the Minister's memorable words—come in all shapes and sizes. Indeed, dysfunctional families come in all shapes and sizes, including the so-called orthodox. Children do not grow up in an idealised world that never was, but that some Members who are present may wish existed.

Currently, and according to the unamended Bill, the only people allowed to apply to adopt are married couples or single people. Adoption agencies assess the suitability of applicants, and write a report for the courts that will decide whether the adoptions should proceed. Unmarried couples cannot apply to adopt as couples; single people can apply even if they are part of a couple, but they must apply as single people.

The arrangement has two impacts. First, unmarried couples cannot currently adopt as co-parents, even if they have their own non-adopted children and are both parents to them. Only one can be a parent, while the other can at best obtain secondary status, which will be recognised only until the child reaches the age of 16 or 18. That in itself has two consequences. The parents are legally unequal, one being second class, which is not in the child's best interests; and some potential adopters are deterred from applying because they cannot do so as a couple. That leaves children in residential care, or in serial foster care, rather than with suitable adoptive families. It does not make the child's interests paramount.

A higher proportion of unmarried couples than married couples may think of adopting. We hear that about 10 per cent. of potential applicants are unmarried couples who may be put off by the fact that they cannot adopt on an equal basis.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): If a couple are desperate to have a child and if there is no impediment to marriage, they have an easy answer. If there is an impediment to marriage, there is a real ground for their not being allowed to adopt as a couple.

Dr. Harris: I disagree. The hon. Gentleman must know that in the case of such applications adoption agencies write reports on the circumstances, which the courts take into account. If he is saying, as he appears to be, that no unmarried couples are suitable to adopt as couples—if he is saying that a priori—I do not think he is making the child's best interests paramount. He is putting his own preferences first, and I feel it is incumbent on us all not to do that.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): The hon. Gentleman said he wanted an evidenced-based approach, and that there was evidence that the present legal status deterred unmarried couples from adopting. What is that evidence? It is referred to in a letter from the British Agencies for Adopting and Fostering. When I asked the BAAF what the evidence was, it said that actually it had none.

Dr. Harris: It certainly does have evidence. I believe the evidence was gathered during national adoption week, when the BAAF recorded the reasons why people who had thought about adopting were put off. I do not want to take up the House's time, because I am sure others with expertise will deal with the right hon. Gentleman's point, but there is no doubt that many unmarried couples would like to adopt as couples, but the Bill, if unamended, will put them off.

Ms Munn: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we only see adoption legislation approximately every 25 years? Is it not important, therefore, for legislation we introduce to take account of the next generation? Given the change in society, is it not sensible to make our own change now?

Dr. Harris: Absolutely.

The second impact of the current position and, indeed, the unamended Bill is that although gay men and lesbians are already able to adopt, and do adopt, they cannot do so as couples. In that sense, the debate on the extension of joint adoption rights to unmarried couples has veered off its original course. Gay adoption per se is not at stake here, although people want it to be. The sexuality of an applicant in itself in no way bars him or her from the right to adopt under current law, as a single person.

There are three reasons for seeking a change in the law. First, it is not in a child's best interests, when members of a couple play equal parts in his or her life, for only one member to have full legal responsibility. The other parent is downgraded to second-class status, without the power to make vital as well as casual decisions in the child's life that call for legal guardian status. Problems are also caused when the adopter is ill or dies, as no legal relationship is left between the child and the other parent. Especially given that any residency orders are valid only until the child is 16 or 18, depending on the circumstances, that does not make the child's best interests paramount throughout his or her life.

Secondly, as I have said, many suitable unmarried couples are deterred from applying to adopt. That clearly is not in the best interests of tens of thousands of children in serial foster care, or in care waiting for suitable adoptive families.

[Dr. Harris]

Thirdly, the current law clearly discriminates against unmarried and same-sex couples. Given the stringent application process for adoption and the rigorous assessments that are made on a case-by-case basis, there is no justification for disqualifying a couple from adopting jointly simply because they do not possess a marriage certificate, if they clearly possess all the characteristics that the agencies would otherwise expect from suitable adoptive parents.

Mr. Streeter: Is it not in the best interests of the child to have a mother and a father whenever that is possible?

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman may think that in an ideal situation it is in children's best interests to have mothers and fathers who are very wealthy, who have nannies and both of whom have jobs. Children today do not grow up in an ideal world. The hon. Gentleman must decide whether he thinks it better for children to be left in care, or suffer the problems that clearly result from serial foster care, than for them to be accepted into the loving stable environment provided by an unmarried couple, if that is what is on offer.

Jonathan Shaw: Certainly the most desirable adoptive arrangement is for the child to have a mother and a father who are married, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that in other circumstances it may well be in the child's best interests to be adopted according to other arrangements?

4 pm

Dr. Harris: Each child's circumstances are different, and it is not necessary to accept the hon. Gentleman's point of view to recognise that we have to find the best solution in each individual case. I am not willing to condemn unmarried couples who have their own children—I am not suggesting that the hon. Gentleman is, either—and if we take the view that married parents are the ideal, we attack the many thousands of our constituents who choose not to get married for perfectly valid reasons, or cannot do so. Hon. Members can put their views—

Mr. Djanogly *rose—*

Tim Loughton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Harris: In a moment. The hon. Gentleman will have a chance once I have made more progress.

What is at stake is making it possible for an unmarried couple to adopt jointly, so that they can both have a legal relationship with the child. It is about recognising the changing structure of social relations, and ensuring that we offer children currently in care the best opportunity of finding a home by allowing unmarried couples to consider adoption in a manner that does not downgrade their relationship. It is also about taking a stance against, and putting an end to, discrimination in whatever form.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Gentleman talks about recognising changes in social trends. Does he acknowledge that in 2000 the number of marriages in fact increased for the first time in eight years? For the avoidance of doubt about the Liberal Democrats' position, can he clarify matters by saying whether or not he thinks the best possible arrangement is for children to be brought up by a married couple consisting of a man and a woman? Advancing that argument does not diminish the alternatives; it merely states that, where available, that is the best possible scenario. Does he deny that?

Dr. Harris: This is a pointless debate, and the hon. Gentleman's position is illogical. He cannot raise one group of people to a higher status without implying that another group are of a lower status. If he asked his questions honestly, he would be more likely to find answers to them, but first he must recognise the reality of the proposition that he puts.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr. Harris: I am keen to make progress as I am conscious that many hon. Members want to speak.

I should point out that there are many justifications for recognising that unmarried couples are suitable for adoption purposes. The argument will be advanced that they are inherently more unstable, but it is based on poor research that does not compare like with like. Other types of partnerships who wish to adopt often last longer than many marriages. A generalising, simplistic analysis of figures that do not even compare like with like across socio-economic groups does the debate a disservice. If the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) argues that case later, I shall seek to intervene on her.

I also question the view that children placed into same-sex partnerships that are otherwise suitable to adopt are damaged in any way. Evidence produced by Professor Golombok, and the review conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics, makes it clear they suffer no short-term or long-term damage, and do very well in such partnerships. Again, I shall seek to intervene on anyone who tries to argue against that evidence.

Liberal Democrats are proud to work with like-minded members of other parties to introduce this measure. In our manifesto—

Mr. Dawson: I may be wrong, but I think this is the first major contribution to the Bill that the hon. Gentleman has made. In the interests of the consensus that he apparently seeks, would he not have done better to align himself much more clearly and solely with the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), who has a solid background in children's issues?

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman will find that I alone among Front Benchers raised this issue on Second Reading; indeed, it was amazing that so little other discussion took place of such an important issue. He will know that, although my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) was a member of the Standing Committee that considered the Bill, I was not.

Tim Loughton: Why was the hon. Gentleman not on the Committee?

Dr. Harris: I was considering another Bill in Standing Committee, and if the hon. Gentleman inspects the record, he will find that I have contributed to such debates more frequently than he has.

Given that I am being provoked, I should point out that we had the courage to call in our manifesto for reform of the fostering and adoption law. That lends legitimacy to my argument, so the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) should perhaps question his attack. The manifesto placed emphasis on the suitability of potential adopters and on the needs of the child, rather than on arbitrary rules that are set centrally. We also called for the registration of civil partnerships to be based in part on the legal effects and duties of marriage, including adoption and fostering. The hon. Gentleman cannot claim, therefore, that I am suddenly springing this view on the House. We have no compunction in calling for and supporting these amendments on a party Whip. In terms of the way in which hon. Members vote, it is through the party Whip that a party shares the accountability of its members.

We know that some sections of the press will pillory us for the position that we take, but it is better to face that and argue the merits of it, rather than hiding behind shifting positions, prevarication and free votes. I am not surprised that the Conservative party has a three-line Whip against the liberalisation of such matters: it is not a liberal party. Conservatives put their prejudices and illiberal views before children's welfare and considerations of fairness.

Mr. Djanogly: In different ways, the hon. Gentleman repeatedly refers to discrimination. Is he aware that the International Court of Human Rights recently ruled that preventing homosexual partners from adopting is not considered a breach of human rights?

Dr. Harris: I know of the case to which the hon. Gentleman mis-refers—it was heard not in the International Court of Human Rights but the lower chamber of the European Court of Human Rights. Moreover, the vote, which was four to three against the application, is being appealed, and the British judge was one of the three who voted in favour. The amendments that the hon. Gentleman is likely to support are not compatible, therefore, with human rights legislation—a point on which the Minister doubtless also has a view.

The failure of the Labour Government to support the amendments is very disappointing, given their high opinion poll rating, their large majority and the admirable interest that the Prime Minister has shown in the matter. I pay tribute to the Minister, her ministerial colleagues, and the hon. Members for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn) and for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) for winning the battle for a free vote, at least. A battle it must have been, given that, on 25 January 1999, the former Home Secretary appeared to agree with the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell), who said that his understanding was that there would be no legal adoption by homosexual couples. We can safely say, therefore, that there is no unanimity on this point among the senior ranks of the Government.

Ms Munn: Given that the hon. Gentleman is so concerned to make progress on this issue, will he withdraw his amendments? If accepted, they could create problems for the rest of the Bill in terms of consequential amendments. Will he instead support the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe)?

Dr. Harris: That is a legitimate point, which I shall come to in a moment.

We should applaud the Secretary of State for Health's personal support for these measures, but we look forward to a time when free votes are offered across the board on genuine points of principle or ethics, and when Governments accept accountability for children's welfare. *[Interruption.]* I have an important question for the Minister, in which hon. Members will have an interest. If this measure is adopted, what will happen when the Bill reaches the House of Lords and they reject it? Will the Minister give an undertaking now to send it back a second time. Those of us who will vote for these measures want to know that we are not doing so in vain. If necessary, will she use the Parliament Act to force through not just the Bill but the measure? It is important that the Minister replies. We know that, in the end, Governments must be responsible for getting Bills and measures through.

In answer to the hon. Lady's question, like amendment No. 148, amendment No. 310 deletes the word "married". Amendment No. 158 defines "a couple" either as married, or as two people both over the age of 21 who are not closely related, and who live as partners in an enduring family relationship. We believe that that definition is effective, and that the amendments are good. The hon. Member for Wakefield will himself want to talk about his new clause 3, but I suspect he agrees that the wording of amendment No. 158 is superior to both previous such attempts. Therefore, I have no compunction in saying that I shall not press new clause 2 and its consequential amendments to a division. However, in a sense, amendments Nos. 310, 311, 312, 148 and 147 are all consequential on amendment No. 158—and vice versa—and there is no doubt that amendment No. 310 is necessary. If it is not agreed by the House today, the Government will have to introduce it in the House of Lords. I ask hon. Members why they intend to vote against amendment No. 310, because it is an inevitable part of the measures. That is my understanding from the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, which sent me a letter today stating:

> "BAAF's position is that we want to see the principle of unmarried couples being able to adopt jointly going through the House today."

That is what amendment No. 310 would achieve. The BAAF continued:

> "We urge MPs to vote for any amendment which will have this effect—I am unclear which will be debated but the principle is what is important at this stage."

Stonewall, which also has an interest in the issue, e-mailed me today to say:

> "Re: today's vote on the right of unmarried couples to apply to adopt, Stonewall very much hopes that this proposal will be supported today by MPs. I am happy to confirm that if Amendment 310 is put to the vote that we would like to support it, as it will carry with it support for the rest of the amendments associated with it—148-158—which we also support."

I have had no notice from the Government about any technical problems—although I will listen to what the Minister has to say—but because we have a clear position on the issue, we would like to press amendment No. 310 to a division.

[Dr. Harris]

Amendment No. 24 and amendment (a) are simply wrong. They are discriminatory and incompatible with the Human Rights Act 1998. They have no place in a modernisation of the law. I understand the sincere reasons of those who wish to press the matter—they want to feel that, even as Conservatives, they can support the general trend of the Bill—but it is unsuitable to victimise a sub-group and refuse to allow children the benefit of being adopted by that sub-group.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, because my name appears on both the amendments that he has just mentioned. He has not yet satisfactorily answered the question from my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) so I shall ask him again. Is it the position of the Liberal Democrats that they do not believe that the best environment in which to bring up a child is with a mother and a father?

Dr. Harris: That is an academic argument, because each case is different. If there is a violent father in the household—it is usually fathers who are violent—it is not a suitable environment. Unless the hon. Gentleman is prepared to say that those of his constituents who do not live together as married husband and wife are less worthy of his consideration, I am not prepared to go any further into what is a sterile debate.

New clause 13 is important and will assume greater importance. It is the one change proposed by the hon. Member for Wakefield that I cannot support, because it would give new and unnecessary regulation-making powers to the Secretary of State. If hon. Members are serious about scrutinising the Government, they should look at the new clause carefully. General regulation-making powers exist in clause 9 already and could cover that area as they cover the functions of adoption agencies and local authorities, including writing reports for courts. Clause 1 already provides that agencies and the courts must have paramount regard to the welfare of the child throughout his life. In addition, statutory guidance already exists on the issue, and adoption agencies can provide further guidance. The additional regulatory powers are unnecessary. Moreover, we have not seen the powers, so we could be voting for restrictive secondary legislation based on measures in the Bill. The Minister might even admit that that is exactly the point of new clause 13. If the Government wanted powers in that area, they should have published the regulations before today, which is the last opportunity that the House has to see what it is being asked to accept.

The amendments are about putting the welfare of children before old-fashioned views of the world as we would like it be rather than as it is. They are about putting fair treatment before unnecessary discrimination, and putting the best interests of children—making their welfare paramount—before prejudice. I urge the House to support the amendments.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I shall speak to amendment No. 148, amendments Nos.149 to 158, which accompany it, and new clause 13. I shall not press the other amendments that stand in my name. I hope that if the debate is interrupted by the knife at 6 o'clock, we will have a separate division on amendment No. 148—and, if necessary, on the other amendments that go with it.

I am pleased to be able to contribute to a debate on this important and welcome Bill, which is long overdue. However, I have been astonished by some of the media coverage of the purpose of the amendments that I have tabled and the changes I have proposed to the Bill. The coverage in the media in the past few days has ranged from grossly inaccurate to frankly outrageous. It has been suggested that the motive behind my amendments is political correctness. I have been told by close friends among hon. Members that I am one of the most politically incorrect Members, so it is an unusual experience for me to be accused of political correctness.

I have read the article by Melanie Phillips in Monday's *Daily Mail* that suggested that the amendments were a deliberate attempt to destroy marriage. It states:

"Ranged behind the BAAF are the Government"—

which does not include me—

"and the moral bankrupts of the intellectual and political establishment",

which presumably does include me. That is the first time I have been accused of being an intellectual.

4.15 pm

Jonathan Shaw: What about being morally bankrupt?

Mr. Hinchliffe: I shall not respond to that intervention. The article continues:

"the interests of vulnerable children are just about the last thing under consideration here . . . It is the latest salvo in the relentless and illiberal campaign to destroy marriage as the fundamental reference point for family life and to give cohabitation equivalent status."

That paper is read by many people, and the letters and telephone calls that I have received show that one or two people are daft enough to believe that nonsense.

I wish to make my personal position clear. My concern is not to undermine marriage. I have a deeply held personal belief in marriage. I am married, and one of my great regrets is the extent of marriage breakdown and family breakdown that I have witnessed in our society. I also regret the failure of society to emphasise sufficiently the importance of marriage and the family in contributing to a decent, civilised and stable society. However, I was encouraged to hear from a Conservative Front Bencher that the number of marriages is going up under Labour. Perhaps we are moving in the right direction.

I have one simple concern and motivation in tabling the amendments, and that is the interests of the vulnerable children to whom Melanie Phillips refers in her article. Some hon. Members may be aware of my background, which is that before becoming an MP I spent nearly 20 years in local authority social work. I often worked on the approval of adoption applicants, which is a very skilled process. Indeed, I pay tribute to the work of the agencies and individuals involved in a difficult, challenging and important task. I spent many years working as a guardian ad litem on behalf of the courts. The guardian ad litem protects the specific interests of a child who is being placed for adoption. I was also, for several years, a member of the adoption panel for the Wakefield local authority that approved placements for adoption. By and large, it did so very successfully.

I come to the matter from the point of view of someone who knows about the situation of adoptive applicants. I know about the circumstances facing many children who could be adopted, and how their best interests might be served by a change in the law.

I entered the House in 1987. With my background, it was a privilege to be invited to serve on the Standing Committee considering the Bill that became the Children Act 1989. I pay tribute to the Conservative Government on their introduction of that fine piece of legislation. It succeeded because at its heart lay what was called the welfare principle—that the best interests of the child should underpin any decision relating to that child's welfare.

This Bill is a positive measure. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister of State deserve great praise for being able to find time in a tight parliamentary timetable to put this long overdue provision on the statute book.

The Bill reflects the personal concerns of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Some two years ago I had an interesting discussion with him, and he told me that his father had been in care. I had had no idea about that, but it is clear that my right hon. Friend has some insight into the concerns of children in that situation. He has initiated what I think is a long overdue and important change in the law.

I also had the privilege, in the previous Parliament, to be Chairman of the Select Committee on Health when we conducted an inquiry into looked-after children. One of our recommendations was that there was a need to make much greater use of adoption. We also said that the law governing adoption should be reformed. That reform is contained in this Bill.

The Bill enshrines the welfare principle—the principle on which the Children Act 1989 was founded—in adoption law, but it fails in one key area. Our debate on this group of amendments is concerned with that area of failure—the fact that the Bill does not allow unmarried couples to adopt, even if a child's best interests would best be served by that. The amendments and new clauses in this group are designed to change that.

I welcome the fact that the Government have recognised that the problem exists, and I also welcome their willingness to listen. I strongly commend their decision to allow a free vote on the matter. It is exactly the sort of issue that should be left to personal conscience. Many Labour Members to whom I have spoken disagree with me on this matter, and many agree. I have talked to Conservative Members about the matter, and some of them would like to go most of the way with what I am trying to achieve. I presume, however, that they are prevented from doing so by what I understand to be a three-line Whip.

Mr. Dawson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the status quo is unacceptable? At present one member of an unmarried partnership can adopt, yet the other member is left out. Surely that cannot be a basis for a permanent, loving and caring relationship with two adult carers?

Mr. Hinchliffe: That problem is at the heart of my concerns about the way in which the Bill is drafted. My hon. Friend is right: the law permits adoption by single people and joint adoption by married couples. The prohibition of joint adoption by unmarried couples is continued by clause 47. As drafted, the Bill requires that all decisions by the relevant agencies or courts must be based on the principle that the child's welfare, throughout its life, must be the paramount consideration. However, in a small number of cases the agency or court is prevented from making the decision that is most likely to promote the child's welfare. They may be few in number, but those cases are important, and that is why I think that the Bill needs to be amended.

In practice, a small number of children—possibly as few as 1 per cent.—are placed for adoption with an unmarried couple. Alternatively, a child may be placed with its existing foster carers. There is no requirement that such carers be married, and they may wish to adopt the child. Sadly for the child, in those circumstances only one of the foster parents can in law become the adoptive parent. The other partner may acquire more limited parental responsibility for the child—for example, by being granted a residence order.

However, such orders end automatically when a child is 16, or 18 at the latest. As a result, the adoptive parent's partner will have no lasting legal family relationship with the adopted child. We have to understand the implications of that. I shall not go into detail, but questions of inheritance, pensions, insurance, and in certain circumstances even nationality, need to be considered.

Most importantly to my mind, the present arrangements also affect the child's ability to have an equal relationship with both adoptive parents. That is why I propose that unmarried couples should be allowed to apply to adopt and to be approved, where suitable and where there is clear evidence of stability and permanence in their relationship.

I emphasise those conditions, as I am concerned that we should be aware of the need for permanence in the relationship of any people applying to adopt. It is worth noting that the 1983 adoption regulations for reports to adoption panels and the 1984 adoption rules concerning reports to the courts require comments on the stability of a married couple's relationship.

I know married couples who do not have an exactly stable relationship, so it is wrong to make the automatic assumption that people who are married have a stable relationship. Sadly, in my experience, that is not always the case.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): Does my hon. Friend agree with the editorial in *The Times* today? It commends his amendment, and states:

"Any couple who can demonstrate financial commitment, enduring love and domestic stability should be free to adopt."

Mr. Hinchliffe: I have not seen that editorial, but I agree with the sentiments.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) expressed concern about new clause 13. The regulations and accompanying statutory guidance would require specific consideration of the duration and permanence of the relationship between the couple as part of the adopter assessment process. That is very important.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): A constituent sent me an e-mail this morning, in which he stated that he accepted the need to open up the process to include stable

[Dr. Nick Palmer]

unmarried couples. However, he wanted to be reassured that the process would not be opened up to unstable couples. Does my hon. Friend agree that the existence of a marriage would offer a certain amount of prime facie evidence for stability, other things being equal?

Mr. Hinchliffe: Some of the most unstable people that I have met in my life have been married. Marriage does not necessarily indicate stability. However, regardless of whether we are talking about married or unmarried couples, the existence of a stable, enduring and loving relationship is crucial when it comes to adoptive applicants securing approval.

Ms Munn: Will not new clause 13 make it a requirement, for the first time, that the regulations should cover inquiries into suitability? It is clearly spelled out that adoptive applicants must have a relationship that is stable and permanent, and those conditions apply to married couples, single people and unmarried couples. That requirement has not existed in previous legislation covering adoption.

Mr. Hinchliffe: My hon. Friend is right, and I pay tribute to her for the long and hard work that she done on this measure. Her background is in social work, and she worked in my constituency some time ago.

Ms Munn: I was chair of the adoption panel.

Mr. Hinchliffe: My hon. Friend therefore knows a bit about this subject, and I appreciate her expertise and commitment.

I want to say something about the number of children who need adoption. My hon. Friend the Minister of State may have up-to-date figures on the number of children in care, but the organisation British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering has calculated that some 5,000 more adoptive families will be needed in the next year. It is worried that the Government's aim of increasing the number of children adopted from care by 40 per cent. by 2004 will need many more adoptive applicants than are evident at present.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Is my hon. Friend aware of the statement made in the media today by the director of BAAF, to the effect that the organisation can get no applicants at all to appear in its "Be My Parent" book who want to adopt boys of more than five or six years of age?

Mr. Hinchliffe: The briefing sent by BAAF to Members refers to that point. It is worrying that many children do not have the opportunity of the loving family environment that all or most of us take for granted.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The hon. Gentleman is giving a very good speech, although I do not necessarily agree with his conclusions. He is at least making the case for stability. It is true that six out of 10 cohabitations turn into marriage, but of those that do not, eight out of 10 break down within 10 years. Does he think that it is wise to place a child with a couple when there is a four in five chance of that relationship breaking down? Is that in the interests of the child?

4.30 pm

Mr. Hinchliffe: Sadly, many marriages break down within the same period. I worked with colleagues who were involved with adoptions, and sometimes the marriages broke down not long after the children were adopted, which deeply affected the children. I do not think that we can ever predict whether that will happen. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but we cannot guarantee that married people will stay together.

Jonathan Shaw: Does my hon. Friend agree that the difference is that an unmarried couple seeking to adopt a child would be subject to a rigorous assessment, and would need to demonstrate stability? We are not comparing like with like, so the example given by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) is not appropriate.

Mr. Hinchliffe: My hon. Friend's background, like mine, is in social work. I suspect that many Opposition Members do not have the depth of knowledge that some Labour Members who have done the job have, about the extent to which such issues are examined. It occasionally results in social workers being accused of prying into issues that they should not investigate. This has to be a thorough process, and I think that the regulations that follow what I hope will be an amended Bill will be thorough on the subject of stability and security.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I agree with some of the hon. Gentleman's arguments. He said that more people needed to offer to become adoptive parents. Has he any figures to show how many people who seek to adopt and make no progress opt for out-of-country adoption? Are those figures recorded with our lists of those waiting for adoption?

Mr. Hinchliffe: I do not have those figures; the Minister may be able to offer some advice on the subject. I have deep reservations about out-of-country adoptions. I have a vivid memory of being in Romania 10 years ago in what was supposedly an orphanage. Many people from this country wanted to adopt Romanian orphans, but I found out that most of the kids surrounding me were not orphans but had families who were too poor to look after them. The message that came over loud and clear is that we need to support the countries where those youngsters come from and ensure that they can be fed and cared for by their own families. I do not have the figures but I am uneasy about the idea of inter-country adoptions without very strict regulations.

Mr. Streeter: I respect the hon. Gentleman greatly for the work that he has done on this matter, although, like my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), I do not necessarily share his beliefs. He has done a terrific job, however, and is making a very good speech. Reference has been made to hard-to-adopt children, particularly boys of five, six and seven. What evidence does he have that if his amendment is passed into law, a queue of unmarried couples will want those hard-to-adopt children?

Mr. Hinchliffe: I cannot give an answer on individual cases. However, I know that BAAF and other

organisations have had significant inquiries from unmarried couples. The information sent to all right hon. and hon. Members shows that during national adoption week in 1999, 10 per cent. of the inquiries received came from people who were unmarried and were actively considering adoption.

The figures discussed in Committee showing how many people cohabit rather than marry nowadays are worthy of note, too. I do not defend those figures—I have made my position clear—but the general household survey shows that in 2000, 11 per cent. of men and 12 per cent. of women between 16 and 59 were cohabiting, and 30 per cent. of women aged 18 to 49. I am told that according to the projections, in 20 years' time—no doubt this legislation will still apply then, because I suspect that, as has already been said, it will be 25 years before there is another Adoption Act, so we need to get it right—the figure for cohabiting couples will be 20 per cent., and may even be higher. Personally, I hope that marriage becomes fashionable—and under Labour, that may happen.

I want to emphasise the need for the thorough assessment that already takes place with regard to stability and long-term relationships. I believe that that can be delivered by the amended Bill and by regulation.

I have a lot of respect for the hon. Gentlemen who put their names to amendment (a) to amendment No. 158. I worked with them on the Health Committee, and I know their deep commitment to child welfare. However, I urge the House to oppose amendment (a). Sadly, the media interest in this debate has focused on the red herring of same-sex adoptions. Frankly, such arrangements are not my central purpose, but I believe that it could be in the interests of a particular child to be adopted by a same-sex couple, so that should not be ruled out.

I say that on the basis of the experience that I had in the late 1970s of approving, as de facto foster parents for a particular child, a lesbian couple. I had reservations and Leeds authority, which I worked for and which was in Conservative hands at the time, had very serious reservations. The decision on that placement went to the Conservative chair of the social services committee, and she agreed that the proposal was in the best interests of that child. The lady concerned is still around, and she will confirm what I say. I understand that the child was subsequently adopted by one of the women involved.

I appeal to right hon. and hon. Members to remember that we are here to deal with the best interests of the child, and those should be paramount in this debate.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There are many right hon. and hon. Members trying to contribute to the debate in a very limited time. We have had two very substantial opening speeches, and I appeal for brevity from other right hon. and hon. Members.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) on a speech that was moderation and reason itself compared with the one that we heard from the Liberal Democrat Front Bench. I particularly congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his support for marriage as an underlying principle. It is a sad day for British politics when a Front-Bench spokesman consistently refuses to say that the best thing that a child can have is a father and mother in a stable married context. That is a great pity, and for that reason alone, I wish that we were going to vote on the hon. Gentleman's amendment first. I do not agree with it and will not support it, but I congratulate him on the very serious way in which he has tackled a difficult subject. He has raised some challenging issues.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Does the right hon. Lady really believe that it is better for a child to be brought up in a stable relationship between a man and a woman who are constantly abusing that child than by a couple who are unmarried but who provide warmth, security and love for their children?

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman does not even measure up to an 11-plus standard of debate.

I should like to address the very serious issues raised by the hon. Member for Wakefield. First and foremost, we should be seeking to give any child, but particularly an adoptive child who has already suffered considerable instability and may be very vulnerable, security and stability. It is only by maintaining the current law and by making it the norm that adoption is undertaken by married couples that security and stability can be achieved.

Mr. Dawson: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I want to make progress, as so many Members want to speak. You have asked for short contributions, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I shall be unable to make mine short if I give way—I say that with respect, as I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would have made an interesting point.

In the name of security and stability, I believe that the present law should stand. I shall first consider security. Marriage brings not only privileges but legal responsibilities which, I believe, provide greater security for a child. If two people really wanted to adopt a child, and were considering the interests and security of that child, they should want to marry—unless there was an impediment. For example, unless the cohabitee is joint legal owner of the shared home, she has no rights over the property, but when a married couple split up both spouses have statutory rights over the matrimonial home.

In the short term, a cohabitee can apply for court orders allowing her—I am presuming that it would be her rather than him, although I realise that it could be the other way around—and the child to stay in the shared home for a maximum of 12 months, whereas a married parent left with the child would be given the right to live in the home until the child reached the age of 18, and would also be granted at least 50 per cent., and sometimes between 60 and 70 per cent. or more, of the matrimonial home in their own right.

Mr. Llwyd: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I am going to make progress.

If a cohabitee lives in a home owned by the father of the child—I am presuming that the parent with care is the mother, although I accept that that is not always so—it is possible that he could sell the house from under them, as no entitlement for her to live there would be recorded at

[Miss Widdecombe]

the Land Registry. Matrimonial rights over property are protected by an entry on the land register. To help provide for a child, a cohabitee can apply for an order that the other party pay a lump sum, or pay for specified items such as school fees, but for a married spouse there is a duty of financial support for the children, and the payments may be substantial.

The mother herself has no right to maintenance payments if she is a cohabitee, and that could be extremely important if she is left with a child, whereas the courts can make a wide range of financial orders for the support of a spouse in her own right—such awards are not merely dependent on the child.

Certain basic securities spring from the legal status of marriage that would not be available to protect a child in what is called an "informal relationship".

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I am sorry. I am not being awkward; I normally give way a lot, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I am following your orders, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am sure that you are delighted that I am doing so.

I shall now discuss stability. Statistics collected by the Office for National Statistics—not an organisation with an axe to grind—show that 8 per cent. of married couples split up in the five years following the birth of a child, and that 25 per cent. of cohabiting couples who later marry split up. However, 52 per cent. of couples who cohabited and never married split up, so the adoptive parents of a child placed in one of those arrangements would be six and a half times more likely to split up than married adoptive parents.

The consideration of those clear facts—the type of evidence that we sought and did not get for the contrary argument—leads me to believe that we are right to maintain the security and stability that marriage offers at present. It would be dishonest if I did not tell the House that I also believe that, as a society, we should continue to distinguish in favour of marriage. We should continue to recognise that marriage confers rights but also responsibilities, so I believe that it should be actively promoted by society. The hon. Member for Wakefield would probably agree.

Mr. Hinchliffe *indicated assent.*

Miss Widdecombe: I cannot support the hon. Gentleman's amendment, but I again congratulate him. I do not dismiss either the passion or experience that he brings to the debate, but fundamentally I believe that it is in the interests of the child that married couples be the adoptive parents.

4.45 pm

Jonathan Shaw: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) who made an outstanding contribution. He gave a measured speech that encapsulated the feelings of many hon. Members.

During the Special Standing Committee, we heard evidence from 30 professional organisations. The gathering of evidence from expert witnesses was certainly the best way of ensuring that the legislation was right. As several hon. Members have pointed out, we only introduce such legislation once in a generation and considerable efforts have been made on both sides of the House to get it right.

I very much agree with my hon. Friend that the current legislation is deficient. We asked all those 30 professional witnesses, representing various organisations, whether they agreed with the proposals that are now set out in my hon. Friend's amendment—I tabled a similar amendment in Committee. Twenty-nine of the witnesses agreed that we should widen the pool, especially if we are to reach the 40 per cent. increase that we all want. We all believe that adoption offers the best opportunity for stability for children.

There is a hierarchy involved. The optimum is a married couple—a mother and a father. That is first and foremost. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Julie Morgan) referred to the number of boys who were included in the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering "Be My Parent" booklet and pointed out how few inquiries were made about them. That is true for many, many children. At present, the pool is not wide enough so we must widen it.

Mr. Djanogly: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Shaw: I want to speak only for a short while.

We need to face the situation that I have described not only for the present but for future generations. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) asked how many more adoptive parents there might be: we do not know. At present, unmarried couples are unable to adopt, so it is wrong to compare—

Mr. Leigh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Shaw: I shall give way in a moment.

It is wrong to compare the breakdown rates of cohabiting couples, who are not subject to the rigorous assessments for adoption, with those of unmarried couples who might become prospective adopters. We need to dispel the general argument put by those who oppose my hon. Friend's proposals.

The key point about such legislation—whether on adoption or child protection—is that we consider it only once in a generation, so we need to ensure that we do the best we can. Are we doing the best that we can for children who want to be adopted?

I was a social worker for more than a decade. We had permanent adoption plans for many children, but there was not a big enough pool of adoptive parents for them. When I visited such children, they would ask whether I had found them a permanent family: "Have you found me a mummy and a daddy?" I had to say, "Not yet". I had to keep saying, "Not yet, not yet".

I do not know whether the provision will change that. I do not know whether it will mean that social workers will be able to assess more adoptive families, but I believe that it is worth trying. It is certainly worth trying to ensure that we can widen the pool.

Mr. Leigh: Has the hon. Gentleman any evidence for the assertion that a tremendous number of cohabiting couples want to adopt? The British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering claims that

"some adoption agencies process an adoption as if it is by a single person when in fact the person is cohabiting."

That organisation commissioned Cardiff university to carry out a study of almost 2,000 adoptions, in which it

"did not record any adoptions by a cohabiting couple."

I am afraid that any evidence. *[Interruption.]* Did the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw) not listen to the first point that I made? Some agencies deliberately flout the law and process an application

"as if it is by a single person when in fact the person is cohabiting."

Not one of the 2,000 people in the Cardiff study was cohabiting. Where is the evidence to show that great numbers of cohabiting people want to adopt?

Jonathan Shaw: If there is evidence of people flouting the law, people should pass it on to the proper authorities, but we took evidence from 30 professional agencies and witnesses from different spectrums of child care. They were not all of one type; there was a whole variety of people. When we asked, 29 of them agreed with the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and said that we need to do the best that we can.

There is no assertion that scores and scores of unmarried couples want to adopt, but such an amendment would increase the pool. There is no pure equation, but we have to deal with such things in child care. We have to put our hands on our hearts and say that we will do the best that we can. We have to take a view of the world that we live in. I believe that, to increase the number of children being adopted, we should support amendment No. 158, and I commend it to the House.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): It seems a long time ago that a small number of hon. Members and I raised precisely this issue on Second Reading. At that time, those on the Front Benches ducked the issue. On this occasion, they have half ducked it, but it is important that, as the Secretary of State for Health said at the time, we have a debate and that the House decides. I do not normally comment on how the usual channels work and how the whipping goes on such things, but this is very much the sort of issue on which hon. Members, from their own experience, are best able to form a judgment. Things would be better done that way, rather than through the medium of a whipped vote.

I am pleased to follow, among others, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) because, as he rightly said, I was a member of the Select Committee on Health under his chairmanship, when it considered children looked after by local authorities. Indeed, we recommended reform of adoption law. That reform was overdue then, and it is very welcome now.

I do not repeat what has been said, not least by the hon. Member for Wakefield, with whom I very substantially agree—I shall come on to where and why we disagree—but I want to encourage colleagues, particularly on this side of the House, not to think about this issue as though, by resisting the hon. Gentleman's amendments, we can roll the world back to a situation where the only people who want to be adoptive parents are married couples, or where they would come forward in sufficient numbers, notwithstanding the improvements and reductions in delay that may occur as a consequence of the Bill.

Following the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), let us construct the argument around the best interests of children based on what happens now, not on the proposition that there is an additional pool of prospective adopters—although I happen to agree that there would be some additional potential adoptive parents as a result of allowing unmarried couples to adopt. About 6 per cent. of those who adopt now are single. Overwhelmingly, they are in cohabiting relationships and are unmarried couples—heterosexuals in the great majority.

So the question is what is in the best interests of the child where those couples are concerned. Having established to the satisfaction of the relevant agencies and the courts that one person in that relationship is the best person to adopt the child, is it in the best interests of the child for the other person in that relationship not to have a long-term, lasting legal relationship with that child? That is not in the best interests of the child.

Conservative Members have established that, if there is a hierarchy of the best interests of the child, it is that a child should be brought up by a mother and a father, first, in a married relationship, or, if there is not a married relationship, an enduring, loving relationship. That seems to be the best way to proceed. If children are to be placed for adoption with a couple—a mother and a father—but the current constraints of the law provide that only one of those two parents can have the legal relationship with the child, that is not in the best interests of the child.

It would be advantageous to free up the possibility for couples to adopt, even though they are unmarried. The evidence that I have seen so far from our inquiry and from talking to directors of social services and others in my constituency and elsewhere and from the adoption agencies makes it perfectly clear that a number of potential parents who are unmarried have their own reasons for not wanting to marry.

Should we see the Bill as some form of social engineering? Is it designed to try to force people to marry in order to become adoptive parents? I think that we should conclude that people should marry if they love one another and if they want to show that to society at large by using that form of relationship. If we do not take that view—I am sorry to tell my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe)—would we really saying that the increasing number of people in our society who have natural children and who, as a couple, do not marry are in some way not considering the best interests of their children? They have their reasons.

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

It is not for us to try to use adoption legislation, which should be designed around the best interests of the child, as a mechanism to effect a change in social circumstances in society at large, still less to try to go back to a different time. Many couples have their own many and varied reasons for not marrying. In some cases they face impediments to marriage. There may not be legal impediments, but there could be religious reasons and so on, which make things very difficult.

Mr. Dawson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman because he is the chairman of the all-party group on children and young people in care.

Mr. Dawson: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I follow his logic entirely and share his views on social engineering. Do not his arguments apply equally to same-sex couples?

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman takes me precisely to my next point. Thus far I have agreed with the hon. Member for Wakefield, and my purpose in speaking is not least to say that, if the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) were to be passed, I would want to press amendment No. 24, which is designed to define unmarried couples for this purpose as a man and a woman living together. However, if the hon. Gentleman's amendment is not passed, and amendment No. 148 and the consequential amendments associated with it were passed, I would want to press amendment No. 158(a), which is designed to remove same-sex couples from the definition of couples for this purpose.

My understanding—you will correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Deputy Speaker—is that the Division on amendment No. 158 will take place not now but on Monday, but we must make the argument now. I hope that hon. Members will understand that we can debate same-sex couples today, but we shall have to vote on Monday. I hope that, on Monday, having indicated that they are prepared to allow unmarried couples to adopt, hon. Members will not, for the reasons that I have explained, extend that to same-sex couples.

Some of the arguments that I have presented are exactly the same as those that Stonewall has put to me. I have great respect for its arguments and we have had some interesting discussions, but we have not reached the same conclusions. Stonewall says that if a child is placed for adoption with a couple who happen to be of the same sex, why should not both partners in that relationship have a long-term, lasting legal relationship? My purpose in speaking to the amendment is not perhaps the same as that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), whose view may be shared by other Opposition Members. Their view is that they would not wish children to be placed for adoption with a gay person in a gay relationship. That does happen—I am working on the basis of what happens now. On Second Reading, I noted—I probably did not refer to it—that last year's October issue of *Be My Parent* illustrated, at length, precisely such a relationship: a lesbian couple who had adopted, over time, four children. I hope that that is successful; I cannot say anything more than was set out in that newspaper.

5 pm

This is the issue: why should we go on to create, for gay couples, a legal relationship that would not apply in a natural birth family? As a consequence of allowing unmarried couples to adopt, we will create, as one would normally expect, a legal mother and a legal father. As a consequence of the hon. Member for Wakefield's amendment, were it not amended as I propose, we would create two legal mothers or two legal fathers. Some other parts of legislation work on the basis of parents, but I am not persuaded that we have yet reached the point at which all our legislation should treat all parenting as wholly non-gender-specific.

I accept that there is a degree to which the parenting skill often crosses gender. Some fathers are better at being mothers to their children and some mothers are better at being fathers. By and large, however, most of our legislation, although it may be written in terms of parenting, is understood in terms of the respective responsibilities of mothers and fathers. There tends to be an understanding of how parenting works in that relationship. We should consider very carefully whether to take the novel step of creating two legal mothers or two legal fathers, especially when the provision may be used more often to assist the lesbian partner of someone who has given birth to a child through donor insemination than it ever will be to assist gay couples to adopt children, who may often be older or severely disabled and for whom there is a significant lack of adoptive parents.

Dr. Palmer: Does the hon. Gentleman feel that the arguments that he advanced for the deficiency of an arrangement in which one partner is the legal adoptive parent and the other is not also apply to a gay relationship? How confident is he that his amendment is compatible with the European convention on human rights.

Mr. Lansley: I shall make two points in that regard.

I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman has been listening to me carefully, as the essence of my argument is that, although I accept the case in respect of unmarried couples, we would create a whole new legal situation in relation to gay couples. It is not therefore directly comparable with the situation for unmarried couples, so we should not necessarily read across.

On the European convention on human rights, the case of Frette *v.* France gave effectively a margin of appreciation to the French Government not to allow a gay man to adopt. I think that that was wrong, and that it was probably incompatible with convention rights.

My amendment proposes that we do not create in UK legislation at this stage a possibility for there to be two legal mothers at the same time through gay adoption. I suspect that the European Court of Human Rights, were it to consider the matter, would allow at least that margin of appreciation, as we are not precluding gay adoption. Everyone has made that clear—gay adoption happens now. It was established in a case in Scotland, which points to exactly the situation in which gay adoption is most likely to happen.

In the Scottish case, which established the principle, a nurse who had substantial experience of dealing with a child who had severe disabilities was able to adopt that child. Circumstances therefore exist in which gay adoption happens, and in which it may be in the best interests of the child. As a consequence of that, circumstances exist in which the partner in that gay relationship may seek a joint residence order. A joint residence order may not be all that gay partners want in such a relationship, but it is sufficient for the time being, while we think carefully about the consequences of trying to establish the proposition that one can have two legal mothers or two legal fathers rather than what we have understood to be the case up to now—that we should have parents, which, in British law, implies a mother and a father.

For that reason, I shall vote for the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Wakefield—I hope that my colleagues will follow me—but I hope that he will understand if, on Monday, I seek to amend it.

Ms Munn: I shall be brief, because I believe that much has already been said in this debate, and I commend hon. Members on both sides of the House for the way in which this issue is being discussed.

One of the problems with adoption is that we tend to approach the issue as we would that of two people having a natural child. Years ago, that was perhaps how adoption was most frequently seen—a couple who were unable to have their own children would seek to adopt a child from somebody who could not keep a child. We are now in a very different situation, in which most children who are adopted come through the care system, most are older children, and most have experienced some form of abuse and are likely to have significant emotional problems.

Today, adoption is about looking for families for children. Nowadays, in our society, families come in many types. In my view, we should not rule out any adult who, after rigorous assessment, is thought to be able to offer a loving, lifelong relationship to a child. We have heard a lot about what is considered the ideal, and about what our ideal would be were we to have children, but that is not what we are talking about. The ideal would be to have enough adoptive parents for all the children who currently seek adoptive families and for all the children whom we would like to seek adoptive families.

That is not the situation. In fact, there are more children awaiting adoption than there are adoptive parents. It is nothing short of political correctness to rule out unmarried couples whether of different sexes or the same sex. To suggest, as did the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), that it is okay for one person to adopt is wrong—we will be creating new legal relationships whether in relation to unmarried couples of different sexes or unmarried couples of the same sex. Indeed, it was those very technical and complex legal difficulties that delayed consideration of these amendments in Committee, as the Minister said, so I do not accept the arguments of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire.

We must ensure that the needs of children are put first.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The hon. Lady says that we must ensure that the needs of children are put first, and the whole House shares that concern. Does she appreciate that not all types of family are equally likely to be stable? While she is right that there are many types of families, they are not all likely to offer the adopted child the same level of security, stability and consistency.

Ms Munn: I entirely accept that not all families are equally stable, but I reject the idea that certain types of family are less stable. We are talking about individual children being placed in individual family homes. Adoption panels and social workers spend a great deal of time trying to match children with people who can meet their needs.

I have been involved in placing children in same-sex couples. The process was particularly interesting and that was not because I found that those couples were very different from heterosexual couples. As hon. Members know, a rigorous assessment takes place. There is a full report—sometimes, it is considered to be too intrusive. I have read literally hundreds of those reports. One reads about people's life experience, childhood, work, relationships, what they do at the weekend and their experience with children. The few reports that I have read on same-sex couples struck me because they were extraordinarily ordinary. Their lives are the same as everyone else's.

Couples who are offering a home to children are focused on exactly that. They want to have children in their lives.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): I read an article in an American newspaper some two months ago about a young child who was seriously ill and not expected to live and who had been adopted by a same-sex couple. Eventually, the child prospered. When the child reached the age of 10, the authorities decided that it should no longer be fostered but should be adopted. Under the law in that state—Florida—the authorities were not allowed to place the child with a same-sex couple. Legally, they had to take the child from the couple who had raised it since it was very young and place it with a different family.

Ms Munn: Clearly, in my hon. Friend's example the needs of the child were not properly considered. That has to be the bottom line. We do not have enough adults who want to adopt. We do not have enough people offering families. We have to widen the pool and look to the future by saying that anyone who can offer the love, care and stability that children in care need should be approved and enabled to look after a child.

Mr. Lilley: I approach this subject in the light of my experience as Secretary of State for Social Security, when it became clear to me, in terms of social problems, that children who had had the advantage of adoption tended to do as well if not better than average, whereas those who remained in care did far worse than average. Four times as many were unemployed. They were 12 times as likely to have no educational qualifications, 40 times as likely to go to prison, 60 times as likely to be roofless and 66 times as likely to have children who had to go into care, thus perpetuating the process.

[Mr. Lilley]

I start from a presumption that we should encourage more and speedier adoption. When the British Agencies for Adopting and Fostering wrote to me, saying

"it does not make sense to exclude a significant proportion of the adult population from consideration"

for adopting children, I was inclined to agree. I started from the position expressed by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), which was also described very lucidly by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw). Although marriage is undoubtedly preferable—the ideal is that children should be brought up in a loving, married family—if there are not enough loving, married families to go around, in principle I would be prepared to widen the scope. After all, we allow children in care to be brought up by people who may be married or single, cohabiting or not, homosexual or otherwise.

I agree with the BAAF that it would not make sense to exclude a significant proportion of the adult population from consideration for adoption. However, no one is, in fact, excluded. Under present law, no one is legally excluded from consideration for adoption: one may be married or unmarried, cohabiting or single, gay or lesbian, young or old, or black or white: one is legally entitled to adopt. Last year, 300 single people adopted children—about 6 per cent. of the total number adopting. I do not believe that the change proposed will increase by one person the number of people with the right to adopt. The numbers argument is therefore bogus.

5.15 pm

Having vaguely acknowledged the situation, but without making it clear, BAAF went on to say:

"BAAF research shows that many unmarried couples do not come forward for this reason"—

namely, that they cannot adopt collectively as a couple; they can only adopt if one of them acts as sole legal adoptive parent. I phoned BAAF to ask for the evidence and spoke to Mrs. Felicity Collier, the chief executive of the organisation, who wrote the letter. She said that there was no evidence to that effect as such. In the letter, she was referring to a study of 500 parents during national adoption week. At the beginning of the sample, 15 per cent. were unwed; at the end, only 8 per cent. of those who carried it through to close to completion were unmarried. A disproportionate number of unmarried people had dropped out, but they were not asked why. No information was gathered on that.

So the assertion in the letter was not backed up by evidence. Indeed, no hon. Member has produced evidence today to support the idea that a significant number of people are put off adopting by the legal situation. It is certainly the case that no one is legally excluded from adopting.

Jonathan Shaw: I said that we do not know whether there is a large pool. We have to make an assessment, and that is based on what we know—on how society is shaped. We also take account of those people who provide adoptive placements for children. Some 29 of the 30 agencies agreed with the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe).

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Gentleman is honest enough to admit that there is no evidence. I am referring to a lobbying body that is pre-eminent in adoption. It wrote to me pretending that there is evidence, which, on closer inspection, does not exist. Why Mrs. Collier, who seemed nice and honest, should put her name to such a tendentious letter, I do not know.

Mr. Dawson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lilley: I am sorry, but I must continue, for the reasons made clear by other hon. Members.

There seems to be an agenda to raise the importance of rights above responsibilities—to equate cohabitation with marriage and homosexual relations with heterosexual relations. To some extent, children are being used as pawns in that game. I accept that it would be equally wrong to use children as pawns or a bait for marriage. I am not saying that I believe we should legislate to provide the incentive to marry that only married people can adopt. That is not the reason for our approach. What matters is that we act in the interests of children—not in the interests of married couples, unmarried couples, gay people, elderly people or younger people.

Mr. Dawson *rose—*

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West) *rose—*

Mr. Lilley: I will not give way, for the reason that I gave.

The practical effect of the change will not be to bring about a significant increase in the number of people who apply to adopt. What it will do is raise the priority given to unmarried parents and reduce the questions that are asked about whether their relationship is likely to be as stable as a married relationship.

We know that overall there is a surplus of parents who want to adopt relative to the number of children. It is babies that are in short supply. What we need are more parents who are willing to adopt not the babies but the children who are harder to adopt. They are the most vulnerable children. They have the greatest difficulties and are in most need of stable relationships and a secure environment. In practice, I do not think that many of those 300 or so who have come forward to adopt and who are not married are particularly likely disproportionately to take on those children who are so hard to place.

Ms Munn: They do.

Mr. Lilley: I said, "particularly likely." I am not saying there are no examples of that happening, but those couples are likely to displace married couples from applications to adopt and reduce their priority when it comes to adopting babies. That is likely to be the major consequence of the proposed change.

It has been asked whether Conservative Members are saying that the unmarried are automatically unstable and unlikely to remain together, and so on. In fact, we are talking about statistics. The House will be given statistics showing the frequency with which unmarried couples break up as against married couples. These are statistics, and the differences can be felt. There will be unmarried couples who live together peacefully, harmoniously and lovingly all their lives. There will be unmarried couples who are as committed as any married couple. Indeed,

from a theological point of view, in the sight of God they are married, because marriage is the commitment and not the public institutionalisation of it. Unfortunately, I do not have the insight of God—none of us has—and so I do not know who is committed and who is not. It is simply more difficult to know if people will not make the commitment public and declare it through the institution of marriage.

That is the difficulty and the problem. We are asking social workers to assess which of the comparative minority among unmarried couples are every bit as committed, as stable, as permanent and as long term as the average marriage. Of course, some of the wedded couples will break up: some are not committed and should be excluded. If they can be identified ex ante they should be excluded from adoption, although that is difficult.

It is surely foolish for us to write it into the law that consideration should be effectively uninfluenced by whether or not people make a public commitment to the responsibilities that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) spelled out as being part of marriage and the commitment that is an intrinsic part of it too.

Children are not trophies to whom anyone has the right. Children are not and should not be tools of social engineering, either by those who pursue a politically correct agenda or by those of us who believe in marriage. The children we are talking about are the most vulnerable, and have the greatest difficulties if they are not satisfactorily adopted. We should be seeking the best for them, and not the best for parents.

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): I am a married man and I believe in the sanctity of marriage. I believe also that it is vital as part of the social infrastructure of modern society. I am the father of three young children. I am grateful beyond words that they are brought up in a loving, stable family environment. I also happen to be a Christian. It is because I am a Christian who believes in the family that I strongly support the amendments, whereby non-married couples, including same-sex couples, will be able to adopt children.

In the shifting values of modern times, there are few, if any, absolute values on which all of us agree. However, one value that comes closer than many to achieving that consensus is, I suggest, the imperative to love and cherish children. It is not only a biblical imperative. It is one that is shared by those of all faiths and of none—people who believe, like me, that the interests and needs of children are paramount and that they should always come first.

If we hold that view, it would seem that our duties today in this place are clear. First, we must examine the evidence to ascertain whether the interests of children are currently being put first. Secondly, if they are not, we must decide what needs to be done in the real world in which children live to ensure that that is remedied. Thirdly, we must decide for ourselves whether that requires statutory expression through the amendments. I shall look at those three questions in turn.

First, it is clear that children are not being put first. There are thousands of vulnerable children who are either in care or in need of care. Many of these children are fostered. Many will return to their natural family in due course, albeit sometimes under supervision and protection. Many others—especially older children, disabled children and hard-to-place children—will not find long-term foster families and will not return home. They are the lost children of the modern age. For them, there may be three possibilities: the street, institutionalised care homes or adoption.

Secondly, in the real world, which is the best of the three options if we are to protect children and put their interests first? It must surely be by protecting them from the street, by taking them out of institutionalised residential care, and by placing them whenever possible in long-term loving family environments, with families who are equipped to give them the care, love and support that they need. That must mean adoption on a scale which, at present, we are not achieving; we have to find about 5,000 more adoptive families every year if we are to find homes for those lost children.

Thirdly, we have to ask ourselves whether there is anything that we can and should do as parliamentarians to meet that need by passing legislation or amendments to it. Current legislation restricts the pool of adoptive families; married couples can adopt, as can single people, whether gay or straight, but unmarried couples cannot. It does not matter how long people have been in such a relationship; it does not matter how skilled and loving those people would be, or perhaps already are, as parents; it does not matter how many children are lost and whose lives are wasted in residential institutions, when they need loving homes; and it does not matter how desperate those children are. None of that matters; unmarried couples cannot adopt.

In a time of great need for more adoptive families, it is absurd that, by legislation, we are denying a pool of adoptive families who could clearly make a significant contribution any chance of adoption. No one is arguing for a lowering of the rigorous thresholds by which the suitability of adoptive parents is judged. We are talking only about adoptive parents independently judged by the adoption agencies and the courts as having the capacity and commitment to be safe and effective parents. How can it be right to preserve the legislative status quo, thereby ignoring the opportunity offered by that pool of adoptive families? There is no justification whatever for doing so.

We live in an imperfect world, in which we must do the best that we can to make things a little bit better; we should not strive for perfection or the impossible, as that would mean achieving nothing. Countless marriages end in divorce; indeed, that is one reason why we need more adoption. Many people choose not to marry again and many choose never to marry at all, but numerous people seek loving permanent relationships outside marriage. We may not like it, but it happens; that is the world in which we live. To cut all those people off from the pool of adoptive families—however decent and loving and however secure and stable their relationship may be—is to cut massively and arbitrarily the supply of loving parents who could meet the needs of children.

How can it be right to allow children to remain in care when they could be in loving, caring families instead? If children who need care can be adopted by a loving single parent, how can it be right that they cannot be adopted by a loving couple? After all, if one mum or one dad is better than none, two must surely be as acceptable as one.

[Mr. Paul Stinchcombe]

It is argued that allowing unmarried couples to adopt would demean the institution of marriage: I disagree, because the needs of the child should come first. Any argument that sacrifices the needs of the child to any other public interest, even protecting the ideal of marriage, is misguided. It subverts one moral value, the protection of children, and sacrifices it to another, the protection of the ideal of marriage, which is less realisable and important.

Protecting that ideal is less realisable than the interests of the child in care, at least from a parliamentary perspective, because while Parliament can vote to enable a child to have a better chance of finding an adoptive family, we can never vote or legislate to make people marry, or keep married couples and families together.

From a legislative perspective, protecting the ideal of marriage is also less important than protecting the interests of the child, because in any modern democracy we must legislative for everyone. As a Christian, I have a personal view of marriage and believe in its sanctity. I believe that it is a sacrament. I believe that it has spiritual and religious importance, but there are others who do not share my faith, and in our democracy, they have rights too.

5.30 pm

I know people who genuinely believe in monogamous partnerships and who believe that that is the natural way of things, but they do not believe that marriage itself is natural. They believe that it is a man-made concept, a religious concept, a social construct of no relevance to them. In a democracy, they have rights too.

Mr. Lilley *rose—*

Mr. Stinchcombe: There are also those who do share my belief in marriage but who find, no matter how hard they try in their own marriage, that they fail and that their marriage does not last. They have rights too, even if they do not remarry. Those rights surely extend far enough to include the right to offer to help to meet the needs of children in care by offering to be adoptive parents to them.

I do not, however, rest my case on the rights of the parent. I rest my case on the rights of the child. The child has rights too—the right to a family, the right to be loved by a family, and the right to be looked after by a family, even if that family unit does not match our ideal. We, in this House, should not sit in moral judgment over families, nor should we stand in the way of the rights of those children being met, for reasons of political or religious correctness or out of idealism.

We must strike a balance. We have an ideal, not universally shared and not realisable by Parliament. Against that ideal, we can weigh thousands of damaged, lonely, unloved, abandoned children, currently kept in care and kept out of families, when we might be able to find them a loving home. For me, that balance can yield only one result: the children must come first.

Tim Loughton: I shall speak to the generality of the amendments—

Sir Patrick Cormack: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not wish to take the time of the House or of my hon. Friend, but would you please convey to Mr. Speaker that the timetable that the House has been constrained to follow has prevented a proper debate on both sides of the House and on all sides of the argument?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Speaker has nothing to do with the timetables that are presented to the House.

Tim Loughton: I have great sympathy with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack), but I shall try again to summarise the debate. I shall speak to the generality of the amendments and explain why the official Opposition will not be supporting them and why I shall advise hon. Members to vote against them.

The subject under discussion has dominated the Bill for far too long—a Bill that has 137 clauses and six schedules and is packed full of many other issues. It is those issues to which I shall direct attention.

Although the debate has been curtailed, it has been interesting. We have had some excellent contributions from all speakers—certainly as soon as the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) sat down. It was an extraordinary revelation from a political party—the admission that a mother and father figure just happen to be, but are not exclusively, the best bet that children can have. It is astonishing that that is official Liberal Democrat policy.

We heard interesting contributions about the legal implications, moral agendas, legal rights, equality of opportunity and even reverse political correctness. However, I am not interested in any of that as regards creating a better system for adoption and adopted children, and for expanding that system, which is the subject of the Bill. That is what should concern us today, and what has concerned some of us for the past six months, since the Bill started its passage through Parliament. We have strongly supported the Bill throughout, and I have become closely involved with the subject of adoption and scrutinising the Bill.

Two over-riding considerations lie at the heart of our deliberations. The first is set out in clause 1(2), which states:

"The paramount consideration of the court or adoption agency must be the child's welfare, throughout his life".

The second consideration is whether the changes proposed will improve and expand the system of adoption in this country, and thereby heighten the chances of making clause 1 a reality for more children. That is what we are here to discuss today—nothing else. Now is not the time for political agendas, for promoting gay rights agendas, or even for promoting the moral basis for the desirability of marriage. In that I agree with the comment in *The Guardian* editorial on 14 March when it said:

"Adoption should not be used as a means of promoting marriage; it is children's interests which should be paramount."

By the same token, neither should adoption be used as a means of promoting alternative lifestyles and equal opportunities for adults, as I fear increasingly it has become. In the context of this Bill, the only equal opportunity that I am interested in is the equal opportunity of a child who ends up in care as a result of a broken

home, domestic violence or sexual abuse, or because their parents are unable to cope, often after a catalogue of personal tragedies and multiple upheavals.

Jonathan Shaw: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I will not for the moment.

Our agenda here must be the equal opportunity of those damaged children to have a second chance to repair their lives and to be brought up in as stable, loving and fulfilling a family environment as possible to give them as fair a chance as the rest of us when they go out into the wide world outside.

Jonathan Shaw: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I apologise, but I want to make progress.

Over recent months, many of us have been heavily lobbied on the Bill by all manner of Christian family organisations and the politically correct social worker brigade. I, like most hon. Members who have spoken today, may have strong views on those subjects on either side, but the Bill is not the means to promote them.

We have already wasted far too much time in delaying the Bill since its Committee stage ended some four months ago. We all know that it is because of the debate that has been raging between No. 10 and the rest of the Government over the issue of extending adoption to unmarried couples, which has, temporarily at least, been resolved by a free vote on the Government side, which is perfectly legitimate. But it should not have taken four months. This is desperately needed legislation that we needed yesterday, not tomorrow.

One interesting point about today's debate is its attendance. When we started the Bill's Report stage on 20 March only a handful of Members were here, mostly those who had served on the Committee. When we spoke about much more important issues earlier today, again few Members were here. Yet those issues have far more serious implications for making adoption work. Media coverage, too, has been purely on the unmarrieds issue. Yet today and on Monday we are debating much bigger issues, such as domestic violence involving children, matters of consent, procedures for overseas adoptions and contact orders.

Jonathan Shaw: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Tim Loughton: I said that I wanted to make some progress.

We are now told that the Liberals were not due to be whipped to be here at all on Monday. They are interested only in the gay rights agenda as part of the Bill, which is disgraceful.

It is interesting that the BBC, which has been ringing round the expert adoption agencies asking specifically how many complaints they have received from unmarried couples who find that they are unable to adopt jointly, was rather surprised when it reached about the seventh of those adoption agencies to be told that it had not had any complaints about unmarried adoption, to which the BBC said that, funnily enough, nor had anybody else. That follows the findings in the Government's 2000 White Paper "Adoption: A New Approach" which listed the 10 main problems to overcome to improve adoption, including delays in the system, inconsistencies in the law and insufficient social worker training, but no mention of the marital status or otherwise of prospective adopters.

Despite this interesting debate, we shall urge hon. Members on both sides to vote against the amendments and to maintain the status quo, because this issue is a sideshow compared with the real concerns of promoting and improving adoption. All the research, all the statistics and all the sociological evidence show that a family that contains a married couple offers the best chance of providing a long-term stable environment for children in need of adoption.

Many may argue that long-term stable environments can also be offered by unmarried couples, whether of the opposite sex or the same sex. I am not arguing against that point here. But no one can refute the evidence that shows that married couples offer the best chances, in most cases by a long measure. Of course, it is not exclusively so and many problems still happen within those married families, as the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) and others have mentioned. But overall the record is much better.

Let me quote something.

"Children in my judgment, and I think it's the judgment of almost everyone including single parents, are best brought up where you have two natural parents in a stable relationship. There's no question about that. What we know from the evidence is that, generally speaking, that stability is more likely to occur where the parents are married than where they're not."

Those were the words of the Foreign Secretary when he was Home Secretary in 1998. I quote:

"Marriage is still the surest foundation for raising children and remains the choice of the majority of people in Britain."

That is from the Government's 1998 Green Paper.

I quote:

"The adoption law review, when considering this issue, concluded that joint adoption should remain limited to married couples on the grounds that adoption by a married couple was more likely to provide the stability and security that the child needed because married couples have made a joint, publicly recognised, legal commitment to each other. In addition, marriage provides for mutual legal and financial obligations, and importantly, in the event of divorce, the couple must be prepared to have plans for the future of their children scrutinised by the courts. There is no provision in law to protect the child's interests when unmarried couples separate."

Those were the words of the Minister herself. Currently, 95 per cent. of adoptions are by married people. Seventy per cent. of children born within marriage will live their entire childhood with both natural parents, compared with 36 per cent. of children born to non-married couples. According to the Office for National Statistics, children brought up by married couples are statistically far more likely to have better health, to do better at school, to have fewer behavioural problems and to be less likely to commit a criminal offence.

Jonathan Shaw: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I will not.

By contrast, cohabiting couples are six times more likely to split up than married couples, and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) said, more than half of cohabiting

[Tim Loughton]

couples split up within five years of the birth of a child. They split up most often when they have children. The statistics go on and on. The figures show that gay relationships are more transitory still. Married couples offer by far the best long-term chances of stability, statistically and sociologically, and that is what we should be concentrating on. We must make it much easier and quicker for married couples to adopt, which is what the rest of the Bill is all about.

Marriage is on the increase. In 2000, there were 263,515 marriages. About 22 million marriages currently exist. So if we want to increase the current 3,000 adoptees by at least 50 per cent., as we all do, there is plenty of scope in the existing material, and we need to concentrate on why more such people are not coming forward or being approved as adopters.

All the amendments—apart from amendment No. 24, which is different—miss the point. They would open up adoption to any manner of pick-and-mix couples, including heterosexual cohabitees—even brother and sister—and same-sex couples, who have the worst record statistically.

New clause 2 also has serious technical problems. How do we define whether people are in a stable relationship? The amendments would create a mess. They would also send out the wrong signals to local authorities, which might present the courts with more unmarried couples instead of concentrating on maximising the availability of existing married couples, against whom there has been too much obstruction from the political correctness brigade in the past.

We are spending all this time discussing amendments that tackle the wrong problem. In any case, keeping the status quo means that single parent adoptions, which currently constitute 5 per cent. of all adoptions, can still continue. We are not seeking to change that situation. Unmarried couples wanting to adopt have the solution in their own hands—they can commit to each other in a long-term relationship by getting married. I quote:

"Why would a cohabiting couple not see—not necessarily in church, but under the law—defining their relationship in terms of a more public, legal contract as being a precursor to actually adopting a child?"

Those are the words of the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint).

No one has a right to adopt, but every abandoned child or child in care has a right to get a second chance of a stable and loving upbringing. Yet I fear that too many Members here today who are interested in this part of the Bill are in danger of putting the interests of adults ahead of those of children. I fear that this part of the Bill is in danger of being manipulated to serve a different agenda that is all about the wishes of adults. I invite all hon. Members to join us in the Lobby to vote against all the amendments that open up adoption without qualification and to put the interests of children first. I invite the Liberals in particular to put aside their whipped agenda for gay rights and to concentrate on what is best for children by voting with us.

To do so is not to be anti-gay or pro-marriage—for marriage is safe—but to be for the best interests of children. I ask hon. Members to put aside political agendas, moral crusades and issues of equal opportunity, deserving as those may be in a different context. The only equal rights that we should be concerned with in the context of the Bill are those of damaged children to a second chance of a stable and loving upbringing. That is best achieved by keeping the status quo and considering all the other ways of improving and expanding the whole adoption system, which is what the rest of this large Bill is intended to do. We should be getting on with that.

5.45 pm

Jacqui Smith: On Second Reading, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State suggested that there should be a debate on adoption by unmarried couples. A good debate on the subject has taken place today, with hon. Members expressing well thought-out and deeply held views. During the Bill's passage, and especially in the consultative Special Standing Committee, we received many representations. We know that the issue is sensitive and difficult. Given the variety of views, the Government have decided to allow a free vote on extending eligibility to apply to adopt jointly. I am disappointed that other parties have not seen fit to do the same.

I should like to comment on the detail of the amendments. Amendments Nos. 148 to 158 and new clause 13, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) tabled, would, for the first time, allow unmarried couples to apply jointly to adopt children. Hon. Members have understandably concentrated on principles. As a Minister, I am afraid that I have to concentrate not only on principles but on whether the legislation will work.

Mr. Leigh: Will the Minister give way?

Jacqui Smith: No.

Amendments Nos. 148 to 158 and new clause 13 would effect what hon. Members want in a way that is legally sensible and confines the definition of a couple to the Bill. The amendment that the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) tabled would not achieve that. Clauses 47 and 48 define who is eligible to adopt. Amendments Nos. 148 to 155 would make the necessary changes, and amendment No. 158 would define a couple. I therefore hope that the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon will withdraw the amendment. It would not achieve his intention but create considerable difficulties if hon. Members wanted to accept joint adoption by unmarried couples.

As many hon. Members have said, the amendments would widen the pool of potential adoptive parents so that more vulnerable children have the chance of family life that adoption can bring. Evidence shows that there is a potential supply of couples who are willing to adopt. British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering has evidence showing 41 per cent. of unmarried couples expressing an interest in adopting jointly. However, as other hon. Members have pointed out, only 5 per cent. of adoptions are currently not by married couples. That suggests that there may be a supply of adoptive parents out there.

As hon. Members have made clear, one of the key criteria for our decision must be whether we believe that we can increase opportunities for children to be adopted

into stable and secure families. There appears to be evidence that we could widen the pool of potential adopters.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Will my hon. Friend help me to understand why an unmarried couple would refuse to marry if they genuinely wanted to adopt?

Jacqui Smith: I believe that there are many reasons, as several hon. Members suggested. We do not need to worry about that today. We should consider whether to increase the pool of adopters and how to promote the stability and security that many hon. Members have discussed.

Mr. Leigh: I very much hope that the hon. Lady, on behalf of the Government, will now provide leadership and advice to the House. That is her duty as a Minister. Will she please confirm that she still believes the statement that she made very firmly in Committee in November 2001? In it, she said:

"joint adoption should remain limited to married couples on the grounds that adoption by a married couple was more likely to provide the stability and security that the child needed because married couples have made a joint, publicly recognised, legal commitment to each other."—[*Official Report, Special Standing Committee*, 29 November 2001; c. 383.]

Will she repeat that statement today?

Jacqui Smith: I will repeat to the hon. Gentleman what I said in Committee about the Government believing that there was scope for looking at unmarried couples being able to adopt and taking that forward through the partnership registration work that the Government were undertaking. There is nothing inconsistent in my position today.

We need to be clear about the basis of this argument. A vote for the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield is not a vote to extend the right to adopt to unmarried people or to gay people. They already have that right. The existing legal framework for adoption already provides that single people may adopt regardless of their sex or sexual orientation; only married couples can adopt jointly. If a single person is living as part of a couple, the couple will be assessed jointly. One person will then adopt the child, and the other may acquire parental responsibility for the child by means of a residence order. This is not, therefore, about extending the right to adopt to gay people or unmarried people. Furthermore, if any hon. Members really opposed those ideas, they should, at some point during the passage of the Bill, have made their position clear. Nobody has done so.

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) in his very considered speech, argued the case for stability for the child and the importance of the legal relationship that that child has with each of his parents. In the current legal framework, the child is missing having two parents, each with a legal relationship with him. We know from correspondence that we have received that adopted children worry about the difference it would make to them if, for example, their legal parent were to die leaving no one legally responsible for them. That does not provide security or stability for those children who are already living with unmarried couples and with gay people. Residence orders are not permanent. They come to an end when the child reaches the age of 16. Adoption, however, is for life.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) made much of the concept of marriage, as did other hon. Members. This Government have supported marriage, and supported assistance for married people. As we have heard, the number of married people has gone up under the Labour Government. I am happily married, or so my husband tells me. This is not an attack on marriage. It is right that we should seek stability for children, and that can be—and often is—provided by married couples. It can also be provided, however, by other families and by other couples. Nothing in these proposals will water down the crucial assessment process that has to be undertaken to determine whether a relationship is stable—whether the couple is married or not.

Under the amendments, particularly new clause 13, any couple—married or unmarried—wanting to become adoptive parents will need to prove not only that they can provide a loving family environment but that they form a stable and long-term partnership. The provisions in new clause 13 are important. All adoptive applicants must be assessed and approved by an adoption agency before they have children placed with them. That assessment will include a rigorous scrutiny of the stability of their relationship. That is right, because we are talking about stability and security; but I believe that we can deliver stability and security by means of the changes that the amendments of my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield would make.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health made clear in answer to a parliamentary question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn), it is ultimately right for the court to decide whether to make an adoption order. It is right that what we look for in the assessment process is a stable and permanent relationship, but when we find that, it may well be possible to address the need for a larger adoption pool.

Our concern should relate to the circumstances of individual children, not statistical bantering about particular kinds of relationship. Some of the children we are considering are very troubled, and potentially difficult to place with adopters. Their relationship with specific people, including couples, who might have the skills, the stable homes and the love and care enabling them to offer something more should be at the centre of our debate.

For many adoption agencies, the choice will be not about placing children with stable married couples or with unmarried couples, but about giving a child the chance to live in a stable loving family rather than being left in care, with all the instability and poor life chances that we know that can bring.

This has been a wide-ranging debate, in which many Members have expressed the views on all sides of the argument. If the House decides to accept the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, the Government will undertake to table whatever consequential amendments are necessary—a considerable number—to ensure that this works in legislation. Amendments Nos. 148 to 158 and new clause 13 provide a legally workable basis on which to extend the right to adopt to unmarried couples.

[Jacqui Smith]

Ultimately, however, the debate is not about a right to adopt. It is not about political correctness. It is not about gay rights. It is not even about parents. It is about a child's chance of being in a family, and I hope that Members will vote on that basis.

Dr. Evan Harris: As has been said, this was a good debate, but it was curtailed by the timetable and the speech of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), which was an over-long rant, with no interventions. In that respect, he outdid all his senior Back-Bench colleagues in intolerance.

As the hon. Gentleman said, this should be about the promotion of neither marriage nor alternative lifestyles but about putting the child first. However, I think that he will come to regret labelling adoption agencies, the NSPCC, Barnardo's, the National Children's Bureau, the Children's Society and the Law Society as the politically correct social worker brigade—just as the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) will come to regret his reference to the use of children in social engineering. I disagreed with his speech and he should have the courage to say that he simply disagrees with me.

Mr. Lilley *rose—*

Dr. Harris: I commend the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe). He put very well—

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Gentleman mentioned me. Will he give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. It is obvious that the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) is not going to give way.

Mr. Lilley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it not a convention of the House for a Member who mentions another to give way if the Member who has been mentioned seeks to correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I believe a number of criticisms have been made across the Floor during the debate.

Mr. Lilley: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was asking about a convention of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That may well be the general convention, but because of time constraints it cannot apply to this particular debate.

Dr. Harris: I urge hon. Members to support amendments Nos. 148 to 158.

Mr. Lilley *rose—*

Dr. Harris: Unlike the right hon. Gentleman, I gave way about 10 times in my speech. I also urge hon. Members to put pressure on the Government to push the measure through the Lords, because we need it. In asking hon. Members to support amendment No. 148, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

It being Six o'clock, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *pursuant to Order [this day] to put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that hour.*

Clause 47

APPLICATIONS FOR ADOPTION

Amendment proposed: No. 148, in page 28, line 41, leave out "married".—*[Mr. Hinchliffe.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 288, Noes 133.

Division No. 244] **[6 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Doughty, Sue
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John

Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan *(Oxford W)*
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Holmes, Paul
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Luke, Iain
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morris, Rt Hon Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Dr Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Walter, Robert
Ward, Ms Claire
Watson, Tom
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jonathan Shaw and
Mr. Andrew Stunell.

NOES

Amess, David
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Stuart
Bellingham, Henry
Benton, Joe
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dobbin, Jim
Drew, David
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Hurst, Alan
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Kay, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
McAvoy, Thomas
MacDonald, Calum
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McWilliam, John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr Andrew
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Oiner, Bill
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, Dr John
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark

Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tynan, Bill
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Laurence Robertson and
Mr. Peter Luff.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 149, in page 29, line 1, leave out "spouses" and insert "couple".

No. 150, in page 29, line 4, leave out "spouses" and insert "of the couple".—*[Mr. Hinchliffe.]*

Clause 48

ADOPTION BY MARRIED COUPLE

Amendments made: No. 151, in page 29, line 15, leave out "married".

No. 152, in page 29, line 16, leave out "spouses" and insert "of them".

No. 153, in page 29, line 17, leave out "married".

No. 154, in page 29, line 19, leave out "spouse" and insert "of the couple".

No. 155, in page 29, line 21, leave out "spouse".—*[Mr. Hinchliffe.]*

Clause 49

ADOPTION BY ONE PERSON

Amendments made: No. 156, in page 29, line 24, at end insert—

'(1A) An adoption order may be made on the application of one person who has attained the age of 21 years if the court is satisfied that the person is the partner of a parent of the person to be adopted'.

No. 157, in page 29, line 27, leave out paragraph (a).—*[Mr. Hinchliffe.]*

Mr. Lansley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you confirm that further consequential amendments—amendment No. 158, new clause 13 and amendment No. 158(a), which is in the name of myself and my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) and would remove from this group of amendments the possibility for same-sex couples to adopt as a couple—will not be debated today but, according to the order of proceedings, on Monday evening?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Those amendments will not be debated on Monday but they will be voted on then.

Clause 41

CHILD TO LIVE WITH ADOPTERS BEFORE APPLICATION

Amendments made: No. 212, in page 25, line 29, after "applicant" insert—

'or one of the applicants'.

No. 213, in page 25, line 30, after "applicant" insert—

'or, as the case may be, applicants'.

No. 214, in page 25, line 44, leave out "afforded" and insert "given".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 43

NOTICE OF INTENTION TO ADOPT

Amendments made: No. 215, in page 26, line 31, leave out "investigate" and insert—

'arrange for the investigation of'.

No. 216, in page 26, line 32, leave out "their" and insert "the".

No. 217, in page 27, line 4, after "are" insert—

'( ) in prescribed cases, references to the prescribed local authority,

( ) in any other case, references'.

No. 218, in page 27, line 5, at end insert—

'and "prescribed" means prescribed by regulations'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 44

ADOPTION ORDERS

Amendments made: No. 270, in page 27, line 15, after "Act" insert—

'the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 or the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995'.

No. 219, in page 27, line 32, at end insert—

'( ) Before making an adoption order, the court must consider whether there should be arrangements for allowing any person contact with the child; and for that purpose the court must consider any existing or proposed arrangements and obtain any views of the parties to the proceedings'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 45

CONDITIONS FOR MAKING ADOPTION ORDERS

Amendments made: No. 220, in page 27, line 40, after "19" insert—

'(and has not withdrawn the consent)'.

No. 230, in page 28, line 23, leave out first "of" and insert "in".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 49

ADOPTION BY ONE PERSON

Amendments made: No. 221, in page 29, line 33, leave out subsection (3).

No. 232, in page 29, line 42, leave out from "child's" to end of line 43 and insert—

'being adopted by the applicant alone'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 50

PARENTAL ETC. CONSENT

Amendments made: No. 222, in page 30, line 22, leave out "freely".

No. 223, in page 30, line 28, leave out subsection (7) and insert—

'( ) Consent under section 18 or 19 must be given in the form prescribed by rules, and the rules may prescribe forms in which a person giving consent under any other provision of this Part may do so (if he wishes).

( ) Consent given under section 18 or 19 must be withdrawn—

(a) in the prescribed form, or

(b) by notice given to the agency'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 51

MODIFICATION OF 1989 ACT IN RELATION TO ADOPTION

Amendments made: No. 224, in page 30, line 40, at end insert—

'or

( ) a child who has been placed for adoption by a local authority is less than six weeks old'.

No. 225, in page 31, line 6, at end insert—

'or a child who has been placed for adoption by a registered adoption society is less than six weeks old'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 52

DISCLOSING INFORMATION DURING ADOPTION PROCESS

Tim Loughton: I beg to move amendment No. 8, in page 31, line 26, leave out "may" and insert "must".

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 254.

Amendment No. 19, in clause 54, page 31, line 42, after "adoption", insert—

'which shall include all information necessary to fulfil the duty imposed by virtue of section *[Disclosure of information regarding a person's adoption]* (2),'.

Government amendments Nos. 49 to 52.

Amendment No. 147, in clause 59, page 33, line 37, at end insert—

'(7) The provisions in this section relating to access to protected information shall be applicable to any adopted person, regardless of whether the date of that person's adoption was before or after the coming into force of this Act.'.

Amendment No. 25, in page 33, line 37, at end insert—

'(7) This section shall apply to all adopted persons, whether adopted before or after the coming into force of this Act.'.

Government amendments Nos. 53 to 58.

New clause 1—*Right to obtain information: adult siblings*—

'(1) Adult siblings by birth of adopted adults who have been adopted at any time from the enactment of the Adoption Act 1926 shall have the right to make an application to an adoption agency, as specified in regulations, to obtain the information under section 77 relating to his relative who was adopted.

(2) The agency shall make enquiries as necessary to establish the views of the adopted person concerning the disclosure of information to the relative.

(3) The information applied for shall be supplied by the agency to the applicant unless either—

(a) the adopted person has refused consent to the disclosure , or

(b) the agency obtains an order from the High Court which authorises the agency not to disclose the information requested.

(4) The High Court may make an order on an application by the appropriate adoption agency, if satisfied that the circumstances are except61ional.'.

New clause 4—*Disclosure of information regarding a person's adoption*—

'(1) This section shall apply only to an adopted person who has attained the age of 18 years.

(2) The appropriate adoption agency shall have a duty to inform an adopted person that he was adopted, subject to the regulations referred to in subsection (3).

(3) Regulations may prescribe—

(a) the method by which adoption agencies shall discharge the duty described in subsection (2), and

(b) any categories of adopted persons to whom the duty subscribed in subsection (2) shall not apply.'.

Tim Loughton: We now have all of 44 minutes in which to debate three important amendments and two new clauses tabled by myself and my right hon. and hon. Friends, together with a handful of Government amendments.

The amendments and new clauses in our name are on important subjects. They would provide full information to prospective adopters, giving rights of information to those involved—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Would Members leaving the Chamber please do so quickly, and would others be a little quieter so that the hon. Gentleman can make his speech?

Tim Loughton: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I was saying, the amendments are intended to give rights of information to those involved in adoption before the Bill comes into force. They would give rights to siblings of adopted people to make approaches to an adoption agency with a view to establishing contact with a long-since adopted brother or sister, and would provide a fundamental right for people to know by the age of 18 that they were adopted if they had not already been told. These subjects were all discussed in Committee, but I think that the Minister may have further comments to make.

Amendment No. 8 would change a single word in clause 52 from "may" to "must". That may seem like a little amendment, but we spent much time in Committee discussing when a "may" should be a "must". That does not make this "may" any less important, although some of the debates in Committee were extremely exasperating.

We have made the case that it is essential for a successful adoption that the provision of as much information as possible is made upfront to prospective adopters to make sure that they are going into the adoption process with both eyes wide open, that they make a fully informed decision that the prospective adoptee is the right choice and that they stand a good chance of being able to provide a stable and successful home environment. That is especially important if the child to be adopted has complex needs—learning or behavioural difficulties, educational problems, challenging psychological experiences from a past home environment or physical disabilities. It is no good finding out about those things after the adoption has been formalised and the court processes have taken place—by that time it is too late.

[Tim Loughton]

It is also necessary to be able to cope with the special needs of those children after the adoption has taken place. During the witness stages of the Special Standing Committee, Professor Triseliotis told us of children who showed extremely strange behaviour at bath time. It turned out that in their previous family existence sexual abuse had taken place at bath time, so it was engrained on their psyche. There were many other examples that showed the importance of knowing all the information.

The original clause 57 referred to the provision of appropriate information as soon as practicable after the making of an adoption order. To give the Government and Ministers credit, after pressure from the Opposition they rewrote the clause but I still cannot understand why the matter has been left for regulations that would, in effect, make optional the type and nature of the disclosure of relevant information by adoption agencies to prospective adopters. No proper explanation was given in Committee, so we are revisiting that provision. That is why we want to change the word "may" to "must".

The adoption agencies have given us many examples that show the necessity for that change. For example, Barnardo's was effectively challenged in the courts for not providing enough information before an adoption. In other cases, a family's medical history has serious implications for an adopted person later in life—as regards genetic disclosures and so on. It is essential that a full medical history is available at the outset to adoptive parents so that suitable precautionary medical treatment or checks can be undertaken if there is a problem later.

There must be a clear commitment that agencies must provide all the necessary information at the time of adoption. That is a legitimate reason for our amendment. We are still not satisfied with the provisions in respect of information for prospective adopters.

Amendment No. 19 makes an addition to clause 54, which needs to be beefed up to ensure that adoption agencies keep records that are detailed enough to fulfil all their obligations under the Bill.

I want to move on to a much meatier and more important subject—a matter that touched me and many other members of the Committee when we heard representations on it. Amendment No. 25 would add to clause 59 the words:

"This section shall apply to all adopted persons, whether adopted before or after the coming into force of this Act."

The hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan) has tabled a similar amendment so I am sure that ours will receive his support.

The clause deals with the disclosure of protected information about adults and was much amended in Committee—thank goodness. For some extraordinary reason, which we have still not fathomed, the Government actually proposed a retrogressive step: to deny people the right of access to information to which they have been entitled since 1976 under the Adoption Act 1976. No one could understand the reason for that. None of the witnesses who appeared before the Special Standing Committee could understand it. None of the representations that we received could explain it. The proposal caused great distress, but I am glad that again—albeit at the 11th hour—the Government had a change of heart and we achieved some improvements in the Bill.

The lives of an enormous number of people were irreversibly touched by adoption—as far back as the 1940s, in many cases—but the Bill will have little or no effect on them.

It is right that we are putting in place new structures for the future. We need to overhaul the whole process to improve the adoption system and the chances of children in care now and in the future to get a proper start in life, but we must also have some regard to the fall-out from some of the past mistakes and problems in the adoption system. That is what the amendment addresses.

In my involvement with the Bill and the subject of adoption, I have been particularly touched by the approaches from older women especially, including those in my constituency who gave up their children for adoption in very difficult circumstances—often with a high degree of pressure, verging on coercion—to people such as those with whom we are dealing in the Bill.

In effect, we are talking about a past generation who lived under very different social standards. Many people were worried about the original Bill, which would have prevented the contact between adopted children and their birth parents in the future. As I have said, the Government did a U-turn on that, but we need to apply the Bill to the forgotten generation of birth mothers from the post-war years especially.

Many mothers were forced to give up their children for adoption because of social stigma, and adoptive parents were encouraged to pass off the child as their own genetic son or daughter. In many cases, the Bill represents the very last chance for those people, in their twilight years, to establish contact with sons and daughters who were given away for adoption, often reluctantly. However, we contend that contact should be established sensitively, and only with all the proper controls and balances through an intermediary third party and only if the adopted adult agrees. Those must be the absolute minimum requirements, but the demand is there.

We have only to consider the fact that, since section 26 of the Children Act 1975 came into force, 70,000-plus adopted adults in England and Wales have received their birth records, enabling them to establish links with their birth parents if they so wish. Some 90 per cent. of non-searching adopted people agree to have some form of contact with the birth parent who initiates an inquiry.

I fully appreciate that, in practice, all this will be fraught with problems, not least the deficiencies in past record keeping. We will obviously need to prescribe limitations on the level of search undertaken, but such searches are becoming easier all the time, with far greater access to computerised information, electoral registers going online and so on. I contend that, whatever the mechanical problems, the principle is right. I hope that the Government will accept the principle. I should be happy to withdraw the amendment if the Government want to go away and introduce something that may be more workable in practice.

So long as we have a proper balance of rights in favour of those adoptees who do not wish to be found, I cannot understand the objections to the amendment. What we are seeking to do, after all, is to give those women the same rights as those enjoyed by women in Canada, New Zealand and, now, Australia—all of which allowed access to birth records in the 1980s and 1990s. I hope that we can use some of the good practice guidance and continue to apply it to future adoptions.

That is the crux of amendment No. 25, but if the Government are not prepared to adopt that suggestion, we have provided an alternative: new clause 1, which deals with siblings. We suggest that siblings should be given rather greater powers to be able to approach adoption agencies with a view to establishing contact with their brothers and sisters from whom they were parted at an early age. Siblings are often forgotten in the adoption process.

Many people argue about whether birth parents were right to give up children for adoption, or whether they had any choice and how much they may have been coerced. Siblings, in all cases, have played no part in the decision-making process, but they have just as much right to make contact with a lost brother or sister, whether they were taken away for adoption while they remained in the family context, or whether children collectively were placed in care and later broken up and adopted individually.

Siblings in care tend to have more complex families than other children. Research reveals a particular lack of contact with paternal siblings. There are placement problems for sibling groups especially—taking on a whole group of brothers and sisters is a much taller order, and they tended to be split up or to stay in care or in separate foster placements. Research shows that, according to self-reports, the loss of a sibling can involve the loss of a lifetime's close and loving relationship, the loss of support in adversity, the loss of a shared history, the loss of a sense of kinship and the loss of a resource for the individual's development of identity.

6.30 pm

This is a poorly researched area of adoption. We lack detailed information about the extent of sibling separations involved in adoptions, and sibling group placement patterns are, typically, not monitored. Surely, however, there is even more justification to give them greater legal standing to try to establish contact with other adopted siblings on an equal basis. That is our case behind new clause 1. This is an important area, and there are many hundreds and thousands of people who have been affected by adoptions in the past for whom the Bill will have no beneficial effect whatever, as it is not retrospective.

New clause 4 deals with an issue for which there was sympathy on both sides of the Committee. It is an issue of great principle, and the new clause is simple and self-explanatory. It is a fundamental right of individuals to be told that they are adopted if they have not been given that information by the time they become adults at 18. Usually, adopted children should have been told that information before they reach the age of 18, sensitively and at an appropriate time, by their adopted parents.

The new clause deals only with a very small percentage of adoptions as, increasingly, the Bill will be dealing with older children who obviously know that their adopted families are not their birth parents as they were not babies when they were taken away. Most of the Bill targets such children. Many hundreds of babies will still be adopted each year, however, and will have no knowledge of their origins unless they are told when they are old enough to understand. We want to protect them from all the angst and complications of such a bombshell coming later in life when they eventually find out that they are adopted, having had no clue, inkling or suggestion for many years.

We have heard of cases, through our research for this Bill, of people who found out that they were adopted only at a very advanced age—in their 60s and 70s—and, in many cases, only after their birth parents had died. Often, that is the trigger to their finding out the information, by which time, of course, they have lost any chance of making contact with their birth parents. It is a fundamental human right for everyone to be told of his or her origins. If that information is not provided by the adoptive parents, the state has a duty to make it available to the adopted person on reaching maturity, through placing a requirement on the appropriate adoption agency. The state, after all, gives legal legitimacy to the status of adoption—a status that is manufactured, for want of a better word—and it therefore has a duty.

Mr. Dawson: In Committee I described the new clause as ghastly, but not because of the intention behind it, which I acknowledge is good. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that the issue of informing adopted young people about their origins should play a large part in social work training and in the assessment of potential adoptive applicants. I am sure he intends the proposal to lie at the back of everything to ensure good practice from authorities. Is not it too crude to say that the state will tell people this information at the age of 18? Should there not be better ways of approaching this issue than the one he suggests?

Tim Loughton: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I recall the word "ghastly" being flung around the Committee Room when we discussed a similar subject. This is a last resort provision. As I think I have said—and as I want to finish by saying—it is a revelation that needs to be handled with the utmost sensitivity. People do not want to receive—I think this was the analogy that I used—on their 18th birthday, along with a tax return and a congratulations card from their MP, a letter in an anonymous brown envelope saying, "Dear Mr. Smith, by the way, you're adopted. Congratulations." Obviously, that is not the way we want to proceed. The best way must be for the adoptive parent to give that information when he or she deems it most appropriate.

When that does not happen, as a last resort the 18-year-old is entitled to be told that information. The state has a duty of care to ensure that the manufactured relationship of adoption is maintained in everyone's best interest. It is not a question of the state sticking its nose in. We are talking about the state monitoring something that it has created through the legal resources of the adoption process.

The Minister and other Government Members raised practical problems about the keeping of records. The measure is not retrospective and it is not intended to be. Given all the other requirements that are being placed on adoption agencies in the Bill—keeping proper records, providing proper information for potential reunions, the adoption contact register and the need for ongoing monitoring of adoption to gauge the need for adoption support services—if an agency cannot go to the trouble of keeping track of an adoptee's 18th birthday, it is not discharging its many other responsibilities effectively.

[Tim Loughton]

The issue has other serious implications. For example, adopted 18-year-olds need the information to avoid incestuous contact with siblings who may be brought up in the same area unbeknown to them. I fully appreciate the argument of the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson). Much better mechanisms could be used and the issue must be handled sensitively. It is up to the agencies to devise appropriate ways to impart the information. Hopefully, the knowledge that the revelation about adoption will take place at some stage around the adopted person's 18th birthday should encourage adoptive parents to give information to their adopted son or daughter in the fulness of time, at an appropriate moment of their choosing.

In Committee, the Minister said that she was sympathetic and promised to consider the matter in more detail. Indeed, on 21 March she wrote us a useful and detailed letter, saying that she had taken the point on board and was minded to change regulations as a point of best practice to encourage prospective adoptive parents to sign a form of contract saying that they would impart the information to their children at the most appropriate time. I am encouraged by that and welcome it.

New clause 4 is still necessary, however, because the Minister's letter and explanation gave no indication of how that process would be monitored. Also, as the letter says, no provision has been made for any legal enforcement process. That is why we are revisiting the matter in the new clause today. It is too important to leave aside. We cannot take the risk that certain adoptive parents, for whatever strange reason, will choose not to give that information to their adopted son or daughter. I am not convinced that the monitoring processes are in place. Certainly, the new recommendations lack teeth as they cannot be legally enforced.

I am talking about a fundamental human right. If the adopted person is not informed and they find out at an inappropriate time later in life, it could have the most damaging consequences. That is what the new clause attempts to avoid.

In this group, the Opposition have tabled three amendments and two new clauses, which are well intentioned, and which build on some of the responses that the Minister rightly made to many of the issues that we raised in Committee—I am glad that she has made some positive moves. We want to crystallise those moves and put them more clearly on the face of the Bill to send out the message that that information is an important part of the adoption process.

Kevin Brennan: I will keep my remarks brief, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) having taken up 23 of the 44 minutes available.

I remind the House that amendment No. 147, which I tabled, relates to something that I raised on Second Reading—and I note the conversion of the Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen who have taken up the issue and tabled amendments to the same effect. I welcome that. I hope to persuade the Government to undergo a similar conversion, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response. I will also comment on Government amendments Nos. 50 and 52.

In addition to raising the matter on Second Reading, I moved a new clause in Committee on 18 December 2001 and spoke on the Government new clause introduced in Committee on 10 January, which is now clause 59. I met the Minister in February, along with representatives of agencies, and subsequently corresponded with her on the issue. The Government's position has shifted, which I welcome, because the Bill now contains clause 59, which allows for a mechanism whereby information on adoption can be disclosed to a birth relative when someone reaches adulthood. However, that will affect only adoptions that take place after the Bill comes into effect. So the day that it comes into law, it will apply to and benefit precisely no one, and will not benefit anyone directly for many years.

If it is right to allow people to have that opportunity in the future, why is it not right to give it to people who have been adopted before the Bill comes into effect, and their relatives? The Government have conceded that legislation can be retrospective. Indeed, that was the case in the 1970s when the original right was given to adopted persons to seek out their birth records. The Government have also conceded that contact is usually welcomed when it has occurred under current provisions.

My amendment would mean only that people would be asked whether they wanted contact rather than having that contact forced on them. The Minister made it clear to me in meetings and discussions that the provision would divert resources and attention away from the Bill's main purpose. Today we debated one part of the Bill that will get a great deal of attention, but the aspect that I am raising—the problem with birth relatives—has not received enough attention.

I remind my hon. Friend about Government guidelines issued by the Department of Health on intermediary services for birth relatives. In the context of Government amendments Nos. 50 and 52, is she minded to introduce regulations that would give statutory force to the good practice guidance? That would be welcome, but the intention is not clear. Although I think that that should be stipulated in the Bill, I am still interested to know whether it is in part the reason for the amendments. We have to consider why we are doing something in clause 59 which, because of the nature of modern adoption, will benefit a tiny number of people in 20 years' time, rather than helping people now. If the Bill works properly, we will not need the clause for future adoptions.

Hon. Members will know that about a year ago the National Organisation for Counselling Adoptees and Parents successfully reunited three triplets, Gillian, David and Helena. It had to go to court to do so. Yesterday it issued a press release, which will not be covered by the media because in the glare of perhaps more glamorous events, no one is interested in the issue. However, it is fundamental and serious, and the media should focus attention on it.

The triplets were reunited because they were allowed to gain the information that they needed to find out about their identity. Mr. Justice Sumner, in his judgment on that case, said:

> "We are still faced with an urgent need to review the legislation that impedes birth relatives' opportunities for search and reunion."

Mr. Dawson: I support every word that my hon. Friend has said. Is he aware of the work that is coming from the Registrar-General's office? In a praiseworthy attempt to

give people privacy, it would seem to be offering the draconian prospect that in future, people who have been adopted will have a great deal more difficulty in tracing their relatives and birth families over a period of 100 years.

6.45 pm

Kevin Brennan: Yes, I am aware of that, and I am concerned about it. I hope, with my hon. Friend's help, to draw the matter to the Government's attention over the coming weeks and months. What is proposed would be a retrograde step.

People have written to me from all over the United Kingdom, and all over the world. I have received letters from Australia, for example. The issue matters even if the media will not cover it. It has an impact on people's lives. We have the opportunity to end the culture of secrets and lies that has surrounded adoption over the years. This is about justice, compassion and the most fundamental thing of all—family. I hope that the Minister will be able to make some helpful remarks. I also hope that if the issue is not pressed to a vote this evening, there will be further discussion later in another place.

Sandra Gidley: I shall greatly curtail my remarks because I do not want to repeat too much of what has already been said. I support most of the amendments, especially those that seek to provide retrospective permission. The hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan) raised the issue in Committee. It seems wrong that someone who is adopted after the Bill is enacted will be able to obtain the information, while someone who was adopted before that will not. However, not everyone thinks in that way.

There is a feeling that if a provision has a retrospective effect, that could be unfair on those who put up a child for adoption before enactment, because they would not have known what the long-term effect would be. Even today, there is a parallel with sperm donation. There was a proposal—I think that it came from Lady Warnock—that in future perhaps it would be beneficial if children born as a result of artificial insemination by donor knew the identity of the sperm donor.

There are other implications, too. I have been struck by the strength of feeling of women—it usually is women, because they live longer—who want to know where they come from. It is important to them to have that information. We are talking about a last chance, and I support the amendments that would provide it.

I am less happy with new clause 4. It is unnecessary and very much a backstop. It is well intentioned, but I would find difficulty in supporting it.

Mr. Walter: I support the proposals of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). In an ideal world, the provisions would be unnecessary. However, we do not live in such a world. It is a fundamental right of those who have been adopted, when they reach adulthood, to know what their origins are.

The subject came home to me vividly, as I mentioned in Committee, when I served on the Committee that considered the plight of child migrants in Australia. I am pleased that the Australian Government are now providing some assistance. However, the press reports seemed to be wide of the mark in terms of the number of migrants who went to Australia, which was closer to 10,000 than 3,500.

The one thing that all those people wanted to know was where they came from; even in their 50s and 60s, they wanted to know that. Someone who has been adopted, even in the most appalling circumstances of abuse, as those children were, should have a fundamental right to know why they went through that life-shattering experience. I therefore support the proposals of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham.

Jacqui Smith: This subject has provoked considerable debate, both in Committee and on Report, but until now there has been considerable movement by the Government in response to concerns about the disclosure of information. In the remaining ten minutes, I shall concentrate on the main issues raised this evening: information for prospective adopters, the retrospective aspects of the access to information provisions in the legislation, and people's right to know that they are adopted.

We had a lengthy and probably futile debate in Committee about the distinction between "may" and "must". I reiterate my belief that the amendment is not necessary. I made it clear when we debated the issue that the Government intended to introduce regulations covering the provision of information for prospective adopters, and I accept the contention of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) that it is crucial to provide that information.

I am sure that hon. Members who served on the Committee will remember that we gave a commitment to introduce regulations to ensure that information is made available at three important points. First, there should be a summary about the child at the linking stage; secondly, there should be a full matching report on the child before the matching recommendation by the adoption panel and the decision by the agency; thirdly, after time to consider the full matching report, the prospective adopters, if they wish to proceed to preparations for the placement, should be provided with a written proposal setting out its terms.

I assure hon. Members that those regulations will oblige agencies to disclose information in prescribed circumstances, as I have spelled out. We shall therefore ensure that the current position is improved; I agree with hon. Members that it is unsatisfactory that potential adopters are not provided with the information that they need.

On retrospection, I accept that the intention of amendments Nos. 25 and 147 is to enable someone to apply for information about a protected adult, irrespective of whether they were adopted before or after the commencement of the relevant provisions. I shall explain the Government's difficulties with those proposals, but I shall also outline the positive steps that we can take to create better opportunities for people to access information, regardless of whether the adoption took place before or after the Bill became law.

If the legislation was retrospective there would be massive problems. In many cases, adoption agencies would be required to trace people who were adopted many years ago, and were thus difficult to trace. There would be a huge volume of potential applications; 875,000 people have been adopted since the Adoption of Children Act 1926.

[Jacqui Smith]

I thoroughly concur with the claim by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan) that he has pressed extremely hard on that issue. He was one of the first hon. Members to raise the issue and he has been diligent in pursuing it. However, I disagree with my hon. Friend when he suggests that the Government's concern for balancing priorities for adoption agencies is wrong.

In the context of past adoptions, I have every sympathy for the feelings of those who want to open up contact with a birth relative, but our principal policy aim, as many hon. Members have said, is to help the vulnerable and in some cases damaged children who need adoptive parents now. If the proposals were enacted, I would be concerned about the priorities of adoption agencies being shifted, and the possibility that that might draw resources away from our primary aim.

As I said, I am sympathetic, but I do not share the view of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham that changing the legislation would necessarily achieve the heartfelt aim that many people seek. There is the dilemma of raising the hopes and expectations of so many siblings and birth parents, and there would be considerable practical difficulties for agencies to face.

Before 1984, the obligations for adoption agencies to keep and record information were not as comprehensive as they are now. Many records exist only in part and others have been lost. Many adoptions were arranged privately, and in those cases there are often very few records, other than the report about the placement, which the adoption agency may or may not hold. I would not want to hold out to people whose wish I understand, a potentially false hope that legislation will be made retrospective.

I now come to the practical steps that we as a Government can take. Stakeholders have acknowledged that under existing regulations, adoption agencies already have wide discretion to disclose information in their records, where that is consistent with their functions. The problem is that existing practice is inconsistent, and guidance on disclosure of information has been criticised by some stakeholders as being ambiguous. In the light of those views, the Government will issue new guidance to encourage adoption agencies to take a more constructive approach to helping both birth parents and adopted people.

There has been criticism of the adoption contact register, which provides scope to bring together adopted people and their relatives. Since the launch of the register there has been only one further attempt to promote it. I undertake to engage in more proactive and frequent promotion of the register through adoption agencies and key stakeholders, and through the media at times of public interest in adoption. We are considering ways to achieve that, and will consult adoption stakeholders.

Hon. Members have referred to the guidance issued by the Department of Health on the role of intermediary services, which can provide sensitive support and counselling to those seeking to make contact with a relative. In August 2000 we issued guidance on the role of intermediary services, and we are actively considering how further to foster best practice among those services. Under section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968 we will supply funding from April 2003 for one leading provider to act as a national focal point for intermediary services and to offer a resource for adoption agencies.

I hope that in the light of those comments on the difficulties of making clause 59 apply to past adoptions, and my commitment to help improve the current arrangements, hon. Members will not press their amendments.

Finally, in Committee we discussed the right to know, and I expressed my sympathy then for the intention behind a similar amendment. I have no doubt that the adopted person should be informed of his adoption. The essential questions are who is best placed to inform the adopted person, and how and when that should happen.

Once again, there would be considerable practical difficulties in giving an adoption agency a legal duty to trace, track down, make contact with and make arrangements to talk to all adopted people—if it were a legal duty, it would have to cover all adopted people—at the age of 18. But as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said, there are practical things that we can do to help—

It being Seven o'clock, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER, *pursuant to Order [this day] put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair.*

Amendment negatived.

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *then proceeded to put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that hour.*

Clause 59

DISCLOSING PROTECTED INFORMATION ABOUT ADULTS

Amendment proposed: No. 25, in page 33, line 37, at end insert—

'(7) This section shall apply to all adopted persons, whether adopted before or after the coming into force of this Act.'.—*[Tim Loughton.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 127, Noes 252.

Division No. 245] **[7.1 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Curry, Rt Hon David
Djanogly, Jonathan
Doughty, Sue
Field, Mark *(Cities of London)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick

Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Leigh, Edward
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Norman, Archie
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, Dr John
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen O'Brien and
Mr. Laurence Robertson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Brennan, Kevin
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, Rt Hon John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Palmer, Dr Nick
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Skinner, Dennis

Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverhton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ian Pearson and
Mr. John Heppell.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment made: No. 254, in page 31, line 29, leave out subsection (2).—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 55

RESTRICTIONS ON DISCLOSURE OF PROTECTED ETC. INFORMATION

Amendments made: No. 49, in page 32, line 15, leave out "is necessary to" and insert—

'the agency has obtained from the Registrar General on an application under section 77(4) and any other information which would'.

No. 50, in page 32, line 28, at end insert—

'(6) Regulations may authorise or require an adoption agency to disclose protected information to a person who is not an adopted person'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 58

DISCLOSING INFORMATION TO ADOPTED ADULT

Amendment made: No. 51, in page 33, line 5, leave out from beginning to "unless" and insert—

'any information which would enable him to obtain a certified copy of the record of his birth'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 59

DISCLOSING PROTECTED INFORMATION ABOUT ADULTS

Amendment made: No. 52, in page 33, line 37, at end insert—

'or to a request for information which the agency is authorised or required to disclose in pursuance of regulations made by virtue of section 55(6)'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 60

DISCLOSING PROTECTED INFORMATION ABOUT CHILDREN

Amendment made: No. 53, in page 34, line 33, at end insert—

'or to a request for information which the agency is authorised or required to disclose in pursuance of regulations made by virtue of section 55(6)'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 61

COUNSELLING

Amendment made: No. 301, in page 35, line 11, leave out from first "society" to "registered" in line 12 and insert—

'an organisation within section 131(2A)(b) or an adoption society which is'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 62

OTHER PROVISION TO BE MADE BY REGULATIONS

Amendments made: No. 54, in page 35, line 38, leave out "an adopted person" and insert—

'any person (including an adopted person)'.

No. 55, in page 35, line 40, leave out "his case" and insert—

'the case of an adopted person specified in the request (or, as the case may be, in the applicant's case)'.

No. 44, in page 36, line 1, after "a" insert "prescribed".

No. 45, in page 36, line 6, after "a" insert "prescribed".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 63

INTERPRETATION

Amendments made: No. 302, in page 36, line 24, leave out from "an" to "are" in line 25 and insert "organisation within section 131(2A)(b)".

No. 66, in page 36, line 32, leave out "(c)" and insert—

'(2A) The power of the Scottish Ministers or of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make regulations under section 61(2) includes power to make—

(a) any supplementary, incidental or consequential provision,

(b) any transitory, transitional or saving provision,

which the person making the regulations considers necessary or expedient.

(3)'.

No. 67, in page 36, line 34, leave out "(d)" and insert "(4)".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 77

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE REGISTER AND BIRTH RECORDS

Amendments made: No. 56, in page 42, line 10, leave out from "search" to "in" and insert—

'(2A) Any such information, and any other information which would enable an adopted person to obtain a certified copy of the record of his birth, may only be disclosed by the Registrar General'.

No. 57, in page 42, line 13, leave out "such information" and insert—

'any information mentioned in subsection (2A)'.

No. 58, in page 42,, leave out lines 18 and 19 and insert—

'relating to the adopted person which is mentioned in subsection (2A)'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Schedule 2

DISCLOSURE OF BIRTH RECORDS BY REGISTRAR GENERAL

Amendments made: No. 303, in page 81, line 8, leave out from first "society" to end of line 9 and insert—

'an organisation within section 131(2A)(b) or an adoption society which is'.

No. 304, in page 81, line 40, leave out from first "society" to end of line 41 and insert—

'an organisation within section 131(2A)(b) or an adoption society which is'.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Clause 78

ADOPTION CONTACT REGISTER

Amendment made: No. 46, in page 43, line 23, leave out "specified" and insert "prescribed".—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

Further consideration adjourned.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Bill, as amended in the Standing Committee, to be further considered on Monday 20 May.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

PACKAGING AND PACKAGING WASTE

That this House takes note of European Document No. 15194/01, draft Directive amending Directive 94/62/EC on packaging and packaging waste; welcomes it as a positive step towards achieving high levels of environmental and single market protection, whilst limiting the impact upon UK business; and supports the Government's negotiating line.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Lords Messages relating to the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Bill have been received.—*[Dan Norris.]*

Vaccination Policy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Dan Norris.]*

7.13 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Vaccines have changed the lives of children and their parents by reducing the risk of contracting crippling childhood diseases. Experience with smallpox and polio provides clear evidence of that, and shows that vaccines can be a most effective means of controlling serious infective disease in human populations. That observation is especially important in the context of the developing world where treatment of diseases such as tuberculosis, AIDS and many parasitic diseases by conventional chemotherapeutic means, when they exist, is impractical or even impossible for reasons of infrastructure and logistics. In those cases, preventive public health measures, including immunisation, must be the way to reduce the disease burden.

The market for vaccines has, in the past, been regarded as insufficiently profitable by the larger pharmaceutical companies. In the UK, there has been a progressive contraction of conventional vaccine production since the 1980s. Vaccines were seen as low-value products. In the UK, the main producer of conventional vaccines was Evans, which is now part of Powderject. During the 1990s, there was a resurgence of interest in vaccine development and production, fuelled by the availability of recombinant DNA technology to produce clean antigens. This development has resulted in the creation of some effective vaccines for infectious diseases that are difficult to treat and have a high morbidity or mortality attached to them—hepatitis and meningitis, for example. These vaccines are regarded as high-value products. In the UK, GlaxoSmithKline is a major company player, although a number of smaller biotech-based companies are also active in this area.

Among the most promising new developments in vaccinology is the development of "naked DNA" vaccines—a stretch of DNA from pathogens containing the genes coding key antigenic components. The idea is that when this material is injected into the skin, it is taken up by host cells, which then make the antigen in situ. This forms a depot of antigen, which provides a continuous immunological stimulus.

A second development, pioneered by Powderject, is the formulation of the antigen-vaccine in powder form. This is introduced into the subject by means of a high-pressure air jet. This transdermal route is known to produce an immune response at least as good as the conventional, needle-based intradermal injection. It is painless, and, being in the form of a powder rather than the more conventional liquid, it is more stable in adverse conditions.

There is a particular problem in the case of diseases such as smallpox that have been eradicated, or diseases such as anthrax that do not normally present a serious risk to human populations, but which can be used for bioterrorism. As the need for vaccines for such diseases disappeared or diminished, the incentive for maintaining a vaccine manufacturing facility for them also diminished. There has therefore been a rundown in manufacturing capacity.

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

With the present bioterrorism threat, there is now concern that sufficient vaccine stocks will not be available to protect military or civilian populations. There is now only limited commercial production capacity for smallpox and anthrax vaccines. Smallpox has been eliminated, so the availability of the vaccine has become scarce. Limited stocks are held by the World Health Organisation and by some national Governments.

As these diseases have either gone or become uncommon, the development of novel vaccines is either difficult or impossible. There are no large populations of susceptible, at-risk people in which clinical trials to prove safety and efficacy can be carried out. It would be unacceptable to carry out challenge studies on such vaccines using normal subjects. The individuals would be put at risk, and there would be a serious risk of the pathogen escaping into the general population. Such vaccines can be tested only by examining immunised subjects for the presence of certain markers of immunity.

To meet the present threat, reliance must be placed on running up the old manufacturing methods as quickly as possible. There are few companies worldwide with the appropriate plant and expertise to hand. Powderject has been awarded the UK Government contract to produce the smallpox vaccine. However, it does not have the technology in-house, and is having to go to a Danish company—Bavarian Nordic—for the technology and supply of the vaccine. It will then have to develop the plant and methodology in-house to produce it. This will be the case for any other company or organisation that takes on such manufacture de novo.

Acambis would appear to have been involved in smallpox vaccine production in recent years under contract to the US Government. The US vaccine is based on a different strain of organism from that used in the UK. I do not know whether the differences between the strains are significant in terms of levels of efficacy, as I am not aware of any head-to-head comparison of the two vaccines having been undertaken when smallpox was a serious health risk. Both vaccines were obviously effective, however, in providing populations with some measure of protection. I look forward to hearing from the Minister which vaccine strain has been used in Britain, and whether it was the more effective. There were several forms of TB vaccine in use in the 1950s: one form gave good protection in the UK but not in the US, and vice versa.

The only UK capacity that I know of for the production of anthrax vaccine is at the Centre for Applied Microbiological Research at Porton Down, which has upgraded its production facilities recently. It still uses a process based on older technology, however. There might also be other research and development enterprises going on elsewhere. I would imagine that in the next few months there will be a great deal of activity, given 11 September, the anthrax outbreak and the other scares in the United States.

The problem of large-scale production of old vaccines against defunct or rare disease organisms has been highlighted by recent events. They have provided effective bio-weapons for use by terrorist regimes, and can be produced on a large scale for such purposes as a very low-tech enterprise. The Government should take responsibility, and ensure that the country has the capacity to respond rapidly to such threats. It should not be left to the whim of industries, which by and large do not act as charities and will want due reward.

Other organisms could be used by bioterrorists—for example, plague and the ebola virus, which could have a devastating effect on an unprotected population. It could, I think, be argued that the Government should establish its own vaccine production organisation, capable of ensuring effective and timely responses to biological threats.

Vaccination has always entailed the problem of convincing the public that no risk is attached. There is no such thing as a risk-free world or technology, and when scientists and politicians stand up and imply that there is no risk, they are likely to be disbelieved. All the arguments need to be put on the table.

Sir Paul Nurse, a recent Nobel laureate from this country, expressed his views on the politics of scientific evidence not long ago. He said that

"there is no doubt that what the Government is saying is true on MMR and that the evidence that it's accepted and safe is very good. Like all things, and in science in particular, you can't be certain of everything and there will be a small risk. In MMR the adverse risk seems to be very, very low to almost non-existent. I think the point is that they"—

politicians—

"need to communicate the evidence. This is where there is a dumbing down. I think they are really frightened to talk about science because politicians come from a different background. They are not happy with it and they are used to having to deal with certainties—and science doesn't deal with certainties."

Submitting a study to a scientific process rather than to partially informed opinion is crucial to the determination of whether a vaccine actually causes a given reaction. If undertaken carelessly or without scientific rigour the study results will be inconclusive at best, may result in the inappropriate withdrawal from use of a valuable vaccine, or at worst may result in a population's exposure to a dangerous vaccine.

In the United States there are controversies about the safety of vaccines. The US has addressed the problem by establishing an immunisation safety review committee—a multi-disciplinary committee with members whose expertise is in epidemiology, biostatistics, paediatrics, public health, immunology, neurology, infectious disease, risk perception, genetics, ethics, health communication and other subjects.

The committee helps to communicate to the public the state of knowledge regarding any particular immunisation safety concern. It produces reports, and has so far been able to convince the public of the uncertainties surrounding any new vaccine coming on to the market. It has recommended to the US Department of Health the creation of a panel to examine parents' perceptions of the risks and benefits to develop better communication tools to them and their doctors. I suggest to the Minister that the Government might follow that example, and address the fears of those caught in doubt or dilemma over the MMR vaccine. Such people may be worried by the unexplained rise in the number of diagnosed cases of autism, although no link has been proven scientifically.

Where will we draw the line on vaccination policies in future? How many shots will an individual need for nations to feel protected? If we expose our immune systems to too many toxins, especially in a very short

time span, there may be deleterious effects—as has been implied in the context of Gulf war syndrome. Given increasingly visible scientific developments, the vaccination scenario for the future may be very different from the current one. New delivery systems for vaccination shots may prove more effective by mimicking natural infection mechanisms. An example is the aerosol delivery of the measles vaccine.

The more we know about the nature of the human genome, the more we start to realise the existence of genetic differences between individuals. That may not just translate into a susceptibility to certain illness such as cardiovascular disorders; it could indicate resistance to certain infections. The future might well hold tailor-made provisions for vaccination, with a profile-adjusted individual vaccination plan that could prevent any possible detrimental effects linked to immune reactions.

Although individuals ask for 100 per cent. security in everything, they realise that it may not be achievable. Governments who play that card and win public confidence by covering up uncertainty and playing the "safe politics" game run great risks. The consequences of such reductionist approaches in political and social debate may yet come to haunt us. The public need to know the risks, and to feel empowered to act accordingly.

I have tried to raise some of the issues to which the subject of vaccination gives rise. Given that biotechnology is coming on-stream at a great rate, and that many diseases are appearing in certain countries for the first time, I believe that there will be an explosion in research and development into new vaccines. It is time for a review of, for example, the relationship between global warming and the new diseases. We need to examine the new vaccines, and our approach should consider how best to protect our population further.

7.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) on securing this debate, and on choosing a subject that is of immense importance to the health and lives of people across the country. My hon. Friend is right to say that we should not underestimate the impact on public health of immunisation programmes such as the NHS programme. Immense improvements have been made not through treatment but through vaccination—a fact that is of worldwide significance.

It is because of the immunisation programme that the incidence of childhood disease in this country has fallen to its lowest ever levels, greatly reducing morbidity and mortality from such diseases. In 1940, before vaccination was introduced, there were over 46,000 cases of diphtheria. Recent data show that, some 60 years later, the annual number of cases has reduced to single figures. In 1940, there were over 400,000 cases of measles, but recent data show that the rate is now less than 200 cases per year. In the same year, there were over 50,000 cases of pertussis—whooping cough—but recent data show that there are now less than 3,000 cases per year.

In 1989, when monitoring began, there were more than 24,000 cases of rubella. The most recent figures show a rate of less than 100 cases a year. Here, the most important issue is the prevention of congenital rubella syndrome. As a result of measles, mumps and rubella vaccination in young children, there were no such cases in England and Wales between 1997 and 1999. Childhood vaccination has repeatedly been demonstrated as cost-effective—indeed, even cost-saving—and the World Bank has identified it as one of the most cost-effective health strategies.

My hon. Friend is right to say that vaccination is a rapidly moving field. Recent developments in this country include the introduction of meningococcal C conjugate vaccine. Before its introduction, there was an increase in the number of notifications of, and laboratory-confirmed cases of, meningococcal disease, and a relatively greater increase in cases of disease caused by group C infection, particularly in older teenagers. In the light of that increase, the UK took a leading role in developing a new meningococcal C conjugate vaccine, and was the first country in the world to introduce it.

In 1994, the Department of Health funded an accelerated research programme to evaluate the safety and efficacy of the new vaccine. It involved collaboration with the Public Health Laboratory Service, the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control, the institute of child health, and the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research. My hon. Friend referred to that centre, and I shall discuss it later. That is an interesting example of work carried out in partnership with vaccine manufacturers such as those that he mentioned. They have the capacity to respond and to adapt, and were keen to work with the Department on developing a new programme.

The meningitis C campaign, which was introduced to offer the vaccine to everyone under the age of 18, has been extended to include older age groups. The programme has been completed, and has had a dramatic effect on all immunised age groups, resulting in the near disappearance of meningitis C disease in people under the age of 20. The incidence of serogroup C disease in targeted age groups fell by more than 80 per cent., and the number of deaths among the under-20s decreased from 78 in 1998–99 to 11 in 2000–01. The provisional data for the last year show that we have not had a laboratory-confirmed case of meningitis C in infants under one year of age since the beginning of December last year. From July 2001 to date, there have been only five cases of meningitis C in the 15 to 17-year-old age group, whereas we saw 73 cases in the same period three years ago. Those are recent examples of the huge impact of developments in vaccination programmes. We have also seen developments in flu vaccines.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North mentioned issues for the future and the progress that needs to be made. He will know that the chief medical officer has recently published a report entitled "Getting Ahead of the Curve: A Strategy for Combating Infectious Diseases", and a key aspect of future policy is continuing to secure the benefits of safe and effective vaccines in future. Other aspects include influenza and pneumococcal vaccine; coverage in childhood immunisation programmes; the examination and introduction of new vaccines; and research and investment, including international research to develop a new vaccine against HIV.

My hon. Friend asks what more can be done. He raised issues connected with the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research—CAMR—and what role the Government could play in ensuring strategic capacity for

[Yvette Cooper]

the manufacture of vaccines. It is rarely likely for it to be sensible or economic for the Government to manufacture the vaccines that we might need for a population of 50 million, with the problems of patents, property rights and licence fees. Vaccine production can be achieved most economically for markets bigger than the UK, so it is not a worthwhile use of resources for the Government to manufacture vaccines directly. However, we can work in partnership to great effect, as we have done with three vaccine manufacturers to develop the meningococcal C conjugate vaccine.

CAMR is a special health authority, funded by the Department of Health and located alongside the Ministry of Defence establishment at Porton Down. As part of its work CAMR undertakes small-scale vaccine manufacture and research. Current work includes the manufacture of anthrax vaccine under a five-year contract for the Ministry of Defence. My hon. Friend was right to refer to the importance of such work. There was no commercial producer of that vaccine because there was only a limited demand for it and it was not considered to be commercially profitable. However, in the UK there has been a long-standing demand for that vaccine for military personnel and therefore CAMR took on its development and production, albeit on a relatively small scale, in order to meet the Ministry of Defence need.

The vaccine was not available in the United States, but since 11 September and the anthrax releases there, substantial demand has been generated and the vaccine is now being produced commercially. Where there is a military need, which is usually a low-volume need, or a requirement for capacity to respond rapidly, there remains a need for the Government to fund research and development for vaccines. We may also need to respond, as we have in the past with anthrax, to demand for vaccines. Before 11 September, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health agreed to the establishment of a strategic response capability at CAMR, which is part of its long-term development.

My hon. Friend raised several issues related to bioterrorism and our response to it. He will know that the planned response to any terrorist attack is co-ordinated between several Government Departments and agencies and facilitated by the civil contingency secretariat in the Cabinet Office. The Department of Health has issued guidance to regional and health authority directors covering the planning of the health service response to any deliberate release of biological and chemical agents and has issued guidance to regional directors of public health on mass decontamination and related matters. Further guidance has been issued to health authorities on the procedures to be followed in the event of the covert or overt release of smallpox, anthrax, plague, botulism or unknown biological or chemical agents.

In October last year, the Public Health Laboratory Service also issued guidelines for action in the event of a deliberate release of smallpox. It is important that we have the right preparation and planning in place. That work is ongoing and has been part of the Department's activity for a long time.

As part of its contingency planning since 1988, the Department has reviewed its stocks and supplies of medical countermeasures. Additional stockpiles of appropriate antibiotics and other medical countermeasures have been put in place, as have additional stocks of smallpox vaccine for use in the event of a bioterrorist attack.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State has set out, in answers to parliamentary questions, many of the decisions taken in this connection, including the decision about the strain of vaccine. Advice about that decision was taken from across Government, especially from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. That is an important body, providing well-established independent expertise for the Department. It regularly reviews UK epidemiological evidence on disease and progress on vaccine development. It also has the important function of horizon scanning, so that priorities can be set against the assessments of disease burdens and the predicted pace of new vaccines.

My hon. Friend referred to matters to do with communication, and the importance of providing people with accurate information. I agree that people need more information, and that they want it to be clear and comprehensible. When complex scientific matters are involved, that is often not a simple task. It is an important challenge, and we must accept that people increasingly want information in which they would not have been interested, and would not have expected, 20 or 30 years ago. That information is now very much part of current expectations of the health service.

My hon. Friend mentioned MMR. Parents have understandably been worried about media stories over the past few months. The Department has conducted extensive research to find out parents' concerns, and to determine what sort of information they want. It is important that we answer the questions that people want to ask, and that we respond to their concerns in this area.

Dr. Gibson: Is the uptake of the triple jab rising or falling? If it is falling, what is the likelihood that the trend might be reversed?

Yvette Cooper: The latest figures from the PHLS show that there was a dip in the level of MMR uptake among 16-month-olds between December and March. Interestingly, however, uptake in that age group showed an increase in April. The figures are available on the PHLS website.

It is important that we continue to respond to people's concerns about MMR. That is why we have sent out new and substantial parent packs to GP surgeries and to NHS Direct. They provide more extensive information to respond to parents' queries and questions, and give more information about scientific research.

The packs include statements from various independent bodies, because, in matters such as this, we must not rely solely on advice from the Department's experts. We need to turn to independent bodies such as the World Health Organisation, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of General Practitioners and many other organisations in this country and around the world. They have all advised us that MMR is the safest way to immunise children against what are very serious diseases. It is important to tell people the full facts about MMR, including the views of all the independent experts, and the single jabs. They have a right to have all the information.

Vaccination policy is difficult, especially when the immunisation programme has been successful in largely eradicating a disease. Many younger people have no experience of the diseases that we are talking about, so the huge impact of the immunisation programme can be underestimated. That applies to many programmes across the board.

Dr. Gibson: Will the Minister say whether there has been any increase in measles outbreaks in this country since the controversy arose? She gave me the figures for the triple MMR uptake, but is there any evidence in relation to a measles epidemic?

Yvette Cooper: There has not been a measles epidemic in this country, although there have been isolated outbreaks in various areas. The experience in Ireland is that isolated outbreaks can occur, and we need to take them seriously. The PHLS said today that the majority of parents are still having their children immunised with the MMR vaccine, but we must continue to take the issue extremely seriously and ensure that parents get the information they need.

My hon. Friend spoke about looking to the future, whether in the areas of new technology, the human genome project or research. He is right that there are all kinds of exciting possibilities, with different technology and research coming to bear. There is extensive research into HIV and other diseases, but we do not know what the long-term possibilities will be. We must ensure that the system can respond rapidly to developments in technology and in progress.

The experience of the meningitis C vaccine has been a powerful testimony to the capacity of the NHS in particular to respond rapidly to a new vaccine that is proven to be effective and have a big impact. This country was one of the first to introduce a meningitis C programme right across the childhood population. That is an immense tribute to those working in the NHS, in both primary care and schools. It is a testimony to the partnerships that the NHS has with the various companies involved and its capacity to deliver immunisation programmes. This is not simply a research or a technology issue: it is also a health service issue because, ultimately, immunisation programmes have to be delivered.

My hon. Friend has raised a series of important points. I congratulate him again on securing this debate. This is an area in which I hope we will see further positive developments. We have had much to be thankful for, not simply over the past few years but over the past 40, 50 or 60 years.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seventeen minutes to Eight o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 May 2002

[SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Elderly Care

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

9.30 am

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): On Sunday, I cycled 30 miles around my constituency in order to raise money for the local hospice, Katherine house. You will therefore understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, why I prefer to stand.

I applied for this Adjournment debate before I took part in that sponsored bike ride, but because hospices such as Katherine house provide care for terminally ill adults, their care for the elderly is relevant to the debate. Katherine house and hospices like it raise a phenomenal amount of money by voluntary means, but it is important that we, the decision makers in charge of spending public money, should properly value the work done by hospices to ensure appropriate support from the public sector as well as from voluntary organisations.

I intend to focus on three issues relevant to the care of the elderly—the well-known problem of delayed discharges from hospital, what help is available for elderly people in their own homes and residential care for the elderly.

It is common ground among politicians that hospital is no place to be once medical treatment has been completed. Social isolation and the absence of purposeful activity are especially harmful for older patients. I regularly receive complaints from elderly constituents—and from their relatives—about the wait for their needs to be assessed before they can be discharged, or about having to wait for the services that have been identified by that assessment of need to be provided or for the funding to pay for that provision.

It is not only patients and their relatives who complain to me—so do hospital managers, who would like to use the beds to help other people with urgent medical needs, and who would very much like those who should not be in hospital to be discharged as soon as possible. It is important to bear in mind that hospital managers are also under pressure to meet targets and deal with the demand for hospital services.

I say well done to the Government for the extra £300 million provided late last year for helping with this problem. Staffordshire's share was £1.7 million last November and another £3.6 million this April. The director of social services in Staffordshire was upbeat about that when I spoke to him, and in the short term at least the money will go a long way to ending the unnecessary delay in people's discharge from hospital in Staffordshire.

In the longer term, we must look for more lasting solutions. One encouraging feature of the final Wanless report, which was published at the time of the Budget, was that subsequent to the interim report Derek Wanless had received many representations about the important link between adequate social services and a satisfactory and efficient health service. In his final report, he identified the need for more support for social services. The Chancellor rose to that challenge magnificently in the Budget by announcing a 6 per cent. increase in social services spending for each of the next three years.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Before the hon. Gentleman gets carried away in his praise of the Government, let me put one point. I presume that he is also aware that directors of social services are concerned about the impact that the increase in national insurance contributions will have on that sector.

Mr. Kidney: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I was about to show that I am not carried away by identifying more of the challenges that face directors of social services. I do not minimise the challenge that he mentioned, but I would add several others, which I shall deal with now if he will permit me.

I still hear of many instances of delay in which money is a factor, but working practices cause problems as well. For example, in multi-agency assessments, one professional after another seems to queue to ask the same questions of the same people. The social services department tells relatives to find a residential home placement for a patient in a hospital bed, and then takes months to say what payments it will make towards it. Families are either forced to lose the places that they have found, or put under pressure to pay out of their own pockets to keep the places open until social services funding kicks in.

To answer such problems, could we not have an effective single assessment of a person's needs? Could we not have some up-front assessment of financial eligibility and availability of funding for people while they are in the hospital bed at the outset? I am reminded of the old problem of people looking to rent a home, but being unable to find out whether they would receive housing benefit for the place that they wanted until they were in and running up arrears. Eventually, the Government said that people could have an advance assessment of their housing benefit entitlement, so that they could look with confidence for a place to rent. The issue of people in hospital beds looking for a residential care placement seems similar.

On departure from the hospital bed, short-term intensive care is sometimes helpful for older patients while they get used to being back in their homes and living independently again. However, intensive care packages are a rarity in my part of the country. I suspect that that is true throughout the country, although good work is being done in some places. The professionals involved need to sharpen up their act on that.

The strain is inevitably taken by the army of carers, the relatives and other volunteers who save the state a staggering £57 billion every year, according to Carers UK when it recently launched its new service "Carers Online". There have been some good developments to support carers since 1997, such as the publication of the first national strategy for carers. There has been funding for support, including respite care. Carers grant this

[Mr. Kidney]

year is £85 million and will go up to £100 million next year. There have been improvements in social security provision, with an extra £500 million to be put into social security benefit over three years. Perhaps the most glittering prize recently announced was the new state second pension, which gives carers pension credits for the first time. I am pleased to see all those good developments, as carers are, and will remain for the foreseeable future, an integral part of help for elderly people. I hope that we continue to support them with such commitment.

Alongside respite care, intermediate care is extremely valuable to people who try their best to survive in their own homes but need help from time to time. In my constituency, our new primary care trust has managed to put together the basics of a good intermediate care strategy. However, it is run on a shoestring. Obviously, there must be adequate funding if intermediate care is to be a reality for the large numbers of people likely to demand it in future.

People want to stay in their own homes, but older people in particular need help to keep their homes habitable. Sometimes homes need major adaptations such as ramps to the front door, or stairlifts and walk-in showers, and sometimes only minor works of maintenance and repair. I generally find that social services departments are under-resourced for adaptations, which leads to long waits for the simplest tasks. However, care and repair services, where they exist, are extremely flexible and responsive to people's needs. Could we not bring together the two types of service to provide a comprehensive social home care service, so that people can have a speedy response when they need minor help with their homes?

The other great aid to people who live in their own homes with help is domiciliary care. I am not sure how unusual Staffordshire is in relying entirely on private sector provision of domiciliary care. I recently met representatives of providers in my constituency, who warned of the imminent collapse of the service that they provide. They said that fees were too low throughout the system and that there were problems with recruiting and training staff, enabling them to gain qualifications, and paying them good wages.

That very neatly brings me to residential care. The last time that I met representatives of the proprietors of privately owned residential homes in my constituency, they raised exactly the same issues: low fees, training, qualifications and low pay for staff. Raising the pay of those who work in the sector is obviously closely related to the ability of social services departments to raise rates for places in homes and for domiciliary care. Providing training, qualifications and status for care workers is, however, not simply a matter of money. Could there not be closer partnership working between social services departments and private owners to tackle such human resources challenges?

I recently came across a Government announcement about employer training pilots, which combine employee leave for learning with employer compensation for costs and free training. The pilots will cover six geographical areas at a cost of £40 million. Is there any chance of the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Skills and the Learning and Skills Council discussing an additional sector-based pilot to cover domiciliary and residential care and to raise training and qualifications issues and the status of those who work in the sector? To quote a famous line, which I cannot attribute, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

Unfortunately, there is a lack of trust between the social services department and private owners in my area, which is, I think, replicated in many parts of the country. I publicly urge both sectors to work more closely together as partners and to keep at the forefront of their minds the fact that they exist to provide a service to vulnerable and valuable members of our society.

I say bluntly that fees must rise; otherwise many residential care home owners will find that it is not worth the candle to run the business.

The other issue that is often raised is national standards for residential homes, and I expect that some hon. Members will mention it. Such standards would be a good thing, but must be enforced sensitively and constructively.

It is a little unrealistic to separate those three issues—hospital discharges, people with help at home, and residential care—in the way that I have done, because, in reality, the challenges involved in tackling them are interrelated. Solutions, of course, require money, but other things, too. For their part, the Government must demonstrate some ownership of the issue and show that they are interested in solving the problems. They have, for example, done good work in developing the national service framework for older people, but on the ground, I still have difficulty identifying older people's champions in local organisations. Furthermore, people tell me that the Government are not committed to the framework, and it would be sad if that became the general view. I therefore urge the Government to take a grip and show that they are concerned about the issue and want to solve the problems.

Last year's King's Fund report on care and support, which was called "Future Imperfect?", identified several national issues that it is important to tackle. The first was the pressure on agencies to contain costs, which cause difficulties when it comes to deciding how to provide services. The report also said that two thirds of the work force lacked a relevant qualification and that there was a problem with low pay and the resulting high staff turnover. It made several recommendations, of which some are relevant to this debate. One was that that there must be funding growth, which was, in part, recognised in the recent Budget. Service users need to be involved and empowered, the national vocational qualifications in care need to be strengthened, skills and standards for all care staff must be improved and the voluntary sector and individual volunteers should be strategically involved.

Those messages were, interestingly, reflected at a conference that I held in my constituency on 19 April to consider care of the elderly in Stafford. The conference attracted 130 people, representing health and social services, private sector providers, housing providers, the voluntary sector and older people and their carers. I had to turn away 40 people because we were full up. A pack was produced for everyone who attended. The keynote speaker, Robin Wendt, a member of the Sutherland commission, made a thought-provoking presentation,

which caused me to wonder whether we have yet drawn the line between nursing and personal care in the right place. In his view, the commission was right and the Government wrong.

The people representing the many interests in my constituency made a number of points that are relevant to the national debate, the first of which was that good communication is key—that includes listening to older people and their carers. Suggestions were made about challenging existing ways of working, which will be music to the ears of the Minister, who is demanding modernisation for funding. They included more joint working between the agencies; more preventive work, which is music to my ears in terms of keeping people healthy for more years of their lives; higher pensions, which was not an unexpected contribution from many of the older participants; good quality provision, particularly respite care; and a directory of agencies offering help, advice and advocacy. They also provided some action points for health and social services departments including an effective single assessment procedure, more collaboration in order to end delayed discharges, better provision to help individuals to remain in their own homes and better attention to recruitment, retention and recognition of staff.

Other recommendations covered carers, funding and housing providers; I shall not list them all. However, I shall draw attention to the need for rapid response when people need help, with the allied requirement for out-of-hours respite care, and the growing issue of pensioners who are themselves carers and who find that when they become eligible for state retirement pension, they lose invalid care allowance—shortly to become carers allowance—because of the rule about overlapping benefits. The Government are about to make new regulations allowing over-65-year-olds to claim for carers allowance. However, the rule about overlapping benefits will still apply. That is increasingly an issue, and greatly unfair. People provide help that would otherwise cost the state much money, yet they cannot keep the allowance that is provided specifically for caring for another person. I hope that that will be given urgent consideration.

At the end of the conference, I made three commitments: first, that I would produce a conference report and send it to everyone, including the 40 people who were not there; secondly, that I would report the findings to Parliament; and thirdly, that I would meet the heads of the various agencies in my constituency to devise an action plan for Stafford. I am pleased to say that by the end of this debate only the third will remain to be completed. I do not want to boast, but it was a worthwhile exercise in identifying local pressures and getting good ideas from local people about how to solve immediate problems. I commend it to other MPs as an approach for their constituencies, so that we can tackle the problems nationally by contributing to the debate, as well as locally by doing something personally.

It is important to recognise, and give thanks to, all the dedicated workers in that sector. As I have said, the pay is not always great, but the dedication of the workers and the importance of their work is clear. A factsheet sent to me by the Royal College of Nursing called "The health of older people" sets out the demographic change that we can expect in the next 30 years and underlines the challenges posed. Some common themes run through everything that I have read, including the King's Fund report, the Royal College of Nursing factsheet, and the work that I did for my own conference, such as getting the funding right, valuing staff and voluntary carers, and putting older people at the centre of the services provided for them. The Budget gave a terrific boost to that work, but plenty more remains to be done. As a society, we do not lack the resources, and the vision of affordable quality services for all older people is exciting and achievable. I look forward to being able to stand in the midst of the community in my constituency and say, "We are all good neighbours now."

9.51 am

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on securing this interesting and important debate. I shall begin by considering what older people want—which is the same as everyone else: normal care; normal services or, in the jargon of my previous profession, social work, normalised services; to be partners with those who provide the services; and to be seen as contributors, rather than as a burden. They want to give as well as to receive, and they want to be part of society, not a forgotten addition.

I want to address some particular issues, not only those that are peculiar to Wales. Everyone needs good quality information and advice to inform their choices. That advice and information is not always available, either from advice agencies or from social services departments in my constituency or elsewhere. Language is a particular issue in my constituency because, often, in the south and east of Wales, information is not available, face-to-face, in Welsh. In my constituency, and in the north and west of Wales, the majority of people speak Welsh, and services for older people and for others are available in Welsh as a matter of course. However, half the people who speak Welsh live in the south and east, where they form a minority of 5 or 6 per cent., but where those normalised services in the medium of Welsh are not available and older people who need those services, and who are perhaps unable to speak English because of an illness or a stroke, are unable to access them. The 1991 census showed that 23 per cent. of the population of Wales who spoke Welsh were over retirement age; that is 110,000 of 500,000 people.

Older people want services to be provided locally, and the threat to post offices and local council services certainly has a disproportionate effect on older people. They also want improvements in the built environment, in terms of access to buildings and the provision of ramps and lifts, so that they can use buildings in the same way as everyone else. They want adequate community policing and freedom from the fear of crime. That is especially pertinent in rural areas, where crime rates might be lower, but the perception of the danger of crime is as high as elsewhere. Some of those who live in rural areas and visit my surgery are extremely worried about crime.

Those issues affect older people throughout Wales and the United Kingdom. One issue of particular interest to me, given my previous career in teaching, is non-discriminatory access to lifelong learning and recreational activity. At a recent Carers National

[Hywel Williams]

Association meeting, I met a lady in her late 70s who is about to undertake a degree course. She was extremely interested in my work and very capable and lively in her mind but, because she was over 75, she could not get insurance for her car to drive the 10 miles to the local college. That had nothing to do with her condition or abilities—it was an example of structural discrimination against her as an older person.

In Wales, as elsewhere, problems have arisen with providing an integrated public transport system, especially in rural areas. Efforts have been made to counter that, and everyone in Wales will welcome the National Assembly's programme of free transport for older people, which has liberated older people and allowed them to travel when before they could not, or when there were different provisions for different local authorities. That free transport does not extend to the train service, however. People can travel by bus but, in some areas, the train service is the service of choice. If we want an integrated transport system for older people, we should integrate the trains as well as the buses.

I should like to draw the House's attention to some innovative projects. Cyngor Henoed Gwynedd, the Gwynedd Council for the Elderly, is providing a day centre, not on the fringes of a village, in a local authority building or a church hall, but next to the bus station, so that older people can pop in for a cup of tea before they get on the bus. Older people who come along with their carers can find a safe, warm and interesting environment and have a bit of a rest while their carers go off and do some shopping. That sort of innovative project is what we need. There are problems in the provision of such services, which I have discussed with the Council for the Elderly. Inevitably, one of those problems is funding.

Two years ago, I had the privilege of advising the Welsh Affairs Committee in its investigation into social exclusion. Some of the conclusions of the Committee's report are pertinent, including those relating to the funding of community groups. I accept that the same problems affect all sorts of community groups, but they have a particular effect on services for older people. The Committee discovered that short-termism was chronic and that planning by community groups providing services was blighted by the fact that they could not plan more than a year or two ahead. The report also stated that staff felt insecure and that the providers of services were forced to waste time in continual justification of the value of services when applying for extra money. Funding must be secure and long-term and take account of on-costs. In my opinion, five-year rolling funding should be the norm.

The University of Wales Swansea issued a report on domiciliary charging for care services, called "Charging for Care in Wales", which was commissioned by the National Assembly. Unsurprisingly, the report found that there were many difficulties with the charging system. First, and most obviously, there is the postcode lottery, which means that each of the 22 local authorities in Wales has its own system and charges at a different level. People who lived on the border of two local authorities were particularly affected. They might be charged more or provided with a worse service merely because of where they lived, with no regard to their needs. That is the theme of the report.

The local authorities and user groups in Wales want an all-Wales policy, which is relevant for not only the National Assembly for Wales but the Department of Health. The report noted that guidance was not strong enough and that the bewildering array of charging policies was causing problems. Those charging policies reflect not need but local circumstance, especially in respect of local authority finances.

The report said that there was pressure on local authorities to charge. Of course, they have been allowed to charge since the Health and Social Services and Social Security Adjudications Act 1983 but, significantly, most of them did not charge until they were subject to pressure. I understand that local authorities are pressured to raise 9 per cent. of their funding through charging, irrespective of the wealth or poverty of the area. That is a blunt instrument, considering the variety of poverty and wealth not only in Wales, but throughout the United Kingdom.

The University of Wales Swansea found a powerful case for disregarding disability benefits. It suggested that that would simplify the system of charging and make it fair for all and cheaper to run. Significantly, it found that local authorities with simpler systems also monitored debts more effectively, stating that those

"with more basic charging arrangements tended to monitor debt on a case by case basis".

Those authorities tended to encounter fewer users who fell into debt, perhaps because other instruments were not as detailed as individual assessments. Those local authorities took much more notice of the problems caused by the system. There is a lack of clarity about carers' income, certainly in Wales, where most local authorities are reviewing their positions on the matter.

Charging should be a way to develop the service, but the report found that it was not. It stated that the use of charging income to develop new or existing services

"was the exception rather than the rule".

Development has been used as a justification for charging, but it is not a good one, so I would be interested in the Minister's response to that.

Many saw charging as effectively a cut in their benefits. During last year's election campaign, I visited many homes for the elderly in my constituency, which was sometimes a sad and sometimes an inspiring experience. I remember asking one gentleman—in Welsh, of course—"What do you want?" Simple questions often give revealing answers. He said, "What you've got," referring to my freedom to walk in and out, the freedom that my wallet and family support give to me, my ability to travel and other such things. That was eloquent testimony of what we need to provide for older people, and what we do not provide at present.

10.2 am

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I declare an interest as a member of the trade union Unison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) for the way in which he introduced the subject of our debate, which was challenging as well as sensible and constructive. So often, Members of Parliament are not given credit in the House for their work. People in Stafford should be proud of my hon. Friend's huge amount of detailed work on the delivery

of health care. He may not want to boast about that, but he can be proud of what he has done. It is so important that MPs make a difference on the ground in that way.

We all hope to be elderly one day, and I want to set the debate in the context of inter-generational issues. I hope that when my hon. Friend the Minister replies, she will place her remarks within the context of public health as a whole. Elderly care is not only about care given to people when they become elderly, or hospital care that we may or—we hope—may not need. It is not only about domiciliary care or the social services care that we may need when we get old, but about how we increase life expectancy. We should not do that simply for the sake of it, but so that we can all look forward to a long, happy and healthy life. Emphasis should be on health promotion so that our NHS and other public services, particularly those provided by local government, do what they can to help us to look forward to as healthy a life as possible.

Will the Minister consider the public health context? As vice-president of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, I should like to think that we develop policy by linking public health issues with the whole health agenda. The question is not simply about the money spent on hospitals, but about wider issues. None the less, the Government can do a great deal more now that the Chancellor has given a commitment to extra funding for health.

I shall put the debate in a spending context. It is wonderful that we now have extra money for the NHS, but we must address how we spend it to achieve the most efficient delivery services. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford has already said that we desperately need a reform of the standard spending assessment so that places such as my constituency, which covers Stoke-on-Trent and other parts of Staffordshire, have a fair funding formula. I am pleased that the Government have promised reform in 2003—it cannot come a moment too soon. Between now and then, we must ensure that there is full consultation with local authority leaders and local government associations so that social services, which are integral to full health care for the elderly, are properly funded. In certain parts of the country—usually the parts with deprived populations—the shortfall from the target amount that should be spent to deal with problems is so great that we cannot catch up.

When I first set out in politics, some 20 or so years ago, there was something known as RAWP—the resource allocation working party. In health, that formula helped to raise the areas furthest from the target level and put them on a level playing field; only then would extra money be given. In the review of the SSAs, we must put areas such as Stoke-on-Trent, which has such great deprivation, on a level playing field to allow our social services to invest money that will complement services provided by the NHS, as happens elsewhere.

Another service that is important for keeping elderly people in their homes, when that is where they wish to be, is provided by local social services, and is called Lifeline. In my constituency—I assume that the same applies elsewhere—only people on housing benefit can access that service. If we want people to stay in their own homes rather than in care beds or intermediate care, we must fund the services that all elderly people need to be able to stay at home.

In her reply, I should like the Minister to consider the fact that elderly people who stay in their own homes desperately need to feel safe and secure. I am aware of that not just because I have been out over the past few weekends for the local election campaign, but because I have regular phone calls and correspondence from constituents throughout my Stoke-on-Trent, North constituency. They say, "Joan, we don't always feel safe." They want local crime partnerships with police. Above all, those who live in council accommodation, which can consist of wonderful bungalows, do not always have the fencing that they need to make them feel secure.

If we had a standing spending assessment that treated our area fairly so that we could invest in council houses, and if we had a level playing field between council houses and other forms of social ownership resulting from transfers, we would be able to provide both the fencing to make elderly people feel secure in their homes and better elderly care.

During the 15 years that I have been in Parliament, I have worked with local people to ensure that we have sufficient continuing care beds for our needs. That campaign came about as a result of the standards, which were not fit for the 20th century let alone the 21st century, at Westcliffe hospital—a former workhouse known locally as the old poorhouse, which is now a large hospital with many continuing care beds. I have been involved with a campaign not to close Westcliffe hospital but to agree a delivery plan to provide sufficient continuing care beds in the context of health care, domiciliary care and intermediate care.

The campaign has had huge success. The Under-Secretary responsible for public health, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), set up the Edwards report, which brought together health care professionals, and considered how we can move from putting people into long-stay beds to using all our community resources to provide the ongoing care needed across north Staffordshire. We had various meetings with my hon. Friend, and were given an undertaking that the Edwards report would be implemented. I am happy to report that under the fit for the future programme, considerable progress has been made towards building both a new hospital at the North Staffordshire royal infirmary and a medical school, for which I have waited 40 years, since I was a small child.

Under the fit for the future scheme, there is a proposal called the north Stoke development, which is going to provide us with the continuing care beds that we need. Will my hon. Friend the Minister take time out after the debate to get back to me, and to other north Staffordshire Members of Parliament who are similarly concerned, to give us an update on the progress that has been made? We need to know whether the number of beds that we were promised will be put in place. Are we going to get the development money for those beds? We were given undertakings following a lengthy formal consultation procedure that involved the community health council.

The Edwards report anticipated that a number of beds would be shared between the NHS and independent sectors. The proportion of the beds that would provide continuing care in the independent sector was never properly specified, but it was suggested that it would be about 20 per cent. As I understand it, however,

[Ms Joan Walley]

as many as 48 per cent. of beds will be provided in the independent sector, although they will be paid for by the NHS.

I want to make sure that the Government are giving their full attention to the community health council in north Staffordshire, which wrote to my hon. Friend on 18 April, as it is particularly concerned that no further public consultation has been undertaken

"on what we consider to be significant changes to these agreed proposals. We feel it important to apprise you of this and if we do not receive a satisfactory response from the Health Authority I shall write to you again."

There is genuine concern that the Edwards proposals, to which we all signed up in good faith and which set out a way forward for continuing care beds, have somehow been superseded by a further consultation, undertaken by the health authority, which looks at the number of intermediate care beds needed. We all recognise the need for intermediate care beds, but there is a suspicion that unless we have full openness and transparency, the wonderful commitment given on intermediate care beds will be at the direct expense of the continuing health care beds to which we all agreed under the Edwards report.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford has hosted debates and conferences in Staffordshire. We need the Government to get back to local MPs in north Staffordshire and ensure that we can have full, open and transparent debates on every bit of progress being made on every aspect of the Edwards report. If they can do that, there will be much joy and optimism among all those who care so deeply about providing long-term care for elderly people.

I shall briefly raise one final issue. Encouraging people to get the very best care and continuing health care beds, and also providing intermediate care beds and care in people's homes, raises a point about adaptations, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford made graphically. I have been campaigning about wheelchairs for a significant time. The wheelchair service in my constituency is based at Haywood hospital, and people sometimes have to wait for 13 months to get a wheelchair. How can we discharge people from hospital into their own homes if they cannot be mobile?

Two years ago, during the spending round, I went to the then chief executive of the hospital trust responsible for wheelchairs, who is now the chief adviser on the modernisation of the Government's health agenda. I set out for him the importance of increased investment in, and reorganisation and modernisation of, the wheelchair service in north Staffordshire. He as much as gave me an undertaking that that would be dealt with in the service and financial framework round. I heard nothing further and, in good faith, assumed that that spending had increased. As I said, that chief executive now advises the Government on their modernisation policy.

Some months later I realised, with a great shock, that the SAFF round had not agreed the money for increased investment in wheelchairs. It should come as no surprise that I felt it important to campaign to ensure that there was a sufficiently well researched, competent and businesslike plan for wheelchair services in this year's SAFF. Again, I made a point of contacting the chairman of the then North Staffordshire health authority and the then chief executive of the hospital trust. I was assured that everything possible would be done about wheelchairs, but, to my deep disappointment, the SAFF round did not agree an increase for the wheelchair service.

Perhaps as a result of my perseverance, and that of others, the silver lining to the tale is that the hospital trust, recognising our points about the wheelchair service, provided extra money to start investment in its long-term business plan for the service. Some one third of the money needed over a three-year period has now been committed, and I am very grateful to the North Staffordshire hospital trust for making that money available.

That story shows that we all have a responsibility to look into joined-up thinking right across NHS services and the different forms of care that need to be provided. The whole system can be completely undermined if one part of it is not right. It is important to get all the pieces of the jigsaw in place so that people in north Staffordshire have the services that they need. I have no doubt that we have an ambitious plan for elderly care in north Staffordshire, but delivery must be open and transparent. I ask the Minister to consider carefully, together with north Staffordshire Members, how we can ensure that our hopes and vision are backed up by delivery of services, so that nobody is without the care that they need.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. Perhaps I should remind hon. Members, after one day's holiday, that the three Front-Bench spokespeople routinely commence their winding-up speeches 30 minutes before the termination of the debate.

10.20 am

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I rise to speak because this issue is of huge concern to my constituents. They raise it with me in advice session after advice session in my tours of residential nursing homes in the royal borough, so I felt it right to attend today's debate.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) not only on his measured and well considered remarks but on the work that he has done in his constituency. I have always regarded him as one of the most impressive Labour Members, and his performance today has only confirmed that judgment. I hope that he will share some of the papers from his conference with me, so that I can see whether I can organise a similar conference in my constituency. I am currently undertaking a survey of care home owners in the royal borough, using a pack produced for me by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), which is producing some interesting results. To follow that up with a conference may be the next step forward and, as with the hon. Member for Stafford, it may be the best service that I can provide for my constituents.

I should declare an interest: I have an elderly grandmother who is recovering in Fordingbridge convalescent hospital because she recently broke her hip

for the second year running. She was about to come out of care to go back to her warden-controlled flat when she fell over in hospital and broke her left wrist. Family members, including me, are increasingly concerned about the care provision that we make for her in the future. Therefore, the experience that I bring to the debate comes not only from my constituents but from the questions that my family and I are having to ask about my grandmother.

Some basic issues arise when one begins to look at the individual families and their concerns. The first question is: where is my relative to go? Is there a place available for him or her? Because so many care homes have closed down in my constituency, the number of places available is limited. People must wait, either in hospital, like my grandmother, blocking much needed NHS beds, or at home, where the quality of care is not good enough. Neither case is satisfactory, so one of the most important questions concerns the number of places.

It is easy to see why there are so many closures in my constituency. First, the labour market is very tight. The number of qualified people available to nurse and care for the elderly in homes is increasingly limited. It is noticeable when one goes round the care homes that many of the nursing care assistants are from countries such as the Philippines, having been brought over by different agencies to fill the gap. However, that is not an easy or cheap solution, and the pressure of costs on care home owners is increasing because of the tight labour market. I welcome the tight labour market because it helps to drive down unemployment, but it has that knock-on effect, which must be addressed by other areas of Government policy.

The lack of places in my area is also driven by two other factors. First, because of rising property values in areas such as Kingston, many care home owners coming towards the end of their working lives are being offered sizeable sums by property developers. One cannot blame them for wanting a decent pension, but a number of homes are closing for that reason.

Secondly, that desire to cash in on the value of the property is being exacerbated by new regulations. We know that there has been all-party support for those regulations, and I am not undermining the thrust of them, but in an area such as Surbiton where many of the houses were built in the Victorian era, although adaptations have been made, it would be extremely costly for care home owners to make the changes necessary to meet some of the more stringent standards in 2006–07.

There is insufficient help available to make that worth owners' while, so many of them are having to say, "We can't make that room a little bit larger—it's impossible. We can't afford to knock those two rooms into one to meet the standards, either, so we'll have to sell up." The problem is huge. Kingston has some of the most severe pressures in the country on its care sector because of those problems. The borough's senior citizens are suffering as a result, and we have to tackle that quite urgently.

There are other issues that we ask about immediately after finding places for our loved ones, such as the quality of the care. As I go round the residential nursing homes in my constituency I find a high quality of care, and I have seen some very dedicated people, but the owners tell me that they have problems in finding qualified staff. The hon. Member for Stafford touched on that during his speech.

Another issue germane to myself and my constituents is that people like their relatives to be near. Often, grandmothers or grandfathers live some way away in a different authority area. They may live in a home or a warden-controlled flat, or benefit from domiciliary care. Then may come the moment when they need to go into residential care. The complexities and difficulties of moving someone from one authority to another are large. If people want their relatives to be near to them when they move to a care home, that can be extremely difficult, given the different financial regimes. Will the Minister comment on that problem?

The Government have slowly been trying to address the problems, and after a lot of pressure and campaigning by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam they have begun to change policies. In the Budget they announced some increases of more than 6 per cent. in real terms for social services over the next three years. The question is whether that is sufficient, particularly if one subtracts from that settlement the extra cost of employers' national insurance contributions. The real-terms increase is significantly less when that extra taxation is taken into account. I am not convinced that the settlement is up to the job. I know that the Minister will not like that, but the extent of the challenge in the sector, and its high relevance to the challenge in the NHS, is such that that sector ought to be getting a better settlement than the NHS.

That sector has been the Cinderella sector, and has been underfunded for many years. The catching up that it needs to do is even greater than that required in the NHS. I found the Budget settlement in that area disappointing. The arguments that the Government rightly used to back the current funding mechanism for the NHS apply in this sector too—in spades. The Chancellor quite rightly argued that a taxpayer-funded health service is needed because in society we should pool risk. We come together as a community and decide that that is the most effective and efficient way of funding that type of service. That argument applies just as much to the care sector—yet people are charged, the quality of service is not sufficient, and the sector has been severely underfunded for a long period. I urge the Minister to press the case for extra funding in future negotiations with her colleagues.

Because the time is approaching the witching hour for Back Benchers I will draw my remarks to a close, Mr. Deputy Speaker—save to say that I can tell the Minister and her colleagues that areas such as mine, which many Government Members believe are prosperous and do not require funding, experience pressures that are as severe as those anywhere in the country, and our budgets and council settlements have not been up to the task of meeting that huge challenge.

10.30 am

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on securing the debate and also on the conference that he organised, the information that has come out of it and the work that he is doing. I want to address some of the important issues that he raised.

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

Delayed discharge has been the focus of Government anxiety, but all too often the initiatives treat the symptoms but do not tackle the underlying causes. The causes of delayed discharge are a lack of prevention upstream and a lack of capacity downstream in home or residential care. Other speakers have touched on the latter, and I want to focus on prevention, about which we should be doing so much more. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) rightly identified the need for it to be seen as part of a wider public health agenda, because a little help early on could make an immense difference to an individual's quality of life and could arrest and prevent a downward decline into dependency and a greater need for more intensive support later on in life.

There is a story that is often used to illustrate how powerful a little bit of help can be, and it is about mucky nets. Many people, when they get to a certain age, can no longer climb up a stepladder or on to a chair to take down mucky nets. For many, keeping up appearances is important to mental well-being, which in turn feeds through into their health. If the ability to keep up appearances is lost, the slide down the path of dependency may begin. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North said, feeling safe is also very important. There really is a crying need for services that provide a little bit of help, whether essential gardening services, essential property maintenance, basic do-it-yourself or the auditing of safety, security or energy efficiency.

However, the figures show that the number of people receiving basic care in their own homes has dropped by 109,900 during the past five years. We are told that those people are now living independently, but I suspect that they are the ones who turn up in the accident and emergency departments and end up as the delayed discharge cases in the national health service. They needed a little bit of help, but ended up getting it through the NHS rather than as it should have been given.

The hon. Lady spoke about budgets and resources. One of the measures of the pressure on social services departments is the extent to which rationing is now the norm, such as by denying care and support to those with moderate care needs who have carers—it is a widespread practice in social services departments that those who have carers often do not have access to any care at all. Rationing is also imposed by making those with high care needs wait, whether in hospital beds or in their own homes, hidden out of sight and out of mind, and by limiting the quality or quantity of care provided. Social services departments regularly deploy those tools to try to make their very stretched budgets go just a bit further.

The Secretary of State and the Chancellor recently spoke about the need to do something about delayed discharge by introducing financial incentives or penalties. Not surprisingly, people in local government and many others have expressed their concern, not least because there was no consultation about the proposals. I am very concerned about the introduction of a penalty system, the details of which are still rather vague, because of the potential distortion of priorities that it could produce.

We all know that there are serious pressures on local authority budgets for children's services. Indeed, two thirds of the overspend in social services budgets is on children's services. Therefore, a system that imposes more pressure to spend money on elderly people—right though that may be—without putting in extra resources in the first place, could result in yet more pressure on the budgets for children's services. The Wanless report, which was published on Budget day, made the following useful point:

> "The processes of objective setting incentivisation and targeting have to be sensitively designed to ensure they achieve the required result rather than distort resource allocation."

I fear that we are about to see a distortion of resource allocation.

Hon. Members have referred to loss of capacity in the care home sector. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said, there is a real possibility of people not being given the opportunity and choice of residential care in their own communities, and being bussed miles away. Kent comes to mind, because the consequence of a substantial loss of capacity there is that people are bussed miles away from Kent, and from their families and loved ones.

The focus has been on delayed discharge, but there has been an 18 per cent. increase in emergency readmissions during the past two years alone. I understand that there will be a scheme of penalties to deal with that, but the details are much vaguer. Perhaps the Minister will comment on whether the system of penalties will simply recreate the cost shunting that already exists in health and social care. Social services will provide inappropriate packages of care, and when someone comes back into hospital as an emergency readmission, who will pick up the bill?

Hon. Members have spoken about residential care, and I shall touch on the important subject of training. I hope that the Minister will give a positive response to the suggestion by the hon. Member for Stafford for a pilot scheme. There is almost a revolving door in care homes at the moment. Unqualified, ill-equipped, untrained staff come in. They pick up the skills and ability to care for frail, elderly people, acquire NVQs and then leave for better paid jobs in the NHS and the statutory part of the state sector of social care. The same happens with domiciliary care, and the consequence is high levels of staff turnover and many vacancies.

We must consider what can be done about that. I hope that the Minister will tell us today what work she and her Department are doing, particularly in parts of the country where there is a tight labour market, to ensure that we can not only recruit but retain the necessary qualified and quality staff. Some parts of the country, such as Kent, Somerset and elsewhere, have lost a massive number of care home beds. What is being done to identify ways of regenerating the sector? When a home is knocked down or turned into flats, the land is lost and the opportunity is lost. It would be helpful if the Minister could tell us what is being done, in areas where the costs of entry into the market are so much higher than elsewhere, to ensure that the barriers are lowered and capacity can be retrieved.

We have discussed budgets and the need for SSA reform. Amen—we all agree about that. However, that is a holy grail that will deliver only if there is an increase in the size of the cake being distributed. The Budget settlement announced by the Chancellor a little while ago does not address the crying needs in social care

throughout the country. The Chancellor rightly identified the fact that social services have been a neglected part of the caring services for too long, but it is not clear from the detail—I hope that the Minister can help us with that today—whether social services' extra spending during the next few years will be borne almost entirely by council tax payers forking out more, or whether substantial extra funds will be made available through grant to fund the necessary improvements. When the Local Government Association and others look at the figures they are alarmed that the resources going in are not sufficient to meet the Government's national service framework aspirations or arrest the collapse of confidence in the independent care sector in many parts of the country.

The hon. Member for Stafford referred to his conference, and I was interested to hear that his keynote speaker was Robin Wendt. I agree with him that there is still a debate to be had and a conclusion to be reached about the boundary between personal and social care. It is interesting that Wales is moving in the same direction as Scotland has taken, and I look forward to hearing more details about that.

Finally, I want to ask the Minister about the guidance document "No secrets", which concerns the abuse of older people. When will we have a report from the Department on its implementation, the budgets that will be made available and the staff who will be put in place? What initiatives are being undertaken to ensure that the document, which was published two years ago, is not a worthless set of words but a meaningful mechanism for delivering services on the ground and protecting the elderly?

In conclusion, I repeat that the care of the elderly must be a priority for us, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford on giving us a further opportunity to debate the issue.

10.40 am

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): I, too, begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on providing us with the opportunity for this useful and opportune debate. Sadly, as we have heard in several speeches, there is a crisis in long-term care and the care of the elderly. The problem is not restricted to particular parts of the country, although there are some in which it is more pronounced.

In the past five years, 50,000 residential care beds have been lost across all sectors. That has put a desperate strain on elderly people who can no longer remain in their homes with domiciliary care. The loss of care home beds has not been uniform, and in some parts of the country, particularly in the south-east and East Anglia, a significant number of beds have been lost as homes are sold and local authorities use their bulk purchasing power to force down the amount that they pay to care for the elderly. The shortage of beds has had a distressing knock-on effect on many people who have been unable to find a home in the area in which they have lived all their lives. As a result, they have had to move ever further from their roots, from family connections and from the communities in which they used to live.

Unfortunately, as many hon. Members have said, we also have a problem with delayed discharge. Figures given in written answers have shown that more than 30 per cent. of those who are caught up in the delayed discharge system remain in hospital for more than a month. There is no medical or clinical reason for them to do so, but they remain in hospital because no beds are available elsewhere, or because there is no back-up for a domiciliary care package to allow them to return home.

Interestingly, last year's social services inspectorate report noted that 39 per cent. of delayed discharges were caused by delays in public funding, 36 per cent. by people having to wait for residential home placements as a result of the loss of beds and consequent shortage of spaces, and 18 per cent. by delays in the provision of domiciliary care packages. It is staggering that 39 per cent. of delays are due to people having to wait for public funding because there is not enough money in the social services budget to fund a place or domiciliary care, and that the national health service must meet the exorbitant cost of keeping such people in hospital for no clinical reason. That is an utter waste of taxpayers' money, and it is a disgrace that people are languishing in beds that are urgently needed for the acute care of other patients.

Reference has been made to this year's 6 per cent. real-terms increase in social services spending. Of course that is a step forward—it would be churlish to say otherwise. However, we should examine more closely the balance in the NHS funding budget between acute care in the NHS and personal social services.

Since community care was introduced in the early 1980s, there has been a significant increase in PSS funding, in percentage terms. As no doubt the Minister will tell us, the recent Budget contained a significant increase in such funding, although some of the gloss will be removed from that increase next year by the 1 per cent. increase in national insurance contributions, which will have a considerable impact on the NHS budget and place even greater financial burdens on care home owners and those in the care sector. The Department of Health did not examine closely enough the implications of an across-the-board increase in this personal tax and its impact on an area that is already struggling with other problems.

Some 62 per cent. of social services clients being looked after are from the elderly section of our community, but only 47 per cent. of the total funding is spent on social services, so there is a gap. Local government spending is significantly more than the SSA for social services, running at about 8.9 per cent. in 2000–01. It is estimated that for the financial year that has just ended, the difference rose to 9.7 per cent. In personal social services and social care, the amount of money has not increased to keep pace with increased demand and the highly sensitive and difficult nature of the care required by that vulnerable section of our community.

The gap between health and social care funding is inexorably widening. It will continue to do so because of the demographic changes brought about by more people living longer and because the extent and the complexities of the care that many people require will increase year on year. That is producing a vicious circle in which the pressure caused by delayed discharges is passed on from the health sector to the social care sector and then to the care market, where funding pressures affect capacity, leading to another increase in the pressures on the health sector.

[Mr. Simon Burns]

As the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) mentioned, there are other pressures involved in getting people out of hospital and into care or domiciliary care packages in their own homes as soon as it is clinically possible. However, I suspect that corners have been cut. Emergency readmission levels have significantly increased—another vicious circle that exacerbates the problems with acute care.

After the Budget, the Secretary of State published a document called "Delivering the NHS Plan", which contains the ludicrous and self-defeating proposal to fine local authority social services departments for delayed discharges. That is an ill-conceived gimmick, which, if it ever sees the light of day, will cause even more problems. The carrot rather than the stick should be used to overcome such problems. The Secretary of State and his successors will rue the day that that proposal was conceived.

We need an urgent and fundamental review of short, medium and long-term financial planning and a proper assessment of the necessary balance between health funding and local authority funding for social care. That will ensure that the problem of funding, which has continued to grow year in, year out as demand rises inexorably, is analysed and rectified to enhance and improve the provision of social care and health care for the most vulnerable, fragile and weak in our society.

10.50 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): Like others, I shall start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on securing this debate, on his valiant efforts on his bike during the bank holiday and on the good and useful way in which he opened our discussion. I particularly congratulate him on the lessons that he learned from the conference held in his constituency. That was heartening, because we have made it clear that although the Government can set standards and targets, improve funding and offer clear guidance, local action is required to improve services on the ground. The local partnerships and plans that my hon. Friend is leading and contributing to will be important for his constituents.

Importantly, most contributors to the debate have recognised the complexity of the matter. Hon. Members have recognised that it is about more than the number of residential care places and that a range of policies will contribute to the provision of the high quality care that we want for older people.

Many older people lead happy and fulfilled lives with a minimum of assistance from formal services. Many of them make an important and positive contribution to their families and their communities. They do so by giving up their free time to work for voluntary organisations and by working with children in their own families and in schools.

The hon. Member for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams) rightly emphasised the range of older people's needs. We ought to aim to support older people and their families in their choices and lifestyles. We should ensure that, as far as possible, people are not removed from their communities and social networks and we should find ways to underpin existing relationships and situations that minimise risk and disruption and maximise continuity, familiarity and social inclusion.

Hon. Members also made the important point that responsibility for that goes across agencies. Local councils, working with partners, have a fundamental role to play, as does the private and independent sector. The voluntary sector also makes an important contribution to the care of older people in our communities.

From talking to older people—my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) made this point—we know that fears about safety and security are high up on their agenda, as is access to reliable transport, local shops, good leisure facilities and primary health care. It is vital for councils to work with local agencies such as those for health, fire, police, housing, education and social care to make our communities safe and supportive places for older people to live.

My hon. Friend made an important link with the Government's overall public health agenda. Our development of good health throughout our lives will affect us in older age. As a Worcestershire MP I heard, as, I am sure, did my colleagues in the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, her plea for SSA reform. I assure her that there will be consultation with local government throughout the summer as we move towards the implementation of the new regime in the next financial year.

Many hon. Members raised the issue of delayed discharge. I agree that it is bad for the system as a whole; even more significantly, it is bad for individuals. That is why the Government's investment in the system is important—and it is important that it should work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford spoke about the £5.4 million going to Staffordshire. He will be pleased to know that it led to a reduction in delayed discharges in Staffordshire; they were down from 224 in September 2001 to 127 in March 2002, and the target is for a further reduction by March 2003. The investment has allowed extra publicly funded care home places, extra intermediary care beds and more intensive care packages; it has been a successful start in tackling the problem of delayed discharges.

I agree that we need extra investment. I was therefore pleased, as were my hon. Friends—we should not be too surprised that the Liberal Democrats thought that it was not enough—that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was able to give personal social services a significant annual average real-terms growth of 6 per cent. in 2003–04, rising again in 2005–06. That demonstrates the Government's firm commitment to social care. It contrasts with an average real-terms increase, on a like-for-like basis, of less than 0.5 per cent. a year under the last Conservative Government. That new cash includes resources to cover the cost of hospital beds that are needlessly blocked through delayed discharges.

Councils will be able to use that extra money to expand care at home and to ensure that all older people are able to leave hospital once their treatment is completed. We shall introduce stronger incentives to ensure that people do not have to wait so long before being discharged. Older people and other service users have the right to expect that local services should work

together as a coherent whole, and that the policy that underpins them should promote joint working rather than letting them act perversely, as sometimes seems to be the case.

The hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) and for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) raised the issue of residential care fees. Once again, we heard the wrong figure for a fall in residential care beds of 50,000; even Laing and Buisson accept that it was a net figure of 19,000. However, we share their concern about residential care placements. As my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have said, higher resources in social services should lead to higher residential care fees. For example, I was glad to see that what Staffordshire received of the £300 million went into increasing residential care fees.

Other hon. Members pointed out the importance that the Government place on promoting independence and allowing people to remain within their own homes. The number of people receiving intensive domiciliary care increased nationally by 6 per cent. to September 2001. That is an important and encouraging trend, and we want to see it continue.

The hon. Member for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams) raised the issue of non-residential care charging. The guidance issued by the Government in England takes an important step in helping to overcome the discrepancies between authorities, and for the local authorities to charge where they choose, which will be much fairer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford and other hon. Members raised the important issue of training, and training support, in residential and domiciliary care. The national minimum standards put in place by the Government will ensure higher levels of training, but we are also matching it through increased investment—for example, through the training organisation for personal social services, which increased from £2 million last year to £15 million this year—to ensure the sort of training that is crucial to recruit and retain staff and to ensure quality in the residential and domiciliary care sector. My hon. Friend's point on how we can take forward that training is important, and I shall certainly consider it.

Several hon. Members made the important link with housing issues. I assure them that my Department is working closely with colleagues across Government to ensure that local authorities recognise those links, and the importance of developing new forms of housing. More extra care at sheltered housing, for example, could play an important role. We are reaching and exceeding our targets on intermediate care. As several hon. Members have said, that is an important bridge between hospital and home, which helps to prevent some admissions to hospital. It is a key part of the national service framework for older people, which remains a high priority for the Government. I shall ensure that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North, receives a reply about the north Staffordshire elderly care strategy.

Cancer Services (South-East)

11 am

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): I welcome the chance to introduce the debate. It was prompted by the realisation that I had dealt with a number of constituents who had had less than happy experiences in cases in which a cancer had been diagnosed. A glance at *Hansard* shows that other hon. Members have had similar experiences, and I hoped to be able to share those today. However, not many of those concerned seem to be here.

Almost invariably, my constituents have nothing but praise for the staff who treat them. It is important to mention that, because when we say things that might have a negative feel, staff may believe that we are getting at them. We are not getting at staff; indeed, in many cases, they are just as frustrated by the problems as are the patients. Most health professionals went into the profession because they wanted to make things better for people, and it is frustrating if they cannot solve problems quickly. In many cases, staff have verified my constituents' stories and have expressed a great deal of dismay at the difficulties that they have faced from time to time.

I want to touch on a number of matters: first, the problems surrounding diagnosis; secondly, waiting times for radiotherapy, without which the debate would not be complete; thirdly, access to drug treatments; fourthly, funding; and finally, a brief recognition of local cancer support services. Much of what I have to say has a national context, but as much as possible I shall restrict my remarks to those relating to the south-east of England.

I shall start by considering diagnosis. The Government have set a two-week standard for patients who have been urgently referred by their general practitioners. That means that they have to see the relevant specialists within that time. The latest available figures show a somewhat patchy compliance. Patients in the Surrey Hampshire Borders NHS trust, for example, come off best in that 99 per cent. of them are seen within the target time. Not so lucky are the people of Hastings and Rother; in that area, only 58.6 per cent. of patients see the relevant specialist within two weeks. I do not know the reasons for the differences—perhaps the Minister can enlighten us—but it will be interesting to know what performance level would ring alarm bells and, once those bells had sounded, what action would be taken, and by whom, to improve the service for patients in a particular area.

It is all very well if one has a lump or worrying symptoms and one's GP makes a referral. However, some say that GPs have a tendency to over-refer—I might not agree with that—because they know that it will put a patient's mind at rest. Others are more mindful of pressure on resources and may take certain decisions before referring, but that can lead to problems, as a constituent of mine in her early 20s discovered. She was a nursing mother, but was convinced that something was not quite right and found a lump in her breast. Her GP dismissed her as being over-concerned and suggested that her lumpy breast was caused by breastfeeding. He was wrong. By the time that the young woman was believed and the cancer properly diagnosed, it had spread, as it was of a particularly virulent type.

[Sandra Gidley]

Also locally last year, the press highlighted the case of a teenage girl who had died of breast cancer. The press reported that she was the youngest person in the United Kingdom to die in that way. Unfortunately, the probability of those two young women having breast cancer was extremely low, as any GP would know. That may work against young women being taken seriously and referred when they visit the GP. I have tried, but have been unable to find figures to show whether the rate of breast cancer in young women is rising, but GPs should be aware that breast cancer can affect women of all ages. Are there any plans to ensure that age is not a factor in determining whether a woman's symptoms are taken seriously?

While I am on the subject of diagnosis, I want to put in a word on behalf of the medical and scientific laboratory officers. They are all graduates and many of them have a secondary qualification. They are essential to the long-term success of the cancer plan, but their wages are very low. My local organisation asked to speak to me about the subject because so many people were leaving the profession. The previous hon. Member for Isle of Wight made the front pages of the local papers with his revelation that highly qualified people earned less than chicken pluckers. The wages are a particular problem in the south-east of England, as property prices are high and there is a high cost of living. There will be implications for the future if the issue of salary levels is not addressed, as the profession will simply not attract the bright young people that it needs to attract.

As I am about to show, accessing some treatments may take time, and there is a debate to be had about whether the two-week target is appropriate or whether it should be longer. Would patients be better served by concentrating efforts following diagnosis to ensure that people are treated more quickly? I suspect that my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) will want to elaborate on that point.

I shall now discuss waiting times for radiotherapy treatment. I was first alerted to the problem by a constituent who had developed a form of skin cancer. His specialist decided that he needed urgent radiotherapy and spent two hours on the telephone trying to book treatment for him. He telephoned places all around the south of England and no treatment was available for three months. My constituent had some savings, which he was reluctant to use, but he eventually decided that his life was worth it and his oncologist managed to book him into one of the London hospitals as a private patient. As my constituent did not know how he would be feeling, he had to travel from London by taxi, again at some expense. Although he accepted that it was his decision to access private medicine, he thought it reasonable to try to reclaim some of his travel costs—unfortunately, to no avail, as he had not agreed that before embarking on treatment. I suspect that he had other concerns at the time, focusing on the diagnosis of cancer, which does tend to concentrate the mind. The decision not to pay some of his travel costs, although they were a small portion of the cost that would have been incurred had he undergone radiotherapy under the national health service, seems perverse when we are shipping people to the continent for hip operations.

Currently, many people in the Southampton area are waiting 13 weeks or more to begin radiotherapy. Recent figures show that that appears to be a problem throughout the south-east. On 30 September 2001, 35 per cent. of in-patients were waiting for more than 12 months for radiology—I cannot believe that figure, but most have to wait more than three months. The latest figures for out-patients show that only 77.6 per cent. are seen within 13 weeks of referral. Is there spare capacity in other parts of the country? Would it be possible to treat patients from the south-east elsewhere?

The plot thickens. Two days ago, *The Sunday Times* pointed out:

> "Many patients are having to wait months for tests for illnesses including cancer and heart disease before they are placed on official NHS waiting lists for surgery. Some die before they reach these lists."

That article specifies surgery, but do the same criteria apply before a patient is put on a waiting list for radiotherapy?

Worryingly, *The Sunday Times* also claimed that there were long waiting lists for magnetic resonance imaging and computerised tomography scans. Worse still, waiting times for MRI scans are not compiled, as revealed by the Minister in a written answer to me on 15 April. In the light of the importance of that procedure in diagnosis of cancers, does she have plans to collect the figures so that we can know whether our constituents receive a service that is good, bad or as we would expect? Constituents of mine have raised concerns about waiting for up to six months for such diagnostic procedures.

I developed a close interest in drug treatments when a constituent wrote to me in desperation. She had been told that Herceptin was her only chance, but at the time the National Institute for Clinical Excellence had not approved it. Her doctors were reluctant to provide it. She obtained the treatment eventually but, sadly, it was too late for her. In some ways, she was luckier than most, in that she was tested to see whether the drug would benefit her. A Europe-wide survey showed that only 18 per cent. of women with newly diagnosed breast cancer in Britain were tested for HER2. A positive test for that means that the drug will be useful. That compares with 67 per cent. of women in Germany and 87 per cent. in Spain.

Happily, NICE has approved the drug, but some interesting questions have been raised. If doctors still do not test for HER2, they will not be in a position to know whether the drug will be valuable. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that all women, not only those in the south-east, have access to the test to suggest whether they should receive a NICE-approved treatment?

I have been lobbied by many drug companies since the subject of our debate has been known. I shall deal with a couple of their points briefly because they affect the south-east, although not exclusively so. Is the Minister happy with the delays in obtaining NICE guidance? What estimate has been made of patients who have been denied treatment because of the delay? When a drug is approved, what monitoring of uptake is there? How does the NHS monitor the number of patients and the cost that it bears, and make comparisons with the pre-approval phase of the drug? Without such

comparisons, it is difficult to say with conviction that NICE guidance is being acted on. An undertaking to provide such information would be most welcome and add to the transparency of the process.

I want to touch briefly on aspects of funding. No one would deny that the extra money for cancer services was welcome. What is less clear is how it is allocated once it reaches a trust. Recently, the Select Committee on Science and Technology considered cancer research, and in one sitting with the Minister specific concerns were expressed about whether funding reached what it was designated for. Macmillan Cancer Relief had received reports that much of the money was diverted elsewhere to pay off debts. At the time, the Minister did not have a categoric answer because the accounts simply were not available. Is there any update on that position, and what action will the Minister take so that her Department—particularly in the south-east region because that is my concern—ensures that hypothecated resources get to the services on the ground?

I want to say a brief word about a couple of local cancer services. We are very lucky to have the Wessex Cancer Trust, which does sterling work. I have mixed feelings about whether such trusts should be funding hospital equipment, rather than the NHS, but it seems to be the way of the world these days. I want to mention briefly Jane Scarth house, which is part of something called Cancer Concern. It is a walk-in centre close to the local Waitrose, in the high street in Romsey—an excellent idea. It provides information, support and counselling. You name it, it does it—from helping women to look good when they have to wear a wig, and really do not want to, to providing counselling support for families, and more or less everything in between. It has suffered financial problems recently, due to the winding up of the parent charity. It has been so worth while and of such benefit to many local people that I wondered whether there was any way of extending that sort of scheme to other areas of the country. People do not always want to go into a medical environment to obtain the help and support that they need. It seems to me that such high street centres are well placed to cater for that.

I am disappointed that there are not more people present today because I have had a considerable mailbag on various aspects of the problem. I had thought that more concern would be shown here today. Of particular concern is the radiotherapy waiting list. I understand that there are plans afoot to put in new equipment, but that will take some time. In the interim, it would be useful to know what we are doing for those patients.

11.17 am

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I congratulate the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) on obtaining the debate, and on her thoughtful speech. She was looking, quite rightly, at the full spectrum of cancer services, from primary care through the full range of hospital services and related support.

I want to focus on the narrower but absolutely critical issue of cancer centre services in east Kent. I am glad to see the Minister in her place again because I have had the opportunity to pursue the cancer issue with her in a small way. The debate will give me a little more time to focus on the cancer problems that arise out of the proposed reorganisation of hospitals in east Kent, particularly in the light of last week's revelations about cancer.

The cancer centre in Kent is unique in the country in being jointly delivered on two sites: Maidstone, which serves west Kent, and Canterbury, which serves east Kent. They have the ability to treat common cancers and provide specialist services for diagnosing and treating rarer tumours, radiotherapy, specialist nurses, diagnostic services, CAT scanners, MRI, endoscopy, pathology, in-patient medical care for complex treatments, a high-dependency unit for seriously ill patients and dedicated out-patient facilities. In other words, all the various strands that comprise a cancer centre are provided on both sites. That is partly because the logistics of Kent are so bad. To be readily accessible to people at both ends of the county, two sites were needed. There is also a capacity issue, to which I shall return.

Behind that dry list of services there exists an extraordinarily good cancer centre at Canterbury. Several very dear friends of mine have been treated there, in most cases extremely successfully. A former agent, Jo Chapman, who, tragically, did not survive, was none the less treated very professionally right up until the day she died. I saw her just before she died and she was full of praise for the treatment that she had received in the Mountbatten centre, the residential facility in Canterbury, whose construction was largely funded by outside money raised on appeal.

Several problems for the cancer centre arise from the proposed reorganisation of the three acute hospitals in east Kent. I have letters from two of the three consultants who operate in the joint cancer centre. One, from Dr. Stewart Coltart, lists the problems, saying:

"Ambulatory/outpatient model is untested in UK"

and

"Not advised by Canterbury and Maidstone consultants nor by the Royal College of Radiologists."

He mentions

"Difficult access for the poorer population from Thanet, Deal and Dover"

as well as from Canterbury. Thanet has the largest concentration of deprived people, we are told, in south-east England outside London; Deal and Dover have large amounts of deprivation and I have some extremely deprived wards in Canterbury.

Dr. Coltart raises the question of

"Who will look after seriously ill cancer patients in E Kent . . . when in patient care and consultants are based in Maidstone. It will not be specialist cancer doctors or nurses as happens now."

He mentions the enormous cost of transferring the facilities from Canterbury to Maidstone, which does not seem to have been included in the private finance initiative proposals at all because of the anomaly that, thanks to the East Kent health authority's last reorganisation, cancer services belong to the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells trust and not to the East Kent hospitals trust, which designed the document. Listing a final problem, he says:

"Lack of access would mean that some patients would not be referred or be fit enough to receive radiotherapy."

[Mr. Julian Brazier]

Dr. Howard Smedley, another consultant, backed up his colleague's comments, saying:

"I have been involved in several meetings with middle management in East and West Kent recently as they try to resolve the issue of what to do with cancer services given the downgrading of the Kent and Canterbury. Despite the rhetoric it is quite clear that Canterbury is going to be left with an outpatient radiotherapy facility as the only treatment facility",

he alleges. He continues:

"It is clear that more chemotherapy may take place in Margate and Ashford and all the true cancer centre, i.e. complex work, will go to Maidstone."

Let us look for a moment at the process that has taken place. Cancer was excluded from it. The trust responsible for delivering the joint cancer centre in Canterbury is not a signatory of the document. Professor James, who heads the joint cancer centre, attended the meetings and claimed that he was closely involved with the writing of the appendix that appears in the back of the document on cancer. He said that his main thrust would be to restore confidence for the purpose of attracting new cancer consultants. He also claimed, at the Canterbury meeting, that all three of the Canterbury-based consultants were solidly behind the proposals in the document. He even listed them by name. Yet the two letters to which I have just referred, attacking the proposal, had been widely circulated some weeks before.

I asked Professor James at a subsequent meeting at Whitstable whether he supported the sentence on page 42 of the document that appears to be a direct attack on confidence in the centre. It says:

"This has led us to conclude, reluctantly, that for the longer term it is not possible to guarantee the continuous medical support and cover that is required to provide safe inpatient radiotherapy and chemotherapy services in Canterbury".

He was, of course, unable to answer, as his previous spiel had been all about building confidence in the viability of those services.

Asked whether he had seen the letters from two of his three Canterbury consultants vehemently opposing the proposals on the grounds that they would be clinically unsafe, Professor James again refused to answer. Just for the record, I understand that the third consultant was so angry about his claim, which mentioned her name and views, that she subsequently denounced him at a consultants' staff meeting.

I shall look for a moment or two longer at the detail of some of those problems. Page 43 of the cancer appendix—I should stress that it is only an appendix that sets out some ball park points rather than a firm proposal—to the document claims that

"in summary, the ambulatory/outpatient model of service at the Kent & Canterbury hospital will support for the next ten years . . . outpatient/radiotherapy and chemotherapy treatment".

That is stated as a bald fact. It was backed up—if that is the right phrase—by Professor James's claims at the Canterbury meeting that four fifths of the people who are currently treated in the cancer centre at Canterbury will continue to be treated there. We have heard the four-fifths figure in a quite different context before. It was claimed for the accident and emergency unit in its downgraded form as a minor injuries unit. That figure has now been abandoned and replaced with one of between 50 and 60 per cent. None the less, I mention that as the figure that Professor James was claiming. He made a bald claim that the ambulatory out-patient model would be good for at least 10 years at the lower level of 80 per cent. of current treatments.

After the cancer tsar visited Canterbury, however, he sent a letter headed "Provision of cancer services in Kent" to Dr. Stewart Coltart. It states that if Canterbury ultimately becomes a community ambulatory care centre, it would not be safe to provide in-patient oncology services there. More important, it states that day case treatment, including radiotherapy, "might be possible." All that the cancer tsar can say is that it "might" be possible.

Since then, Professor James has prepared another paper that he has actually signed—there is no signature on the mysterious appendix that appeared in the back of the proposal document. Indeed, as I remarked earlier, his trust was not a signatory to that document. This paper was produced in secret, prepared for his employers in Maidstone and, I imagine, sent to the new Kent health authority. It also happens to have fallen into my hands. As one would expect, it is worded in highly technical language. I shall therefore only quote its aims and final conclusion, both of which are extremely short. It examines the implications for Kent of

"the impact of haematology location on service delivery of solid tumour chemotherapy and complex cancer surgery"

and looks at

"alternatives for the co-location of solid and non-solid tumour chemotherapy".

I shall also quote the paper's first three conclusions. The first conclusion is:

"Planned changes in support services for cancer services in East Kent increase the need for co-location of complex cancer services in the Maidstone Cancer Centre."

Maidstone already has a 14-week waiting list as opposed to Canterbury's seven-week waiting list.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Hugh Robertson) tells me that he has written three times to the chairman of the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells trust asking it to give an official response to the cancer appendix to the document. He has not yet received an answer of any kind. He asked me to state that, because he is attending another meeting booked some time ago that prevents him from joining us.

The second conclusion is:

"National guidance on the surgery for rare cancers (gynaecological, head and neck, upper gastrointestinal) recommends centralisation. For West Kent, the chosen site is the Cancer Centre in Maidstone."

The idea that gynaecological services will be taken away from Thanet, where they are now, has been neither canvassed nor discussed anywhere. Professor James uses the word "centralisation", reminding us that the centre for west Kent is now in Maidstone. The only other place where gynaecological services are delivered at present is Thanet. Is east Kent to lose gynaecological services too? It would be interesting to have an answer to that question.

The third quotation is the real killer:

"There are strong arguments for co-locating high-level haematological chemo with a cancer Centre. Parallels exist in service support for cancer surgery and the haematological malignancies and consideration should be given to merging and co-locating some of these support services."

Indeed, a large part of the paper, which I shall spare the Chamber, discusses the back-up services for haematological cancers—leukaemia and the other blood-related cancers. In other words, since Professor James's various verbal contributions to the consultation process—they were only verbal—he has already conceded that in the case of blood-related procedures the services are worthless: they will all have to go to Maidstone.

A few minutes ago I was on the telephone to Dr. Stewart Coltart to discuss this issue. He makes the point that the distinction that Professor James draws between blood cancers, in the case of which he has finally conceded that it will not be practical to follow his model in Canterbury, and the solid cancers does not exist: almost exactly the same problems apply to the solid cancer centre services as to the blood cancers. In other words, we face the loss of all the true cancer centre services from east Kent. It is true that on all three sites in east Kent it will be possible to continue to deliver the cancer out-patient unit services. However, to summarise in plain English what I have been saying for the last few minutes, if the proposals to reorganise the three acute hospitals in east Kent go ahead, the first cancer centre closure since the Government took office will take place: the cancer centre, as a centre, in Canterbury will close. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on that.

11.31 am

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) for securing the debate and setting out what she wished to say in such a clear and organised way. She draws our attention to key questions about diagnosis, the waiting time for diagnosis and, in a couple of examples, the quality of diagnosis, the waiting time for treatment, access to drug treatments, funding and the role of local cancer support services in the NHS and, particularly, the voluntary sector. I share her regret that more hon. Members from all parties are not present to hear her points of view, but what we lack in quantity the two previous contributions have made up for in quality.

Even in the south-east, cancer services are a large subject. I am sure that the Minister has come prepared to deal with a number of questions from Back Benchers and Front Benchers on all aspects. I concur with my hon. Friend that many of these issues are not only local and regional but national. I have a number of questions to which I hope that the Minister will be able to respond. To ensure that she has time to prepare her answers, I shall set them out at the start of my speech, before I mention each one individually. I should be grateful if she would respond to six questions.

Will the Minister first—she may have guessed that this was coming—set out the evidence base on which the two-week wait policy is predicated, to show that it will improve survival, compared with a policy of a maximum waiting time between presentation and treatment or diagnosis and treatment? She will accept that, at best, there is some controversy about the rational evidence base for improving survival for that target.

My second question, which my hon. Friend raised in passing, relates to the shortage of radiotherapists and the fact that the private sector has radiotherapists who may be available to the NHS. A separate question relates to the fact that the bulk of those radiotherapists will have been trained by the NHS, at its expense and that of the public sector, through our university system. Does the Minister think that it is reasonable for the private sector not to carry any overhead for the training of radiotherapists when it tenders for NHS contracts or any other business? Does she agree that there may be some rationale for asking the private sector to pay some form of levy for the time that it uses of NHS-trained radiotherapists and other professions allied to medicine, such as nurses and doctors? Otherwise, there will not be a level playing field in tenders for NHS contracts, which she wishes to open up to the private sector.

My third question relates to a point made by my hon. Friend. By focusing on specific aspects of waiting, the Government fail, by an act of omission, to pick up the overall waiting time between presentation and treatment everywhere in the country, although one can consider it on a regional basis. Can the Minister explain why the Government did not set up a mechanism to measure the time between presentation and treatment and, even more important, between diagnosis and treatment rather than between presentation and diagnosis of referrals, most of whom, fortunately, will not have cancer? The failure to collect such data and the failure to record other waiting times, such as those for MRI and other services, lead to the allegation that the Government seek to disguise long waiting times.

My fourth question is about NICE approval for drugs. Can the Minister tell us which drugs are not funded in order to find the money to pay for drugs and treatments that have been approved by NICE, which must now be used, following the regulation that NICE guidance must be implemented? If she cannot answer that, can she say what system she has set up to monitor the effect on drug treatments that have not been approved by NICE and, therefore, are not protected by the diktat that health authorities and primary care trusts—whoever has the funding—must fund them?

I should be grateful if the Minister would discuss the role of the lottery in local cancer support services. Perhaps the Government have changed their policy, but my understanding was that the lottery would not be used to pay for core services in the health service. We know that the proceeds of people's gambling on the lottery are used to pay for radiotherapy machines and linear accelerators to treat cancer. Is that because the Government's policy has changed or is it their view that such machines are not part of the core service that the NHS should provide? Everyone wants to see more machinery, but is that consistent with the Government's announced policy?

My final question is about the funding of hospice care, which is, I suppose, the end of the process. The Government made a series of announcements about additional funding for hospices, which have not really been part of the NHS. In my constituency and in the constituencies of other hon. Members, that important part of patient care has generally been left, at best, to a

[Dr. Evan Harris]

combination of voluntary organisations that have been fortunate and hard-working enough to raise funding, and small NHS or social services contributions. If hospice care and terminal care are part of core NHS treatment—I believe that they should be—they should be funded by the Government. I am not asking the Minister to repeat her previous announcement about the amounts of money, but I am asking her to clarify when hospices will receive the funds.

My local hospice certainly has not seen any additional funding. I refer to the children's hospice, Helen house, and its partner organisation, Douglas house, which is about to be established. I fear that, despite huge efforts, such hospices will be unable to continue to fund-raise sufficiently to maintain resources. Since there is not an adequate NHS for children and young adults, which is the area covered by the hospices, I should be grateful if the Minister would give a categorical assurance that the funding that she announced—it differed from a Library briefing that I was given—will reach front-line services.

My hon. Friend raised several important points about the two-week wait. Through her work, she showed that the implementation of that has been patchy, which is a source of concern even if it is a rational target. None of us wants our constituents to wait too long for a diagnosis of symptoms. There is a debate over whether people necessarily want a same-day or one-stop service, which has been previously advocated, or whether they want time for investigations, to see specialists, and to return in the near future for a discussion of the diagnosis. However, the trend towards conveniently accessed one-visit diagnoses and further investigations is important.

If there is no evidence of improved patient survival after a two-week, rather than a two-month, wait to see a specialist, one must balance the undoubted gain of speedy referral for some patients with the consequences of such a policy. The consequences do not appear to be improved survival for the patients referred; they appear to be a later referral time for those who are not fortunate enough to be referred under the two-week wait. That may apply to the people in the cases raised by my hon. Friend, who are not thought to have cancer symptoms and are referred by GPs in the normal process if they are referred at all. They must wait longer because resources have been taken from general out-patient services to meet the two-week wait.

Even when funding is available, if there is a fundamental shortage of staff one is simply rearranging queues. The Government have decided to prioritise people referred under the two-week wait, but they must recognise the consequences of that. Professor Michael Baum told me that he was concerned that in the breast cancer field patients who were not referred under the two-week wait would suffer. Many GPs recognise that, and refer as many people as possible for the two-week wait, which somewhat defeats the purpose. Can the Minister say whether any thought has gone into the implications of that policy?

I should like to reinforce the message of my hon. Friend on the state of recruitment among scientific officers, and on their remuneration. The problem is apparent not only in laboratory staff and medical laboratory scientific officers, but in cytology screeners, who are a crucial link in the diagnosis of cancer. They are among the worst paid graduates working in a technological area. The south-east has a general skill shortage and will find it more and more difficult to recruit newly qualified graduates. It may also become more difficult to recruit people into training for those subjects. As the former Member for Isle of Wight, Dr. Peter Brand, remarked, for scientific officers on the Isle of Wight to be paid less than chicken pluckers is an indictment of the way in which, over many years, the NHS has treated people with those qualifications.

There is a growing concern, although the problem has always existed, about the wait for radiotherapy treatment. In that case, outcome will be impacted by the time spent waiting for treatment. Many of the points made in the article in *The Sunday Times* need a response from the Government. In my constituency and other areas throughout the south-east, patients have great difficulty in gaining access to drug treatment. My hon. Friend drew attention to the difficulties for patients waiting for drug treatment when NICE has started its appraisal process because of what is commonly called "NICE blight" in which the take-up and prescription of a drug falls simply because the drug is going through the NICE process. My hon. Friend's questions about the speed at which NICE reaches its conclusions are pertinent and I look forward to the Minister's response.

A number of hon. Members in this debate and elsewhere have asked where the funding for cancer services has gone. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) said at Prime Minister's questions that if funds are ring-fenced for cancer services, it is reasonable for people to ask what steps the Government are taking to ensure that that funding reaches its destination. There have been a number of claims that funding has been used to pay off debt or has gone to other areas. One can question whether it is reasonable, legitimate, ethical or distorting specifically to allocate some of the growth to centrally decided priorities, but if the Government do that they owe it to the audit process, if not to patients and staff whose expectations have been raised, to ensure that the funding reaches those priorities. The Science and Technology Committee report on research mentioned the matter and raised serious questions for hospitals not only in the south-east but throughout the country.

I again pay tribute to the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), who perhaps has more detailed knowledge than anyone of the proposals for east Kent hospitals. He has been very active in the matter and I know from speaking to people in his area that he has worked hard on their behalf, no matter what their political views or whether they have any. The reorganisation of hospital services in east Kent, particularly cancer services, poses difficult problems for a Government with whom the buck eventually stops. His contribution reflected the widespread public concern about the future of cancer services as well as the drastic situation concerning acute services in those hospitals.

In conclusion, I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to those who work in this area. They have to deal with a difficult condition. Cancer can strike at any age and is, by nature of its pathology, often relentless in its course. They must deal with a condition that receives a lot of political and media attention. Professional staff tell me

that they know the risks of working with this condition and that they may be labelled negligent if one cancer is missed because the expectation is that screening will pick up every cancer and that early detection automatically and always means an increased likelihood of cure. The picture is more complex. Screening is high risk detection and is not foolproof. It is incumbent on the media and politicians to recognise that when cancer is missed. It was ever the case. We must improve diagnosis and our level of suspicion. We must also improve treatment in the health service, but it is dangerous to raise expectations to too high a level because it will simply put off hard-working staff who do their best.

Tribute should also be paid to the voluntary organisations that do so much to raise resources for cancer research and treatment. My hon. Friend referred to the tension between welcoming fund-raising of all kinds for cancer and the question whether that is a replacement for or an addition to Government funding for the health services. It is clear that without volunteers to offer counselling and raise funds for treatment and research, we would not have the cancer services that we do, and I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to those people.

11.49 am

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Like other hon. Members, I congratulate the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) on raising an important subject, although it is a great pity that its importance is not reflected in today's turnout. That said, the reason for the poor turnout may be that we hold debates almost every other week on some aspect of this issue, be it breast cancer, cancers in men or, as today, cancer services in the south-east. However, the low turnout gives the Minister an opportunity to provide a full and detailed response to the points that have been raised. Usually, Ministers must squash their replies into the final 10 minutes or so and are peremptorily cut off just as they get to the essential question that we want answered.

I echo the six questions raised by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), which I, too, have raised at various times in the past, not least in this Hall. I want to take up two of the hon. Gentleman's points. First, the two-week policy has been a cornerstone of the Government's approach to cancer treatment, but I have seen evidence that it distorts treatment times following the front-end loading of consultation times, which have been speeded up only through the massive concentration of a finite quantity of resources.

Secondly, I echo the hon. Gentleman's final question, which related to hospice care and to which I hope the Minister will reply. Hospices are finding the going tough, and that will be particularly true following the national insurance increases in the Chancellor's recent Budget. They will receive none of the additional funding that is intended to make up for the £250 million national insurance bill that will fall to the NHS. The vast majority of hospice funding will have to come from additional voluntary contributions and charitable fundraising which we see throughout the country. That is true not least of St. Barnabas hospice in my constituency, of which I am honoured to be a patron. St. Barnabas is conducting its massive chestnut tree appeal to build a hospice for children in my area, and it needs to raise £5 million in capital alone. The running costs involved in staffing the new hospice will be that much higher than elsewhere given that it is in the most expensive corner of the country and that it is particularly difficult to recruit medical staff. The Government must consider the issue more favourably than they have done. The Conservative party promised a big increase in funding for hospices, particularly for children, and I would like guarantees along those lines from the Government.

The initial point raised by the hon. Member for Romsey was that our comments about cancer services in this debate and elsewhere are not a criticism of the dedicated and long-suffering staff in this highly stressed area of the NHS. From all the examples that I have seen, I know that, without exception, they do their jobs with enormous dedication and professionalism, even if the results do not reflect their input in many cases.

Cancer treatment remains one of the cornerstones of new Labour's promises to modernise the NHS, but we still hear far too many horror stories and excuses as to why services are taking so long to improve and will need much more investment. The national cancer plan stated:

> "The ability of the NHS to modernise and reform its cancer services is a litmus test for the health of the NHS as a whole."

The Government therefore have an awful lot more to do.

Over recent months, we have heard stories that suggest that things are not going as well as they should, not least the stories in the recent Science and Technology Committee report about the siphoning off of cancer funds, revealing that money promised to improve cancer care appears to have been siphoned off by NHS trusts to pay for other priorities.

In their cancer plan, the Government pledged to increase spending on cancer care by £570 million a year by 2003–04, but cancer specialists told the Select Committee that part of the first round of funding—about £280 million for 2000–01—may have been diverted by NHS into paying off debts or meeting administration costs. The report stated:

> "The increase in cancer care funding, often quoted over recent months, may not be reaching those who are relying on it to deliver the cancer plan ... We are seriously concerned at the apparent ease with which trusts can re-deploy such funds if they choose."

The Committee thought it "dissembling" of the Government to allocate funds to cancer care with great publicity, without taking even the "simplest precautions" to ensure that the money reached the intended areas. I am sure that all hon. Members will echo the sentiments expressed in that frank, detailed and welcome report.

As other hon. Members have said, there are continuing problems over spending on chemotherapy drugs. Spending in this country is still way out of proportion to what is spent in other countries. Spending per head of population is £6.24 in Germany, £3.31 in Italy and a derisory 95p in the United Kingdom. That puts it in context.

Conservative Members welcome the Government's cancer plan—it will allow preventive work to reduce the risk, earlier detection and improved community support for sufferers—but the proof of the pudding will be in the

[Tim Loughton]

output, not in the amount of literature produced to identify the problem and to try to convince us that something is being done.

As we have heard, waiting times are still far too high. In a recent Adjournment debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Barker) spoke of the alarming problems caused by the time that breast cancer patients have to wait for treatment in his constituency in East Sussex. In an article entitled "Not the waiting list" in *The Sunday Times* this weekend, we read of further examples of treatment not happening in the south-east. For instance, Joy Barthorpe of Battle was diagnosed with breast cancer last October and had her operation on 28 December. She has now been told that her radiotherapy will not start until 24 June.

Another patient from Sussex was attending the Kent oncology centre in Maidstone. She was diagnosed last autumn as having breast cancer, and she underwent surgery on 21 November. Following the operation, she was told that it would be a requisite part of the treatment that she should start radiotherapy between four and six weeks later. She was told that she would receive written confirmation that radiotherapy would begin in early January, but she heard nothing for seven weeks. On telephoning Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS trust in early January, she was told that her treatment could not begin until 25 March. In practical terms it means that treatment that was recommended to begin four to six weeks after the operation will not now take place until at least 16 weeks later.

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of the case is that the hospital made no attempt to get in touch with the patient and tell her that she would have to wait another two and a half months to begin radiotherapy. By its own admission, current waiting times at the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS trust are not unusual; they are an accurate reflection of the situation across the NHS. The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) show how the centralisation of those services may push waiting times out even further.

Mr. Brazier: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, but he has just made exactly the point that I was about to make. We already have completely unacceptable waiting times at Maidstone. Waiting times at Canterbury are currently shorter; however, if Canterbury is run down and everyone is expected to be treated at Maidstone, what can we possibly expect to happen to waiting times?

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend makes his point well. As we know, Kent has a particular problem. Speed is of the essence in treating these cancers. Six weeks is approximately the time that it takes for many tumours to double in size, and introducing an additional delay of four or more weeks between planning and starting radiotherapy must prejudice outcomes.

It is not all the bed of roses in the south-east that many Ministers seem to think. It is the largest region in the country, with 8,100,000 people, which is 13.5 per cent. of the population of the United Kingdom. It is the most densely populated part of the country and the one with the greatest number of older people, as I know from my experience of Worthing. That brings with it problems for the NHS, such as additional costs of treatment for the elderly, bed blocking and long waiting times for hip and knee replacements. What measures have been taken to utilise spare capacity elsewhere in the United Kingdom? Those in the south-east face disproportionately long waits.

The pressures on finance are especially acute in the south-east. One recalls the leaked memo from Ruth Carnell, the chief executive of the NHS in the south-east region, which came to light just before Christmas. The memo showed that NHS trusts in the region would overspend in the financial year 2001–02 by £60 million. The Worthing and Southlands Hospitals NHS trust, in my constituency, is some £2.7 million in deficit.

Jo Yardley, the general manager of Kent oncology centre in Maidstone, in my hon. Friend's area, said:

"We asked for in excess of £1 million for this financial year. It was reduced to £650,000 and has now been reduced yet again. The waits cause immense anxiety yet I have never reported on any performance programme. It's something that we have been crying out for years."

Hilary Thomas, professor of oncology at Royal Surrey County hospital, said:

"When the money comes in, the chief executives want to put the money into achieving the targets over which they will get sacked. The public should know that one patient might be getting their varicose veins surgery done to meet some silly target in a manifesto and another"—

someone who does not appear on the waiting list—

"might not get radical treatment for cancer that may make a difference to whether they live to old age or not."

Those quotes are from this weekend's edition of *The Sunday Times*.

In the south-east, the additional pressures of staff shortages at all levels are causing problems. There is a particular shortage of radiographers, as has been mentioned by hon. Members. The figures for radiographer shortages in the south-east are alarming: the number of whole-time equivalent radiographers per 100,000 for the whole of England is 21. In the south-east, that figure is just 17 and in West Sussex, in my area, it is just 12, which compares with a figure of 25 in the north-west and 65 in Manchester. Those are big differences.

The vacancy rates also reflect the differences between regions. Against a national average of 8 per cent. of vacancies for therapeutic radiographers, in the south-east the average is 13.1 per cent. and in East Sussex and Brighton and Hove, next to my constituency, it is 19.2 per cent. Those are enormous differences. When I tabled questions about radiographer vacancies, we were told that information regarding the number of radiographers joining and leaving the NHS was not collected centrally. One might suggest that it should be collected centrally, because urgent central attention is required.

The Government may tell us that the number of qualified radiographers has increased by 8 per cent. since 1997—that is a head-count figure, not a whole-time equivalent. However, the Government have placed extra burdens on radiographers, with the enormous numbers of people who now, rightly, have breast screening. That extra capacity has been used up in dealing with the extra breast screening alone.

The breast screening centre in Worthing hospital has one consultant radiographer, Dr. Linda Rockall. Goodness knows what problems we would have in that hospital if she fell under a bus. The hospital desperately needs more recruits. People at the hospital say that they would be delighted to offer breast screening to older women, but that they cannot do so because they are struggling to cope with the work load as it is, without taking on a new raft of clients. Breast screening for older people would be a fair promise to make, but it is a worthless promise unless the resources and qualified radiographers exist. Especially in our corner of the world, there is an enormous shortage of those people.

I want to mention breast care services in Brighton and Hove. The central Sussex partnership has proposed the establishment of a single breast care service at the Princess Royal hospital at Haywards Heath, which will mean the closure of the breast care unit at the Royal Sussex County hospital in Brighton. That is a big issue locally. Just last week, a couple of Brighton and Hove councillors, Brian Oxley and Ann Norman, came to see me to try to focus yet more attention on what is a serious issue. A petition on the subject attracted some 30,000 signatures in just 11 days and a unanimous vote by every councillor of every political persuasion on Brighton and Hove council.

The city of Brighton and Hove has a population of just over 250,000, plus another 50,000 people living in the surrounding areas and 750,000 in West Sussex and my constituency, from where many people go to Brighton hospital for treatment. Many hundreds of women who live locally put their lives at risk each year by failing to keep hospital appointments, mainly due to fear of diagnosis. Certainly, as the hon. Member for Romsey said, we need to encourage women to walk into centres and get treatment at an early stage. It is felt that the number who fail to keep appointments will rise if patients have to undertake a difficult journey, often alone by public transport—in this case, to Haywards Heath.

The journey by public transport from Brighton to Haywards Heath and back to Brighton would take approximately four hours to complete, as the Princess Royal hospital is situated on the outskirts of Haywards Heath. The journey will be even more difficult for people who are elderly, disabled or infirm. The hon. Member for Romsey mentioned paying the travel costs of people who have operations on the continent, but it is a real problem at home. By contrast, buses travelling from all parts of Brighton and Hove stop at four-minute intervals outside the Royal Sussex County hospital in Brighton.

Even if the breast care service should be relocated to Haywards Heath, the accredited pathology service and treatment for patients needing chemotherapy or radiotherapy would be available only at the Royal Sussex County hospital in Brighton, and it is felt that separating services could lead to a lack of continuity in care. Two thirds of patients who attend breast care facilities at the Royal Sussex County hospital come from the Brighton and Hove area, where, on average, 2,700 patients a year attend 7,700 appointments.

My point is that the centralisation of cancer facilities—in this case, breast cancer facilities—is not doing anyone any good. Virtually the whole of the population of Sussex will have to use one centre or go across the border to Maidstone, and my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury has mentioned the problems there. Such services should be far more widely available, and far greater cognisance should be taken of the transport difficulties that people, especially those who come from deprived areas, encounter in trying to reach those facilities. That is not happening in Brighton and Hove.

Mr. Brazier: I want to add one point to the powerful case that my hon. Friend is putting on the issue of staffing. Part of the capacity problem results from staff shortages, yet people who are told that they must move to jobs in other specialties do not always go. I have seen a considerable number of resignations result from people being told that they must move from working on cancer.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a question not just of getting patients to the new facility but of getting professionals there to treat them. As the Minister knows, Sussex is a notoriously bad county to travel around, especially going from east to west. We need to take such considerations into account, instead of adopting the approach that big is good and centralising is inevitable. That is crucial in relation to breast cancer services, so I ask the Minister to reconsider. I am not saying that all services should be kept at Brighton or go to Mid Sussex, but we need much greater provision, which is more accessible to everyone in that area, although I do not believe that the example is atypical. I shall not refer to my second example because I want to leave the Minister adequate time to address the serious and important questions that have been raised. I hope that she will use the remaining 22 minutes to do so.

12.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) on securing this morning's debate and choosing such an important issue to discuss. The issue of cancer services clearly has immense resonance and importance to people throughout the country, including the many people who have in their family someone suffering from cancer and those whose relatives have died of cancer. Of course, people are anxious that, should they suffer from cancer, they will get the treatment and support that they need.

In introducing the debate, the hon. Lady spoke about the south-east, although she recognised that these were national issues. Other hon. Members also raised national issues, so I will talk about local issues, but I shall need to address many of the national questions that have been raised and put them in the national context.

The Government drew up a national cancer strategy, the NHS cancer plan, in September 2000. It is a 10-year strategy, part of the NHS 10-year plan. It is the first time that there has been a national strategy that covers cancer all the way from prevention, through diagnosis and treatment, to palliative care and research. Although hon. Members have concentrated primarily on cancer treatment, I shall make a couple of points later about prevention and research. It is important to look at the

[Yvette Cooper]

overall picture, not to segment the approach to cancer, as happened too often in the past and led to many of the problems that we face.

We should be clear that, throughout the country, NHS patients receive excellent cancer care. Hon. Members have mentioned the gratitude felt by individuals towards those who treat them; many people feel that they receive excellent care. However, it is also true that many patients wait too long for their treatment, and that there are too many variations in care across the country. Before the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the cancer plan, we had too little in the way of national standards.

Considerable progress has been made, particularly in the areas that have piloted some of the most innovative reforms, but we still have a long way to go. The Government have made substantial extra investment available for cancer—with tangible results in terms of both cancer consultants and extra equipment. We had 560 more cancer consultants in September 2001 than we did in September 1997, including 360 more since the national cancer plan was set out, and we have 29 new MRI scanners, 81 new computerised tomography scanners, 41 new linear accelerators and hundreds of extra pieces of breast cancer equipment.

In the south-east, staff recruitment and retention pose additional problems, although considerable work is under way and good progress is being made with the cancer plan initiatives to recruit and train more cancer staff. We must consider not simply recruiting further members of staff—given the time that it takes to train many health professionals, that could still leave us with an interim concern—but changing the mix of skills and the work that different health professionals do, in order to expand capacity. For example, we have made £2.5 million available to train additional staff in endoscopy and I shall say more about radiotherapy.

Capacity is not the only issue; there is also a matter of reforming the way in which care is provided in order to speed up treatment. In that respect, I pay tribute to the excellent work being done by the cancer collaboratives, including those in the south-east, some of which have demonstrated the most innovative reform in the NHS. For example, the cancer collaborative in north Hampshire has cut the length of time for which a patient has to wait between an out-patient appointment and a CT scan from an average of 20 days to an average of two days, and the one in west London has cut the diagnosis time for prostate cancer from 20 weeks to 14 days simply by changing the way in which it provides the service. On average, since the cancer collaboratives were introduced, waiting times for treatment have dropped by two and a half weeks.The NHS has also made substantial progress in meeting the two-week target for waiting to see a specialist. Between October and December 2001, over 95 per cent. of patients nationally referred urgently with all suspected cancers were seen within two weeks. That figure rose to 97.1 per cent. in the case of breast cancer in the south-east.

The hon. Lady mentioned variations in meeting those targets and referred to Hastings and Rother meeting the two-week target in only 58 per cent. of cases. The latest figure there is 97 per cent. I am advised that in order to meet that target, the health authority developed a one-stop breast clinic. It was a question of reforming the way in which it provided the services in order to speed up the time that patients had to wait to see consultants.

Hon. Members raised concerns about other factors not being measured and said that the whole cancer pathway from referral to treatment or from referral to diagnosis should be considered. That is right and that is exactly what we are doing. We have set out a series of targets that will come into force during the next few years. Already, from last December, a maximum one-month wait between urgent referral and treatment has been established for children with cancer, patients with acute leukaemia and those with testicular cancer. A similar one-month target has been established for the length of time between diagnosis and treatment for women with breast cancer. By 2005, there will a maximum one-month wait from diagnosis to treatment for all cancers and a maximum two-month wait from urgent referral to treatment for all cancers.

The two-week wait is just the first step. It is an important step and an important part of the patient pathway, but we must also take action to bring down the waiting times for diagnosis and for treatment. To do that, we need to measure waiting times differently and follow the patient in a different way. The cancer collaboratives are already doing that and we need to do it across the NHS to ensure that cancer patients are getting the best possible care. Work is already in hand to introduce those targets and ensure that they are met across the country.

Hon. Members raised issues surrounding radiotherapy. We have been very open about the problems in that area. The number of therapy radiographers needs to increase and we need to improve facilities. The problems are exacerbated by the fact that the number of patients being referred for radiotherapy has increased considerably during the past few years, following the establishment of specialist cancer teams. The increase in referrals is a positive development because there was unmet need before, but that increase means that considerable work needs to be done. Progress has already been made. The number of therapy radiographers increased by 9 per cent. between 1997 and 2001 and training places for therapy radiographers at university have increased by 62 per cent. since 1997. By 2003–04, the projected increase is 120 per cent.

The numbers are increasing, but we need to go further. We need to consider a different skill mix. Different skill-mix programmes are already being piloted, including the creation of a new grade of assistant practitioner. Pilots are continuing in 10 centres and early indications are positive. Huge additional investment is being made in radiotherapy facilities, but there is much to do and we need to go further.

Hon. Members asked questions about funding. We have made substantial extra sums available to support the implementation of the cancer plan. We are monitoring the extra investment and will continue to do so to ensure that improvements are being made. In the end, the key issue will be the output from improvements in care.

Hon. Members also raised the question of palliative care. We have made available an extra £50 million to support investment in such care by 2004. It will be a matter for local cancer networks to decide how that

extra money needs to be spent. They will consider hospices, investment in the community and the issues surrounding palliative care in hospitals. It is important that that is done as part of a strategic approach. For the first time this year, local areas have had to draw together palliative care strategies, which are now being assessed. In some areas, it is the first time that hospices have got round the table properly with the NHS to consider strategically the community's palliative care needs. In other areas, good working relationships have been built on and in others there is considerably more to be done.

It is important for the NHS to pay sensible contribution costs. We need to inform that process through guidance produced by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence on palliative care, which is due to be published this summer. However, it should be recognised that extra investment is reaching hospices. The Help the Hospices survey showed an increase in funding to hospices during the past two years of 14 per cent., although I say that from memory and not from my briefing. Extra resources are reaching the hospices, but they must be part of a broader, more strategic approach to palliative care across the country.

Dr. Evan Harris: The Minister is making quick progress through the points that we raised, but I want to return her to my first two questions. The first related to her attitude to the private sector employing NHS-trained radiotherapists, whether there is any compensation for the NHS and, more important, whether one can ask it to reflect the cost of that training in its tenders. The second related to the evidence base for improved survival resulting from concentrating first on a two-week wait to see a specialist rather than giving priority to the waiting time for treatment for patients already diagnosed with cancer.

Yvette Cooper: When it comes to the relationship between the NHS and the private sector, the Government have clearly said that we must ensure that the NHS obtains value for money. There are many different ways to achieve that. The relationship will evolve over time to ensure that that value for money is sustained. However, we must use whatever extra capacity there is and must not disadvantage patients by avoiding doing so, as long as extra capacity can provide value for money without undermining the long-term sustainability of the health service.

The two-week wait must be seen as one part of the patient's journey. There is considerable evidence of the anxiety felt by patients at that important time when they first raise concerns and are referred by a GP, but have not been seen by a specialist: they have not even entered the first stage of the process of being seen by the specialist and sent off for the appropriate tests or possibly being reassured by the specialist. Therefore, we must speed up every stage of the patient's journey. The point is not to separate out the different stages and consider the comparative evidence base, but to start at the beginning and see how quickly patients can get through the whole process once they are referred by their GP. The cancer plan approach is to consider the whole journey, and that is what the collaboratives have done. Their success has come from following the patient from beginning to end instead of looking at the way in which isolated cancer services perform and do their job. That is the right approach, but the improvements take time to put in place, because they involve different ways of working as well as changes taking place across the NHS and additional capacity, and the information must be monitored. It is right to make a start with the two-week wait, but we must also speed up the process across the board, particularly by rolling out the cancer collaboratives.

The hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) referred to the cancer services and issues in his area and in relation to the Canterbury hospital. As hon. Members will know, after a public consultation on proposals issued last year the East Kent health authority has made its conclusions known. The new health authority considered those proposals recently, and two community health councils have now registered their objections to some of them. Ministers will have to decide what action to take, and a decision will be needed from the Secretary of State. The hon. Gentleman has raised those issues before and will understand that I can add no more to my earlier comments. It is not a decision that Ministers will take lightly; they will have to consider all the issues. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears), will visit the East Kent health authority area in advance of any decision to see the situation for herself. I simply underline the fact that decisions on reconfiguration in East Kent must be taken in the best interests of all the residents, who must have access to the best quality treatment. The cancer services and their configuration in the area must reflect those principles.

Mr. Brazier: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way. Would she accept that the problem is that cancer was not included in that consultation? The trust responsible for delivering cancer care in Maidstone and Canterbury, the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS trust, was not a signatory to the consultation document.

Yvette Cooper: I know that the hon. Gentleman has made those points. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is very much alive to them, and will certainly take them into consideration. Although I cannot comment, the hon. Gentleman made various detailed remarks about the views of different consultants, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend is aware of the points made during today's debate.

On the issue of cancer services in Brighton, I understand that the recommendation for the central Sussex partnership programme has yet to be considered in full by the new health authority. Because that is the case, and because of the possibility that Ministers will have to take a decision on that issue in future, I am sure that hon. Members will understand that it would be inappropriate for me to comment at this stage.

Several hon. Members have raised the issue of cancer drugs and the role of NICE. It is important to remember why we set up NICE. We did so specifically to end the lottery of postcode prescribing. For the first time, we have national guidelines on treatment and drugs, particularly for cancer. It is important that the national guidance is right and that the process that NICE goes through involves opportunities for interested parties to submit evidence and comment on draft conclusions. Directions have been issued obliging health authorities and primary care trusts to provide appropriate funding for the treatments recommended by NICE.

[Yvette Cooper]

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) asked what the implications were for other drugs. We have made the extra investment available for cancer services. It is clear that that was to cover recommendations made by NICE. We have also made overall investment available for the NHS, which is increasing by more than 7 per cent. and includes a substantial increase in the drugs bill. Local areas clearly have to take their own decisions about prescribing, but the allocations available for them and the investment in drug treatments is increasing substantially right across the board.

There are other areas of progress worth pointing out, including the increase in the number of women receiving breast cancer screening as a result of the extension of the age range up to 70. A total of 87,000 more women were screened last year, and that figure will eventually reach 400,000. There has also been an increase in the numbers of people receiving support to give up smoking. We should not forget that we shall save far more lives from cancer by preventing people from getting it in the first place than purely by improving the care that people receive.

There have been some common themes in the debate, interestingly including, from both the Opposition spokespersons, a concern about more investment and more money for cancer care. They want more money for drugs, treatment, palliative care, staff pay, and consultants. I agree that we do need more investment in cancer treatment, and that cancer services need more funding. They are already getting an increase in funding, but they need to continue to receive that increase during the next few years. That is why the Government set out an overall increase in funding of over 7 per cent. a year in real terms—double the historical increase that the NHS had during the last 30 or 40 years—and we have said that that money will come from national insurance contributions.

The Conservative Opposition, with respect, have opposed the increase in national insurance contributions, but have also said that there should be more money for palliative care and other areas of cancer. I have no inkling of where on earth they think that that money will come from. Frankly, the idea that people should pay extra for cancer care to provide, for example, their own cancer drugs is not something that we would expect to see realised in the NHS, and no one, whatever their background, is likely to be able to afford it easily, given the cost of some of the new treatments that are coming on line. It is right and fair that cancer care should be provided for everyone on the NHS, not simply for those who can afford to pay. We need greater investment but also greater reform.

Opposition Members need to recognise our extra investment, and if they want further investment they need to set out where it should come from. We have set out where it should come from and where it should go—

Mr. Win Griffiths (in the Chair): Order.

Standard Spending Assessment (Bury)

12.30 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I am grateful to have this opportunity to raise the standing spending assessment for Bury. This may not be the best-attended debate of the Session, but the issue is of enormous importance both to my constituents and to the local authority that encompasses my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) and I have campaigned consistently on behalf of our constituents over the past five years, and it is only his ministerial responsibilities that prevent him from participating in today's debate.

The timing of the debate is interesting as it is almost three years to the day since I raised the issue of SSA in Bury in an Adjournment debate that I secured on 19 May 1999 on primary schools in Bury. The particular component of SSA that is most controversial from Bury's point of view is, of course, the education SSA, to which I shall return later.

Bury metropolitan district council is one of the smallest of the 36 metropolitan districts, with a population of 182,000. It has a mixed population and is not easily categorised. It contains areas of great deprivation and of great prosperity. It is an urban local authority with a rural hinterland and significant expanses of suburban areas. The local authority has historically suffered from its small size because, by definition, it cannot enjoy the economies of scale open to bigger metropolitan districts and shire counties. Historically, it has been underfunded, originally because of many years of control by a Conservative group, which did not build up the asset base in Bury, and over the past decade by the impact of the SSA, which has always worked against Bury and many other small metropolitan districts.

The authority has recently been categorised as one of the 20 most improved authorities in the country. It is well regarded by most ratepayers in Bury, as evidenced by the results of the local elections last Thursday, in which the Labour majority on the council was increased by two. The authority does most things well, some things excellently, and where it has weaknesses is working hard to remedy them. Its financial difficulties are enhanced by the large majority of properties being in council tax bands A, B and C, which limits the scope of revenue from that source.

The history of Bury over the past 10 years is interesting. In the early 1990s it was subjected to continuous financial pressures leading to an absolute crisis in the 1997 budget. Several million pounds of cuts were made, particularly to the education budget. That caused widespread controversy and disruption throughout schools in the borough. The council had historically protected its education service—it has to be said that that was at the expense of other services such as highways and social services—by spending approximately 10 per cent. more than SSA throughout the early 1990s. By 1997, that was no longer possible, and the bullet had to be bitten. The local authority bit the bullet by cutting its education spending to the SSA level.

In Bury, we are extremely grateful for the gradual increase in SSA that the local authority has experienced in the past three years. For example, in 1998-99, it

increased by 7.99 per cent. against a national average of 5.19 per cent.; in 1999-2000, it increased by 5 per cent. against a national average of 4.84 per cent.; and in 2000–01, it increased by 4.74 per cent. against a national average of 4.37 per cent. We are grateful for the year-on-year improvements in investments in our services. Despite that, the difference between Bury's education spending and the national average has widened in the past three years, as has the difference between Bury's education SSA and that of the best-funded authorities.

We would never expect to be one of the best-funded local authorities, but we are hugely aggrieved that we consistently find ourselves in the bottom quarter of the education SSA. The Government's index of local deprivation suggests that Bury is in the worst third of local authorities on most deprivation indicators, so we think that our SSA settlement should reflect that. I should like to quote briefly a debate here on 19 May 1999. I am reluctant to quote myself, but it is a timely way to start. I said:

"On finance, Bury local authority has suffered historically from a low standard spending assessment ... The aggregated schools budget per capita spend is £100 below the national average for primary schools and £150 below the national average for secondary schools."

Those differentials have increased over the past three years. I also said:

"I know that Ministers at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are highly conscious of the inequities of the SSA system. I know also that a considerable amount of work was done on that last year and that a change to the children's social services criteria was introduced which benefited some of the poorly funded authorities such as Bury. However, I again draw attention to the fact that we must wait a further three years for the next review of SSAs. The contentious issues of the area cost adjustment and the additional educational needs criteria remain to be resolved. In those three years, Bury and other small local authorities will continue to be funded by a system that is widely regarded as being unjustified and methodologically unsound."—[*Official Report*, 19 May 1999; Vol. 331, c. 1023.]

So it has proved over the past three years. We look forward to the promised Government reforms of 1 April 2003.

Just before the 1997 general election, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), the then shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, came to Bury, pledged that there would be a full reform of the SSA system, and accepted that Bury's case for improvement was overwhelming. Two years later, the present Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions came to Bury in his former capacity and recognised the inequity in funding, particularly in education; he pledged that the system would be reformed. In each of the past five years, the local authority has written to the Department in response to the settlement and has made arguments for change and improvement. My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware of recent correspondence, and I am grateful for his reply acknowledging the council's points.

In a letter that I sent to the Department on 24 January this year which summarises my views I said:

"I am writing to support the Council's response in its entirety; to reiterate the urgent need for a transformation of the current arcane SSA system to one that is not only fairer in application but more transparent in methodology and less subject to dubious forms of manipulation; and to draw attention to the fact that the discrepancy between Bury's SSA and that of both the best funded authorities and those with average levels of funding would appear to have significantly widened during the last four years."

We welcome the overall improvements to local government finance, the approximately 5 per cent. a year increase in SSA, and the introduction of new funding streams, particularly for education, from which we have benefited. However, I come back to the fact that the basic methodology that currently applies is unacceptable.

In a letter to the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, the finance spokesman of a local authority criticised the area cost adjustment component of the SSA:

"The operation of what is the most perverse element of the SSA system has now reached the point of farce and the late amendments made to the data used in the provisional Settlement has brought the absurdity of the situation directly to the attention of our residents, schools, partners and service users.

Bury continues to acknowledge that the costs of providing local authority services in London and the South East are, to some extent, higher than in other areas of the country. However we have always believed that the current ACA methodology considerably overstates the differential in costs and we have campaigned, along with our colleagues in SIGOMA, for a distribution system that reflects actual, measurable variations in local authority costs.

The late data changes have severely damaged the expectations of service providers and users, and they will hit our schools particularly hard. Local politicians and officials will find it well nigh impossible to justify to Governors, teachers and parents why it is that the pay increases given to 350 'City' workers should rob Bury schools of around £400,000 of much needed resources."

That was a reference to the late changes to the data used in the settlement for this year. We want a system that is based on transparency and on measurable costs that have been agreed and that everyone can understand.

May I give an example of the differentials that currently apply between Bury and other authorities? The gap that I referred to in the 1999 debate on Bury's primary schools was of the order of £100 between the primary SSA for Bury and the national average, and £150 between the secondary SSA for Bury and the national average. In the past three years, the gap has increased: the gap between Bury and the English average is now £201 for the primary SSA and £254 for the secondary SSA. The differentials between the Bury primary and secondary SSAs and those of some of the best-funded authorities have increased by far more than that. The primary SSA for Tower Hamlets has increased by £443 in the past three years, against an increase of £223 in Bury. Its secondary SSA has increased by £521 against an increase of £281 in Bury. I know that Tower Hamlets has many problems to grapple with, and everyone in Bury would accept that the problems in Tower Hamlets are of a different order from those in Bury. However, my constituents, my local authority and I cannot and do not accept that that is an argument for increasing the differential in SSA year after year.

I am focusing on the area cost adjustment element in education because it is most controversial. We have particular problems this year. For example, the need to provide local authority matched funding for the standards fund resulted in the call of an extra £900,000 on the local authority. Had the local authority not attempted to draw down its full allocation of the standards fund, it would rightly have been subject to criticism by head teachers and governors and by the

[Mr. David Chaytor]

auditors. The only way it could find that additional £900,000 was by working with the schools and getting their agreement to pool their surpluses to achieve the matched funding.

The teachers' pay award this year put additional stress on SSA funding. The cost of statementing children with special needs has increased dramatically in recent years. Like many other areas, the area faces the problem of declining numbers in primary schools, an issue with which the authority is currently dealing through a consultation programme on proposals for mergers of primary schools to reduce surplus places.

The pressures on education budgets remain intense, but it is not just education that feels such pressures. The local authority was particularly aggrieved this year at the way in which the implied promises—I choose my words carefully—of increases to highways SSA because of the use of geographical information system data did not materialise. Apparently, that was because of a very late decision to change the application of GIS data so that the data applied only to principal roles. That change resulted in the loss of several hundreds of thousands of pounds for Bury's highways SSA.

In social services, we have a legacy of overspend, with which the local authority is dealing effectively. However, pressures on social services, particularly because of the interface with the health trust, are putting significant pressures, in turn, on the local authority. I draw attention to a further issue: the pressure on the local authority to meet performance indicators on the movement of elderly people from residential care and on the increase in domiciliary care is in conflict with the pressure on primary care trusts to deal with bed-blocking by getting more people out of hospital as soon as they are ready to leave and into residential care. Ministers in the DTLR and the Department of Health could usefully discuss, and to try to resolve, that issue. At the moment, the local authority's performance indicators are in direct conflict with the performance indicators by which primary care trusts have to abide.

The local authority has put a budget together this year that resulted in a council tax rise of a little more than 6 per cent.—higher than we would have wished. It has allowed some modest growth in education and one or two other services, but there have been serious reductions in some services. The local authority continues to support the work of the special interest group of municipal authorities, which has campaigned consistently for the abolition of the area cost adjustment. It is also a member of the F40 group of local education authorities—the 40 worst-funded LEAs. Bury has a very strong interest in the campaign that F40 runs for a national minimum per capita level of investment in primary and secondary education.

I know that the Government have pledged to reform the system by 1 April 2003 and I understand that there will shortly be a consultation document. We look forward to that with enormous interest. We hope that there will be a genuine consultation, with ample opportunity for all local authorities to state their views. In his reply, I hope that the Minister can say whether he accepts the case that Bury has consistently argued over the years—that the current system discriminates against Bury.

Can the Minister confirm that the reforms promised by the Government, whatever shape they prove to have, will be in place by 1 April 2003? Can he tell us when the consultation document is likely to be published and how long the consultation period will be? Will the proposals put out for consultation include the idea of a flat-rate entitlement in respect of the education SSA? Given my earlier comments about the discrepancy in the way in which Bury is treated for SSA and categorised in the index of local deprivation, will the index of local deprivation be used as a factor in the new methodology?

Finally, the Minister is very welcome to visit my constituency and I invite to him to do so at his earliest convenience.

12.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Dr. Alan Whitehead): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on securing this debate on Bury's standard spending assessment. I drove through his constituency the other day, but did not stop in Bury. I should be delighted to visit his constituency and Bury metropolitan district council in the not too distant future. Not only has my hon. Friend secured this debate on Bury's SSA, but the evidence of his contribution suggests that he is in danger of becoming one of the five people in the country who, allegedly, fully understand the SSA system.

The 2002–03 local government finance settlement has come and gone. Parliament approved it, councils have set their budgets and are getting on with the difficult tasks they face this year. Finance directors of most councils are turning to the distribution of grant next year. We want a fair and transparent distribution of Government grant between authorities. My hon. Friend's letter of 19 January was prescient in that regard. That is precisely what we are trying to achieve in our review of how SSA, or its successor, is determined.

My hon. Friend focused on the changes he would like to be made to the distribution formula. We are working hard to develop proposals with local government and will consult councils, probably during the summer, on the options. I confirm that the new distribution formula will be in place for the next financial year, but I do not underestimate the magnitude of that task. All authorities want to be winners, but that, of course, is not possible. I can assure my hon. Friend that changes will be made only in the interests of ensuring that the money that is available as a result of the current spending review finds its way to the right areas.

I must set the scene for what has happened in Bury in recent years. It could make a case that it has not done as well as it might in terms of grant increases, but we have been able to provide good increases for Bury metropolitan district council in recent years. However, I recognise that it has not done as well as many authorities.

The overall settlement for 2002–03 was a good one for local government and provided an increase of £1.9 billion in general grant on a like-for-like basis. Those good increases in grant enabled us to set a floor grant increase to ensure that all authorities received increases in general grant at least in line with inflation. All authorities with education and personal social

services functions, such as Bury, received an increase of at least 4 per cent. Bury's settlement was just above that floor with an increase of 4.2 per cent. or £4.6 million. However, Bury remains close to the floor because it received a lower than average increase in SSA: 4.3 per cent. this year compared with a national average increase of 5.4 per cent.

That was due mainly to a small population decrease compared with a national average increase and also to a below-average increase in the number of pupils aged 11 to 15 compared with a national average increase of 1.2 per cent. However, as my hon. Friend said, compared with the increases in SSA before 1997, Bury, like many authorities, has done well. In the four years before then, Bury received an average SSA increase of 2.6 per cent. each year and since then it has received an average annual increase of 4.6 per cent.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the pressures facing social services departments from bed-blocking and the care of elderly people. He will be aware that Bury benefits from the increase in ring-fenced grant to tackle bed blocking and receives £500,000 from the new fund. We recognise, however, that there remain substantial pressures on social services departments in that regard.

My hon. Friend makes the case for a different distribution of grant, which would benefit Bury. As I mentioned, we want a fairer and more transparent system for distributing grant between councils, and we are working with local government to develop options to achieve that. Fairness is, however, often in the eye of the beholder, and while we hope to achieve consensus, we shall inevitably be unable to please everyone.

I cannot provide details about the possible options today, but the debate has given us a valuable opportunity to understand more about the issues from Bury's perspective. As I said, we will consult on options for the new grant distribution system over the summer. Colleagues from across Government and I will continue to discuss these difficult issues with hon. Members, local government representatives and others with an interest in what the grant system delivers.

As my hon. Friend said, Bury wants to close the gap between SSA and spend. We know that most authorities spend more than the grant allocation system assumes when standard spending assessments are calculated, and we are considering particular pressures in the spending review. Among other things, that will effectively spell the end of the standard spending assessment as we know it. We certainly intend to remove from the system elements of roll-forward from historic assumptions, which have caused some of the problems that my hon. Friend mentioned.

My hon. Friend will also want to know that, alongside the changes that I have outlined to the SSA system, the Government are committed to ensuring that ring-fenced funding as a proportion of total revenue spend will go down over future years.

It is for local authorities to take decisions on council tax levels and on whether to spend above the level that we assume in the formulae. The son or daughter of the SSA system is likely to involve a decision about how much spending the Government are prepared to support, and grant will be allocated on that basis. However, we want local authorities that are in the process of making such decisions to continue engaging with their communities about priorities and their implications for council tax.

My hon. Friend mentioned the possible allocation of a fixed sum to reflect population. He said that Bury was a small authority and could not find the same efficiencies of scale as larger authorities. My officials are examining the proposal from many smaller authorities that an element of grant be distributed on a fixed-cost basis. Authorities should, however, be able to think innovatively about making themselves more efficient and providing better services.

My hon. Friend mentioned the area cost adjustment and underlined his concern about the late change in this year's figures. The area cost adjustment turned out to be different from initial indications. A late change in the data that the Office for National Statistics supplied to us led to a change in the area cost adjustment just before the provisional settlement announcement. We certainly want to avoid a repeat of that. We know that the ACA is possibly the most controversial element of the formula system, and we want to reform it.

My hon. Friend talked about the education standard spending assessment formula. I am very much aware of the strength of feeling about the current education funding formula in Bury. As he will know, we are working on a new system, which includes education. Our aim in introducing that system is to make funding not only fairer, but clearer, and that is particularly true of education. For the first time, we will separately identify the funding that we want to reach schools, which we cannot do under the current system. Of course, any funding formula will need an element for deprivation and an enhancement for areas where schools must pay more to recruit and to retain staff. However, we want the level of those enhancements to be decided using more up-to-date evidence, not by building on past expenditure, as in the current system.

We still have work to do on the new system, and my hon. Friend will understand that until the new formula has been developed and detailed figures have been obtained we cannot say how individual authorities' share of overall funding will be decided. We shall be consulting on proposals for the new funding formula in the summer.

I accept that there are declining pupil numbers in Bury. Interestingly, however, a lag in data tends to protect local authorities in that regard. The problem faced by authorities with increasing pupil numbers is of equal concern.

Mr. Win Griffiths (in the Chair): Order. We move to the debate on the state of the Scottish whisky industry.

Scotch Whisky Industry

1 pm

Angus Robertson (Moray): I am pleased to have the opportunity to initiate a debate on the Scotch whisky industry, which is responsible for much of the country's exports. It is a significant employer and provides hundreds of millions, if not billions, of pounds of taxation revenue to the London Treasury.

I should begin with a declaration of interest, which is not confined to a personal, though moderate, recreational tasting interest. My first job was at the Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre on Edinburgh's Royal Mile. That has been superseded by my responsibilities in representing Moray, the constituency that contains more than 50 per cent. of Scotland's malt whisky distilleries. I am also vice-chairman of the all-party group on Scotch whisky, and I pay tribute to Margaret Ewing, my predecessor in that post and in the House. She was a doughty fighter on whisky issues in the House and continues to be so in the Scottish Parliament.

Maintaining a close interest in all Moray's whisky producers is not always easy, especially at election time, when it is necessary to tour the region's fine distilleries. Of course, it would be rude not to sample the product—in moderation, I hasten to add. Discipline is called for, given the number of distilleries. One can at least rely on the knowledge of numerous genuine experts in Moray, such as Peter Brown of Craigallaichie hotel, whose encyclopaedic knowledge covers all 436 single malts, a large selection of blends and the vatted malts at the Keeper of the Quaich bar.

The whisky industry in Moray is vital, owing to the considerable direct and indirect employment that it provides in the constituency, from the stillmen, the coopers, peat cutters, farmers, hauliers, tour guides, managers and office staff. Moray is home to world-renowned bottlers, retail outlets and experts, such as Gordon & McPhail, the whisky shop in Duffton, and Malcolm Greenwood, the celebrated writer. For those who would like to know more, I recommend the new Scotch whisky course offered by Moray college.

One cannot accurately measure the importance of the whisky industry to local business and tourism, as it is immense. Yesterday, the highly successful Spirit of Speyside whisky festival ended. At the beginning of the festival, on Friday, I was delighted to be able to join hundreds of locals and tourists at the Coothie Doo Two ceilidh in Craigallaichie. That was a fantastic event, featuring a fly-over by Flight Lieutenants Colin McGregor and Andi McColl of the Tornado GR4 display team based at RAF Lossiemouth, in their aptly named fast jet Spirit of Speyside. It was a great example of the local partnership between the whisky industry and charitable and community causes. In this case, moneys were raised for the Children's Hospice Association of Scotland, Rachel house. I am sure that hon. Members will wish the appeal all the best.

The whisky industry is significant throughout Scotland. It is the second largest export industry in Scotland and the fifth largest in the United Kingdom. The industry directly employs more than 11,000 in Scotland and a further 30,000 are employed in related sectors. It is among the United Kingdom's top five export earners, generating more than £2 billion from sales a year, in 200 markets. The industry uses about 25 per cent. of Scotland's barley crop, and 70 per cent. of all Scottish grain is used in grain distilleries. It supports one in every 54 Scottish jobs, accounting for 5 per cent. of all manufacturing jobs, and spends £1 billion a year buying goods and services from local suppliers.

In 1999, the Fraser of Allander Institute produced a report for Allied Domecq. It identified that the Scotch whisky industry was twice as important as computer-related manufacturing, a third bigger than the oil and gas industries, 12 per cent. greater than banking, insurance and finance, 30 per cent. greater than mechanical engineering, and a third larger than the chemical industry. All those statistics underline the key importance of the Scotch whisky industry, and stress the need for the Government to provide the optimal conditions for it to flourish.

Over the years, commentators have established that the taxation regime at home and abroad is one of the most significant factors that determines whether whisky sells as much as possible. In recent decades, Scotch whisky has made great strides in markets such as Spain, Italy, the United States and the far east. Those areas generally have more benign tax regimes than the United Kingdom. Sadly, some of the worst taxation excesses are to be found in the UK, the state that benefits from massive revenues from the industry.

Currently, 66 per cent. of the price of a bottle of whisky is tax. Since 1973, the price of a bottle of whisky, including the excise duty, has been subject to value added tax, which is levied on the duty-paid price. That means that the price of a bottle of Scotch whisky is increased by and subject to a tax on a tax. On 10 occasions in 18 years of government, the Conservatives took the opportunity to raise the burden on the whisky industry. Perhaps that sad record is why no Conservative Member of Parliament is present today. The discrimination under the Conservatives has continued under the Labour Government, and duty on whisky is currently one and a half times higher than that on other competing beverages.

Although there has been some recent narrowing of tax discrimination against spirits, the discrimination remains and was continued in this year's Budget by a Chancellor who, of course, represents a Scottish constituency. Like the Scotch Whisky Association, the Scottish National party has been in favour of a 4 per cent. cut in whisky duty. Experts believe that such a measure would be revenue neutral, creating a higher demand for whisky and thereby maintaining duty and taxation income for the Treasury.

Most distilleries are based in rural areas such as Moray, and the distillery is often the lifeblood of the community A duty cut for Scotch would have helped to end the competitive disadvantage that discriminates against Scotland's farmers and rural communities. Perhaps the Minister, in his summing up, will outline how long we must wait for an equalisation of duty under the Government's current policy.

I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to clarify the recent and welcome U-turn by the Treasury, in which it dumped its controversial proposal to bring in strip stamps. The Government have consulted on introducing the costly anti-fraud strips on the top of bottles, despite evidence from other countries that they

do not work. Luckily, a vigorous campaign by the Scotch Whisky Association, the Scottish National party and others made the Government see sense. However, Ministers still have to answer why they thought about introducing the daft scheme in the first place.

David Hamilton (Midlothian): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. Like him, I enjoy a tipple or two now and again, and frequent the usual areas. Unfortunately, there are no distilleries in Midlothian, although East Lothian has the only lowland distillery.

Does the hon. Gentleman not give credit where credit is due? The Government are listening. They listened to Back-Bench Members who approached them, and to the whisky organisations, about the strip duty. It was a bad idea, but the Government had to consider it. He should give them credit for having withdrawn it.

Angus Robertson: Midlothian has the largest plant that produces labels for the Scotch whisky industry, so the hon. Gentleman has a direct and pressing interest in it.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning other parties' opposition to strip stamps. Early-day motion 842 was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Perth (Annabelle Ewing), and we were grateful to receive the support of English Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs. However, I note with interest that not one Scottish Labour or Scottish Liberal Democrat MP chose to oppose strip stamps publicly. I am therefore grateful that the hon. Gentleman has, perhaps belatedly, joined the opposition to what I described as a daft idea. I welcome that greatly, and would be grateful for his support on similar campaigns while they are ongoing rather than over.

Why did the Government think about introducing strip stamps? That measure would have cost the Scotch whisky industry £250 million extra. The Government had no idea how much revenue strip stamps would raise, but application machines would have cost producers millions of pounds, forcing smaller businesses under.

In a recent debate on the subject in the Scottish Parliament, justifiable concerns about tax fraud were raised. Despite efforts by Labour Members of the Scottish Parliament such as Brian Fitzpatrick to support the case for tax stamps, more thoughtful contributions were made on the problem of inward diversion, which is tax fraud connected with whisky coming from the European Union to the United Kingdom. Of course, the primary difficulty is that excise duty in the UK is much higher than in other EU states. That creates an automatic incentive to fraudsters who want to avoid paying the higher rates of excise duty in the UK. Government efforts to deal with fraudsters should start with that point, rather than measures that penalise the whisky industry.

The key matter of minimum duty rates applied by the European Union also affects the Scotch whisky industry. The EU Commission has said that spirits, including whisky, are disadvantaged and that there is distortion in the market. With a new draft proposal by the Commission on the table, I would be grateful if the Minister clarified what efforts the UK Government are making to secure the best deal for the whisky industry and everyone who works for it, directly and indirectly.

It would be useful to find out what consultations have been held with the Scottish Executive, whose Ministers miss 90 per cent. of meetings of the Council of Ministers. That is a great example of the case for direct Scottish representation in Europe. Today's edition of *The Herald* suggests that the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament do not receive all relevant EU documentation from UK Departments, including the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Before today's debate, I took time to speak to many local people in Moray involved directly in the whisky industry. I tried to find out what problems they face, in the hope that the Government would listen to those concerns and do something about them. Next to the matters of taxation that I have outlined—that is the overwhelming issue for them—red tape concerned them most. Despite the excellent safety and environmental record of the industry, regulations and compliance issues with regard to the control of major accident hazards have mushroomed. Those include the climate change levy, the waste water directive, the fresh water fisheries directive and the possible consequences of the Roques report. What assurances can the Government give that they will stop forcing the industry to prove negatives, that public agencies will act as facilitators rather than barriers to success, and that red tape will be reduced?

The Scotch whisky industry is vital to the Scottish economy and the UK Treasury. The taxation imposed on whisky by successive UK Governments has disadvantaged Scotch in the home market, where whisky is taxed at higher levels than wine or beer. That discrimination has allowed other countries to seek to justify their own discriminatory tax regimes by reference to those implemented in the UK by a Labour Government and previously by a Conservative Government.

The Government will be aware of a joint document published by the Scottish Executive and the Scotch Whisky Association, aptly if optimistically entitled "A Toast to the Future: working together for Scotch whisky". The Scottish Executive support the industry's case for a review of the UK tax regime, with the aim of achieving a fair outcome for the Scotch whisky industry. Will the Minister indicate whether the Government will accede to that moderate demand, or do they oppose the Labour-Liberal Scottish Executive?

I welcome the Government's U-turn on a tax stamp system, which would have constituted a barrier to trade and been inefficient and ineffective. Finally, it is high time for all powers relating to the regulation and taxation of the whisky industry to be transferred to the Scottish Parliament. That should not be left to the whim of successive Westminster Governments, who do little to help it.

1.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) on securing this debate and on making a strong case for an important industry. It is important for employment in many areas—not only rural areas but urban areas. As my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton) pointed out, the Scotch whisky industry is important to his constituency and the surrounding area.

[Mr. Elliot Morley]

The whisky industry, however, is also much involved with the tourist industry. I speak as someone who has enjoyed the whisky trail, visiting the distilleries in Speyside—a good time was had by all—and I understand the popularity of whisky tasting. The hon. Member for Moray may like to know that, when the United Kingdom had the presidency of the European Union and the president of the Agriculture Council was my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), one of the most popular informal meetings was the whisky tasting event. Indeed, Franz Fischler was intrigued by it, and it was difficult to get him out of the room at the end. The event was a huge success for Britain and for the Scottish whisky industry.

I was intrigued to learn that the hon. Gentleman once worked at the Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre. I should have thought that the attraction of being a Member of Parliament for the SNP did not compare to working in the whisky heritage centre; the hon. Gentleman seems to have given up a very good job. I echo his comments on the Tornado GR4 display team. It is good to see such community involvement. I congratulate all those concerned in that fund-raising exercise and wish them every success.

I turn to the details raised by the hon. Gentleman. We concede the whisky industry's importance to the UK. We also recognise its tremendous success in promoting exports. He was right to state that Scotch whisky is the UK's fifth largest export earning industry. Fourteen per cent. of exports go to the United States of America, and 40 per cent. go to the EU. Indeed, wherever one travels, Scotch whisky is effectively promoted. The brand image and the industry's promotion campaigns are a lesson to other industries on how to succeed in export markets.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of tax parity and the duty on whisky. We know that it is of considerable interest to the sector. There has been a lot of dialogue between the industry and the Government. I emphasise that, since the Scotch Whisky Association wrote its report on duty, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has frozen the spirits duty rate for a fifth successive year. That will doubtless feature in the association's report for 2002. It demonstrates that the Government are prepared to listen to a good case and to respond. That five-year freeze is significant.

The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear me say that future taxation and parity are matters for the Chancellor, not the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Decisions on spirits duty and other taxes are made Budget by Budget, and account is taken of a wide range of factors, including the views and the state of the industry concerned. I am sure that the Scotch Whisky Association is well capable of making its case. Indeed, it has done so, and I am sure that it will be pleased with the results.

On EU minimum duty rates, the UK has consistently argued that member states should be allowed to maintain fiscal sovereignty, but that it should be underpinned by a regime of sensible and realistic minimum rates. The Government hope that the European Commission will carry out a meaningful review of EU minimum rates, and we look forward to receiving its long-overdue proposals.

The Scotch whisky industry's strength lies in its export markets, so it is not surprising that much of its long-term success will depend on fair access to world markets. The Government recognise the importance of access in Europe and further afield, and we seek to assist the industry wherever possible. That was highlighted in the Scotch Whisky Association's 2001 annual report, which said:

"the single most important trade issue confronting the industry in world markets is to secure acceptable access to India 's enormous domestic spirits market".

We recognise how important that is to the industry. We have worked hard on its behalf to persuade the Indian Government to remove trade barriers that are causing concern, and Ministers have repeatedly pressed the industry's case with their Indian counterparts. On 28 February, the Indian Government's Finance Minister announced budget proposals to reduce the relevant import duty in line with India's World Trade Organisation schedule. That is a positive step, which we welcome.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned tax stamps. Anti-fraud strips were certainly worth considering, and I was a bit surprised that he dismissed them. I understand, as the Treasury did, that they would have had significant financial consequences for the industry, but it is unreasonable to dismiss them as daft. The Treasury was examining how to prevent fraud that costs the country about £450 million, which is a significant amount. It is not, therefore, unreasonable that the Treasury should consider a range of anti-fraud measures. It consulted on the options and listened to the industry's case, which many of my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian, supported. The Treasury accepted that the industry's case was reasonable, and did not go ahead with its proposal. That demopstrates that the Government respond positively to a fair and good case.

Angus Robertson: Why have not the Government pursued an active policy of reducing duty on Scotch whisky? Such a policy would remove the incentive to use fraudulent measures, because the cost of whisky here would be equalised with that in EU countries, where fraud is a particular problem. Will he also say whether the Government are happy to accede to the Scottish Executive's proposal for a review of taxation on Scotch whisky?

Mr. Morley: On the latter point, I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government regularly discuss such issues with the Scottish Executive, to whom we listen carefully.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about equalising duty as part of an anti-fraud measure. The problem, of course, is that equalising duty in European markets is no guarantee that people will stop illegally avoiding duty if they think that profits can be made by doing so. Although I understand the case for equalisation, that is a matter for the Treasury. The hon. Gentleman would be making a mistake if he thought that equalisation would prevent fraud. There is no indication that it would, although I accept that that is not his argument.

We are ensuring that Customs works with the industry on a joint strategy to identify and track illicit consignments of spirits, radically increasing the exchange of information and making fraud easier to detect through the development of product testing kits, enhanced barcode data and a range of other measures. We recognise that there are several ways to tackle fraud, and I am gratified that we have received so much co-operation from the industry.

We have also made additional funding available to Customs this year to allow it to up the volume of intelligence-based checks on inward freight consignments of duty-suspended spirits, which includes making full use of the national network of X-ray scanners; to increase disruption of the criminal gangs engaged in spirits fraud; and to strengthen control on UK excise warehouses.

We take the issue of fraud very seriously. We are looking at several ways of tackling fraud; barcoding the bottles was just one. However, we accept that the disadvantages to the industry would have outweighed the benefits. We are committed to supporting the industry in the drive for export markets. I can update the hon. Gentleman. As recently as last week, we intervened in a case in the European Court of Justice brought by the Commission against Greece, because preferential duty rates for ouzo were acting against the interests of competing products such as Scotch. I know that our intervention in that case was warmly welcomed by the Scotch Whisky Association. We are committed to the long-term sustainability of the Scottish whisky industry, and we are working to foster conditions abroad that will achieve that.

On the hon. Gentleman's final point about the cost to the industry of red tape, the problem is not confined to the Scotch whisky industry. The matter is raised with the Government by all industries, which are, reasonably, concerned about the additional cost burdens inherent in a range of policies—some are national, such as the climate change levy; others result from European Union directives, such as environmental pollution controls; and others relate to health and safety measures designed to protect those who work in the industries.

We recognise those costs to the industries, but whatever measure we implement, we always carry out a financial impact assessment to give us some idea of its implications for the industry concerned. We seek to minimise costs and streamline the burdens placed on industries. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that environmental controls, pollution controls and health and safety are important issues, which we should not ignore.

We are trying to strike a balance between the necessary protections, controls and regulations, with which all industries must comply—in the case of EU directives, to ensure that, within the European single market, no industry has to bear an unfair burden—and the costs and bureaucracy that fall on the sector. We regularly review those issues, which are also considered by taskforce groups, and we talk to people in the various sectors of the industry about how to reduce the burdens. Indeed, where there is a case for self-regulation, we will consider that, too.

In conclusion, the Scotch whisky industry is a great success story for our country. It is important for us economically, and in terms of our export markets. We have done a lot for the industry and we are working closely with it. We have listened carefully to the representations that we have received. I believe that the industry has a great future. We will recognise its needs and support it.

Racism (Welsh Politics)

1.30 pm

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): May I say in advance that I will not accept interventions from any party because I am already sharing time with one of my hon. Friends?

In a recent debate on the Government of Wales Act 1998, the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) angrily intervened on my contribution, accused me of ranting and wanted the Deputy Speaker to call me to order. I assumed that the hon. Gentleman and his fellow nationalists were not happy about me trying to iron out some of the contradictions that are obvious in their policies. In retrospect, I have to admit that I was probably wrong, and that deep down the nationalists, and the hon. Gentleman, appreciate all the good work that I am doing in trying to resolve those contradictions. Their support for my good work has been recognised during the past few days when I received a letter from their party headquarters inviting me to the leaving party for their chief executive, Karl Davies. I am sure that that was not a computer error, or the result of someone pressing the wrong button, but a genuine attempt on behalf of the nationalists to show their appreciation and thank me for all my good work in recent months in highlighting their policies. I hope that the nationalists who attend the bash will give my apologies and appreciate the necessity for me to be here in Parliament to continue all of the good work.

My father and his family were born in England in the early part of the last century and they came to Wales. My father proceeded, from the grand old age of 13, to work in the local colliery as a face worker. He died not just with cancer, but like many of his generation in that employment, with pneumoconiosis as well. His brother, at a very young age, died as a result of a tragic accident in the same local colliery. Although my dad was English, he did not feel, as nationalists have described them, that he was part of an

"alien culture within our nation".

Like other people who came to Wales from England, my dad built many of the good things that we are proud of in communities such as those in south Wales. He never learned the Welsh language, but that did not make him any less a part of Wales. Contrary to what nationalists such as Saunders Lewis argue, he did not

"completely submerge and destroy all of Welsh national tradition."

Indeed, he and his generation helped to build on many things in that tradition, which we are justifiably proud of in working-class communities. If he had a criticism of Wales, which I share, it was that we lost too many times on the football field. He often made the plea for the occasional victory, which he thought would be much appreciated.

The nationalists have always seen conspiracies everywhere to destroy the Welsh tradition and nation, and almost invariably they are the fault of the English. I well remember reading an account of the decision of Neath town council in the 1930s to invite the Bath and West Southern Counties show to the town. The nationalists protested at the time, claiming that the invitation was

"proof of the diseased individualism of Welsh local authorities"

and

"a basic challenge to our principles as a party."

That attitude to the English can also be seen in their opposition to English children coming to Wales during the second world war to avoid the Nazi bombing of their homes. For the nationalists, that movement of population was one of the most horrible threats to the continuation and life of the Welsh nation in history. How could anyone have such a warped sense of priorities, seeing as the enemy not Nazi Germany, which was bombing the homes of people in London, but English children, who were coming to Wales as evacuees?

Angus Robertson (Moray): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Llew Smith: No.

It was not just the Bath and West Southern Counties show and English children coming to Wales that caused concern. The Welsh nationalist party at the time described the building of the Severn bridge as a suicidal policy; I have never heard any retractions from modern-day nationalists. I assume that their main interest was breaking all links with England, and that that was far more important than creating jobs.

Some hon. Members may argue that those examples are from some years ago and that Welsh nationalists have seen the light and learned to love the English. Sadly, that is not so. Gwilym ap Ioan referred to the English in Wales as an alien culture within the nation.

Angus Robertson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Win Griffiths (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Llew Smith) has said that he is not giving way.

Llew Smith: Gwilym ap Ioan said that Wales would soon be so full of foreigners that the Welsh voice would be drowned out, and Simeon Glyn referred to retired people moving to Wales as a drain on the resources. Time does not allow me to quote the many other examples of similar expressions put forward by leading nationalists. When is the leader of the Welsh nationalist party, Ieuan Wyn Jones, going to insist that such people be kicked out of the party if they continue to make racist demands?

Not only nationalist members but fellow travellers such as John Elfed Jones use the race card. He compared the effect of English migration to foot and mouth disease. Who made the greater contribution to Wales, my English father and his generation, or John Elfed Jones, who made a killing on the backs of Welsh workers and consumers, among others, through the privatisation of Welsh Water?

The BBC has joined in. It was recently found guilty in the courts of sacking one of its senior journalists because his accent was not Welsh enough. The Arts Council of Wales continues to subsidise *Barn*, although it says that

it will review the output. However, anyone who knows anything about the Arts Council of Wales knows that very little will happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) referred in the Welsh Grand Committee to a visit by my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) to north Wales. In referring to his lecture, my hon. Friend the Member for Conwy said that he recalled that,

"as a child—of about 10 years old, I think—he attended an outdoor parliamentary meeting with his father. He felt himself caught up with the passions aroused by patriotic flag-waving. His father brought him down to earth by reminding him, 'You can't eat a flag.'"

My hon. Friend the Member for Conwy said:

"That comment is relevant in Wales today, and I would add that the people of Wales cannot eat the graffiti, 'Cymru i'r Cymry. English go home.'"—[*Official Report, Welsh Grand Committee*, 24 April 2002; c. 60.]

Today, John Humphreys of the Welsh Independence party calls for a national act of defiance to halt the influx of incomers to the Welsh heartlands. He states:

"Those of us of a bloody minded disposition will not be passive observers to the obliteration of our heritage",

which, he goes on to say,

"must be fought for over and over again."

I do not want to give the impression that the Welsh nationalist party hates the English to the extent of taking a principled stand against taking English taxpayers' money. Hardly a day goes by without their demanding a change to the Barnett formula so that Wales can have a bigger slice of the cake. When cash is concerned, the principles of the nationalists go out of the window. It is not surprising that English Members of Parliament are increasingly demanding to know why the nationalists and their sympathisers, who demand independence, are not willing to accept the financial responsibility that goes with it. The nationalists are willing to take money from the enemy, the English, although they took a somewhat different and, in some ways, more principled position in the 1930s when they argued for refusing the blood money from the English, whom they so despised.

That is sad. It is damaging when nationalists and their fellow travellers judge others not by their character but by their nationality. We are a tiny island and if we cannot live together as brothers and sisters, there is little hope for us. Linked to that, there is little hope for the Welsh language if nationalists use it as a political philosophy and a measuring rod of Welshness. I say that as someone who spent a considerable part of 15 years developing the Welsh language in Gwent.

Nationalists in Wales demand that we dump the geography that we share with the rest of the United Kingdom, our common struggles and the philosophy of international socialism, replacing those with a narrow nationalism based on bigotry and prejudice, in which the problem lies with the so-called English or London government, not with the economic system. Is that the kind of philosophy that we want our children to inherit? I suspect not. That is why we are having this debate.

1.40 pm

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Llew Smith) on his forthright contribution. The strong strand of racism and xenophobia in Plaid Cymru's history is well tabulated. We have only to look at some of the writings of Saunders Lewis, the founder of Plaid Cymru, to recognise the truth of that. He believed that he could embrace the corporatist ideas of Mussolini, with whom he was enamoured. He certainly had plenty of time for the racist remarks of various fascist elements arising in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Let me make it clear that he was an anti-Semite. We can see that time and again in his writings—it runs through them from start to finish.

Saunders Lewis had sympathies for Mussolini, Franco and Hitler. Other elements in Plaid Cymru had sympathies—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Members should not betray some of their pedigree by interrupting in the way in which they are. If they stopped to listen for a moment, they might learn something. That goes for Scottish as well as Welsh nationalists.

Angus Robertson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. David: My time is short and I have a number of points to make. I will not give way.

It was not only Saunders Lewis who was enamoured with fascist elements in Europe. On one occasion in the 1930s, when Welsh miners were going to Spain to fight for liberty and democracy, Welsh nationalist academics stood up in Cardiff university and toasted Franco as an honourable Christian gentleman. That is in the nationalists' history, and they cannot get away from it, even if they do not like it.

More recently, we have seen spasmodic examples of intolerance coming to the fore from the Welsh nationalist party, such as the comments of Simeon Glyn.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. David: My time is short, and I must continue.

We have seen the racist remarks of Simeon Glyn and the comments of Simon Brooks. What unites their views is an intolerance of English people and those who speak the English language. There was a report in *The Western Mail* yesterday about a new play written by a Welsh playwright by the name of Dic Edwards, about Welsh extremism and the Free Wales Army. Two of his performances have been disrupted by Welsh nationalist elements. He spoke forthrightly and sadly to *The Western Mail*, which reported:

"Born and brought up in Cardiff, Mr Edwards said he encountered racist attitudes towards immigrant communities in areas of the city and now sees similar racism towards English-speaking incomers in rural areas."

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. David: The report quoted Mr. Edwards:

"'I come from a racist culture in Cardiff and now that I live in Aberaeron and work in Lampeter I know children who are discriminated against because they are English,' he said. He said his son Nick, brought up fluent in Welsh, was so disgusted with

[Mr. David]

the attitudes he found among Welsh speakers towards English that now, at the age of 30, he wants nothing to do with the Welsh language."

That is extremely sad. I want the Welsh language saved and I want it to flourish. I call upon the Welsh nationalist party today to unite the communities of Wales—to unite the Welsh speakers and the English speakers, so that we have one Welsh nation.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. David: I call upon the leadership of Plaid Cymru, once and for all, to renounce unequivocally the racism and xenophobia inherent in the party. Now, here is a chance for Plaid Cymru to renounce those elements. Let it do so.

1.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My hon. Friends the Members for Blaenau Gwent (Llew Smith) and for Caerphilly (Mr. David) have made some serious points in their usual trenchant way, and have given examples of when, in our history in Wales, race has been used as a political weapon. Words are as powerful as any weapon, particularly if spoken by those who hold political responsibility, as we do. Words can be used to inspire great actions, but they can also be used to inspire base actions. All of us who hold political office in Wales have a responsibility to choose our words carefully. They must not give offence in a racial way.

Angus Robertson: Does the Minister agree that it is important that one should not take a partisan approach to such a serious issue? He says that words are important, but will he put on record his opposition to Ministers using words such as "swamping" and to Back-Bench Labour Members using words such as "floodgates" when talking about asylum seekers and their children? Will he disassociate himself from the Government's efforts to build a special relationship with a Government who include neo-fascists, and perhaps reflect on the fact that the Labour party, through the Socialist International, condoned the first occasion that the Freedom party got into government in Austria?

Mr. Touhig: Yes, we should all be careful about the words that we use, because it is possible to give offence in a racial way. I have made that point clear. That applies in Wales as much as in any other part of the United Kingdom.

Our great cultural heritage, which includes the Welsh language, should be used to unite the people of Wales, not to divide them. Wales is a bilingual country. As the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams) said in last week's debate in the House on Wales in the world, we must remember that English is a Welsh language, too. Those who seek to use the Welsh language to emphasise their separateness from the rest of the peoples in these islands do no service to the Welsh language or to the Welsh people.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The Minister will accept that I was born in Wales and lived there for 33 years of my life. I am proud to be Welsh but proud to be British as well. Part of the problem between reality and perception is that, when politicians say things that are narrow, nasty and evidently abusive to our neighbours in England, it does enormous damage, even though they are only a small minority. The English will feel equally hurt when people who should know better have a go at the Welsh.

Mr. Touhig: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point and I shall touch on it as I progress.

No artificial wall, whether it is a wall of rhetoric or one put there by the law, will protect Welsh-speaking communities from a lack of jobs and economic opportunity. Indeed, we will not help the Welsh language by shutting out non-Welsh speakers. We will help it only by ensuring that people can stay in their local communities in rural Wales: they will stay if there are jobs, affordable housing and good public services.

The future of the Welsh language will be secured through a strong economy. We have already made good progress by cutting unemployment in Wales to a 27-year low, but we know that there is much more to do. To secure economic prosperity, we must take tough decisions. That applies to all parties, both Government and Opposition parties. We must radically reform the current system of agricultural subsidies and tackle the culture of long-term reliance on benefits, which is a blight in many parts of Wales: we must help people to move from welfare to work. We must also tackle the problem of providing affordable housing in rural communities, an issue we should be cautious about. Some restrictive policies in relation to new houses have had the opposite effect from that intended. The market being what it is, house prices are often driven up in rural Wales as a consequence of the actions of some, and the problem remains.

I have referred to measures to reform agricultural subsidies and welfare to work, but vociferous members of the Welsh nationalist party, who are here in the Chamber this afternoon, have opposed them. They have been negative and backward looking when we have sought to raise those issues and to take that agenda forward.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Touhig: They have that attitude because they have no serious policy issues.

Paul Flynn: On a point of order, Mr. Griffiths. The subject of the debate is racism in Welsh politics. The Minister has not mentioned that in his speech. Is he trying to disassociate himself from the inflammatory and ill-informed speeches by his hon. Friends?

Mr. Win Griffiths (in the Chair): That is not a point of order, but it was a nice try.

Mr. Touhig: My hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn) must not have heard what I said at the beginning of the debate about race being used as a political weapon in Wales. He should bear that

in mind. I am seeking to develop an argument that language is being used destructively as a racial political weapon in Wales.

Plaid Cymru has no serious policies on the issues that I have raised. It has no political leadership about which it is worth talking. In fact, it will not take responsibility for facing up to the problems in Wales. Political leadership must be based on a set of beliefs and a set of principles. On no issue is Plaid Cymru's lack of leadership more evident than on that of whether language extremists have introduced race into the political debate in Wales. Language extremists want to restrict the movement of English speakers, whether or not those English speakers are Welsh-born.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Does the Minister share my great disappointment that, in an Adjournment debate on racism in Wales, we have heard not one word about racially motivated crime in Gwent, which is higher than that in London, not one word about asylum seekers' problems in Wales and not one word about the difficulties faced by young Asian people, who are less likely to find jobs in Wales than people of other races? Does he agree that this debate is disgraceful? Nasim Babur of the Welsh Asian Council said:

"There is no problem with Plaid Cymru and Welsh nationalists who just want to control their own country, which anyone would want to do".

I agree with the Welsh Asian Council. Does the Minister?

Mr. Touhig: The hon. Gentleman must recognise that it is our country as well as the nationalists' country. The subject of the debate to which I have been asked to respond is racism in Welsh politics, and I am seeking to develop my argument on that subject. Every intemperate attack on so-called outsiders and every word of hatred expressed can only worsen the prospects of Welsh-speaking communities getting the investment that they desperately need to secure their future. Recent headlines in the press such as

"Anti-English graffiti daubed over village"

and

"Town daubed with racist graffiti"

damage Wales, rural Wales and its economy, because tourism is important for that part of the country.

In a recent debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) made some good points, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent referred. She represents an area that depends strongly on tourism. She made it clear in the Welsh Grand Committee how damaging such headlines are to our efforts to encourage people to take their holidays in Wales. We had a debate in the House last week on Wales in the world. It is extremely harmful to Wales, its people and its economy when lunatics put up posters and splash walls with graffiti that says, "English go home".

In last week's debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) made those points and pointed out the lack of leadership in the Welsh nationalist party. When he made those points, hon. Members representing Plaid Cymru said, "This is our leader," and pointed to the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd). Perhaps there will be a challenge somewhere down the line. He would be a leader of some stature. A vacuum presently exists in Plaid Cymru.

We must remember that if we want to secure and improve use of the Welsh language, we must underpin that with a strong economy in rural areas. All we hear from the nationalists, apart from a constant demand for English taxpayers to stump up more money for their separatist nightmares, is a demand to tax English people who settle in Wales. Nowhere is that more clearly shown than in Plaid Cymru's hypocritical approach in dealing with Cymuned and Simon Brooks.

Cymuned is a deadly enemy of the Welsh language, and those involved in Cymuned are harming the Welsh language. Their tactics, which are simple—this goes to the heart of the debate about racism—are to intimidate English speakers, whether Welsh or English born, out of what they see as their communities. It is our community, whether we speak Welsh or not. They want a monoculture: a throwback to a Wales that I doubt ever existed. I know that some members of Plaid Cymru are as disgusted with that approach as Labour Members, but they dare not say so because at the core of Plaid Cymru is a right-wing, hard-core group of language extremists who drive forward their policies. They have been successfully excluded from positions of real power in Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, but it remains the case that everyone in the nationalist party who wants to succeed must bend a knee before those who preach language intolerance.

Simon Brooks is the grinder of the organ and Ieuan Wyn Jones plays his monkey. They do not offer leadership; they offer an opportunity for those who hold the extreme view that people who do not speak our language and come from outside Wales have no place in Wales. It is a sad reflection on Wales in the 21st century that people who hold the views expressed by leaders of the nationalist party 30 or 40 years ago—

Mr. Simon Thomas: On a point of order, Mr. Griffiths. As we have been unable to debate the real causes of racism against black and ethnic minority people in Wales, will it be in order to apply for such a debate? The title for this debate was misleading.

Mr. Win Griffiths (in the Chair): That is a matter for Back Benchers, not for me.

Mr. Touhig: I regret that the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas), for whom I have great respect, is again following his party's leadership and ducking the issue by not condemning the racist extremists in his own party. Why do people such as Mr. Brooks remain on its candidates' list for election to the Assembly? Strong leadership would have tackled that and said that such people have no place in the party or in politics in Wales. It is important that we all unite in saying that it is wrong.

I sensed a degree of unity when the matter was touched on during the debate on Wales in the world in the House last week, but there is no such unity in the Chamber this morning for partisan reasons. Interventions this morning have dodged the issue. Hon. Members have said that they will oppose such views, condemn people who hold them and remove them from their party. That is the true fact of the problem.

[Mr. Touhig]

We will not build a harmonious and strong Wales if we allow people who preach intolerance to be seen to be speaking for the people of Wales. They do not. The people of Wales treat such people with abhorrence. The language should not divide us; it should unite us. English is a Welsh language, as the hon. Member for Caernarfon said during the debate last week.

It is important to take opportunities such as this to flush out extremism in society. We have seen it grow in other parts of Europe and we have seen the resulting danger to a healthy, free, open and democratic society. Our challenge to everyone in politics in Wales should be to stand up and say we will not tolerate such division in our society, or racism. It is a pity that the so-called Opposition party in the Assembly—the so-called party of Wales—is so lacking in leadership that it is unwilling and unable to stand up to people who are divisive and destructive. It is for those on the Labour Benches to bring such matters into the open, and to make it clear that we shall fight them tooth and nail.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 May 2002

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Royal Navy Sea Harriers

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Stringer.]*

9.30 am

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): The focus of today's debate is the Ministry of Defence's decision, announced on 28 February, to axe the Royal Navy Sea Harrier units from the beginning of 2004; service will end by 2006. The decision is of great concern to the Opposition as it affects the Royal Navy and the future of this country's defence. Even the Minister of State for Defence, who was involved in the decision, pointed out:

"There is an associated risk attached to all of this, but it is without question a decision based on the balance of investment. We believe it to be an entirely logical step".—[*Official Report*, 29 April 2002; Vol. 384, c. 660.]

We will point out the flaws in the decision during the debate. I hope that the Minister will not only respond, but reconsider this short-sighted policy.

In 1998, the Government conducted their strategic defence review and decided to restructure the Harrier forces in the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Air Force.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): Will my hon. Friend comment on two related points? First, although we are discussing a matter of great importance to the defence of the fleet and therefore to the defence of the realm, no Labour Back Bencher is present. Secondly, without intending any disrespect to the Under-Secretary of State, for whom I have a considerable amount of time, I have to say that it is disrespectful of the Secretary of State for Defence not to be present in Westminster Hall this morning to discuss such an important matter.

Mr. Syms: I make no comment about the Government: people can make up their own mind about the Government's priorities. However, I draw attention to my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, who is answering the debate for the Opposition. I welcome his contribution, as it proves what importance the Conservative party attaches to the issue.

The 1998 strategic defence review proposed a joint force of the Fleet Air Arm and the Royal Air Force. The Opposition were not against that because there is logic in it, but we are concerned that already, only two years later, the Government are changing the shape of the defence forces proposed in the review, and the decision will reduce the flexibility of the Royal Navy. Between 2006 and the introduction into service of the new aircraft carriers between 2012 and 2015, there will be a major gap in air defence of our fleet. The Opposition regard that with great concern. A key lesson of modern defence is that air superiority is vital to our armed services, so it is a serious matter to give up air superiority of our fleet.

The United Kingdom's Sea Harrier is a capable fighter aircraft. We all remember its vital role in defending the fleet from air attack during the Falklands war. In 1982, the Sea Harrier destroyed 28 of the 100 enemy aircraft destroyed; more importantly, United States Air Force analysts said that it deterred 453 further attacks on the fleet. Without it, that enterprise would not have been successful. In 1996, Commander Richard Dawkins—Commander Air for the Fleet Air Arm—said:

"the F/A2 is the best air-defence aircraft in Europe".

It is therefore important to keep the aircraft as part of our armoury to protect our fleet.

Many members of the press have expressed concern about the decision. In March 2002, the much respected *Jane's Defence Weekly* commented:

"Withdrawal of Sea Harrier FA2, equipped with the Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile will . . . represent a significant diminution of the RN's fleet defence capability. Whereas the FA2 is equipped with the Blue Vixen multi-mode radar, the GR7/GR9 lacks a radar and is only equipped with short range air-to-air weapons for self-defence."

That is a critical point. There has just been a major refit of the FA2s. In 1985, work began on a mid-life update of the Sea Harrier fleet. Finished only in 1996, the programme cost £466 million. We can stretch the life of the aircraft to give our fleet substantial protection.

Why have the Government changed their policy and what are their motives? Is it money? The overall cost of keeping the Sea Harriers would represent good, not bad value for the taxpayer. The Government claim that the move will save £109 million between 2002–03 and 2005–06, but if it impedes the flexibility of naval forces and does not provide protection for carriers, it is a short-sighted economy. The replacement of the Harrier GR7 with the upgraded GR9 means no stand-off weapons capability, as the aircraft will not be equipped with an appropriate gun. The arms it possesses will give it an over-the-target capability, but, as we all know, it is difficult to deliver that payload when the enemy state has an air defence system.

It is important that the fleet has a layered defence. Sea Harriers provide the outer layer, patrolling perhaps 100 nautical miles around the fleet's exterior. Because radar can see down and jet fighters can cover hundreds of square miles, they provide the outer protection. The key to protecting the fleet is to see off any potential threat before it becomes a real threat to our ships, and that involves deterring as well as shooting down. The problem with relying on the type 45 for missile defence is that the moment an aircraft comes within the range of our missiles, we are within the range of its missiles. That puts our fleet in great danger.

We all know that Britain has been involved in several areas of tension, albeit not clear-cut war. Our fleet may be stationed off the coast of a nation over which the west is in dispute. I can readily imagine a rogue state sending jet fighters to threaten our fleet, and presenting our fleet commander with a difficult choice—to take an aircraft out, or allow it to come close enough to launch its missiles, which could result in the loss of a ship. That choice would not arise with Sea Harriers protecting the fleet, because of their great reach.

[Mr. Syms]

I remain deeply concerned about the change. The Government place great emphasis on the type 45, but the fact remains that by 2010 to 2012, we shall have only three type 45s. The missile for which we all have great hopes—the principal anti-air-missile system—will certainly be superior to the Sea Dart, but to provide high-level protection it will have to act at the height of its capability from day one, straight out of the box, and we know that high technology does not always work like that. I am worried that we are giving away an air superiority fighter that would have provided protection for the fleet, and instead relying on missile defence when we may not have sufficient ships or sufficient missiles to make it work for our fleet in areas of significant risk.

The Government have spoken about significant technical difficulties, such as problems with the Harrier and Sea Harrier in hot climates, which can affect the power of the engines, but the Harrier's record shows that it has served all over the world, including the middle east and off Sierra Leone, so I see no reason not to continue its service. Even with a slight diminution of capability, it remains a capable air defence fighter for protecting our fleet. Off the coast of Sierra Leone, the Sea Harrier was used for patrolling and bombing missions on the mainland in preference to the Army version. Its radar enables it to find the ship, which the Army version cannot do.

Incidentally, a hardy aircraft is required to serve in a maritime environment. The Sea Harrier has anti-corrosive treatment to enable it to serve in that environment, whereas adapting the proposed GR9 to ensure that it can serve on land and off aircraft carriers might involve quite expensive treatment.

My principal concern is that getting rid of the Sea Harrier will make us heavily reliant on other forces if we were to deploy in the air defence of a British battle group. We would have to rely on US carrier protection, which immediately inhibits what we can do. The French are also a possibility, because they have an aircraft carrier and air superiority forces; perhaps India is, too. Perhaps if we had to sell the aircraft to India, we could do a deal whereby the Indians protect the Royal Navy. The Government's policy decision leads us to all those conclusions.

I am genuinely concerned because the Sea Harrier is a proven aircraft. Admittedly, it is slowly becoming obsolescent, but all military kit becomes obsolescent. There is a substantial difference between keeping an aircraft that is ageing but can perform a role, and getting rid of it entirely and having no aircraft to perform that role. Our fleet needs protection: the added security of an air defence fighter in the form of the Sea Harrier is vital to ensure the maximum flexibility of the armed services.

I hope that the Government will reconsider carefully the arguments being advanced from all quarters, including the Opposition. The policy decision will substantially inhibit the Government's strategic outlook. It will be a sad day in the future when the Royal Navy can deploy a battle group only by agreement with other countries. The Royal Navy has always been the third navy in the world and a blue-water navy that can deploy around the world. I believe that, at least in the interim before the future aircraft carriers are introduced, the Navy will not be able to perform the tasks that the Government continually give it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. With such demand, brevity will be our friend.

9.42 am

Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): First, let me pick up on the final remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms). Once, as the British fleet closed on the American fleet, the Americans signalled to the British fleet, "How's the world's second largest navy?" The Royal Navy replied, "Fine. How's the second best?"

I had the privilege to serve in the Fleet Air Arm in the 1960s. I was a fighter controller, carried on board HMS Eagle and operating out of Royal Naval air station Yeovilton. It was a time of great tension: Russian aircraft would constantly overfly the fleet. We operated primarily in the north Atlantic, off the coast of Norway, and in the Mediterranean. I had the privilege of being on board HMS Eagle when the first vertical take-off aircraft landed. The Kestrel was the forerunner of the Harrier, and it became obvious to those of us involved in defence of the fleet that it was an integral part of Britain's defence system. I was also involved in the trials of the Phantom, which was the backbone of the Fleet Air Arm throughout the 1970s and 1980s. HMS Eagle carried a fleet of Sea Vixens of 899 Squadron, which were the backbone of the air defence capability of the Fleet Air Arm. Those aircraft were flown in combat air patrols over the fleet, in a manner that was described admirably by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole, in an air defence capacity.

It is unthinkable that British amphibious forces could be deployed in a modern theatre without air cover—it is an essential ingredient of modern warfare. I can understand how the problem has arisen. The new carriers are predicted to come into service in 2012, but I guess that it will be 2015 or even later. There will potentially be an eight, nine or 10-year gap in the fleet.

The FA2 is a fantastic aircraft: it carries a tremendous weapons system and good radar. One difficulty is that it is getting old; another is that it is designed to operate in the north Atlantic, not in hot weather conditions such as the Indian ocean and the Gulf. It is unable to land if it is still carrying a heavy load of unused missiles, and the only alternative is to dump the missiles, which is a bit like dumping a Rolls-Royce every time the aircraft comes in to land. It differs from the GR7, which is bigger, lighter and made of more modern fibres than the heavy FA2. More recently, the FA2 has effectively ridden as shotgun for GR7 bombers, for example in Bosnia and Kosovo.

The solution is to upgrade the FA2 and fit a modern engine, but the Government have chosen not to do so. I assume that the reasons for that are budgetary, but there are only 17 FA2s: is it really worth sacrificing the essential air defence cover of our amphibious forces because there is a lack of cash to upgrade the engines of 17 aircraft? It is a big risk, and the Government are seriously exposing themselves with the decision.

The second world war was won as a result of air superiority, and HMS Sheffield was lost due to a lack of air superiority. In the Gulf war, the position was never tested, but I am sure that the Americans would not have gone to the Gulf had they not had air defence cover.

Mr. Francois: There is an old naval saying about spoiling a ship for a ha'p'orth of tar. Is this decision not a modern variant?

Richard Ottaway: My hon. Friend is right. It is such a bad decision for a modest budgetary sum, which is why it baffles me.

The Government say that the answer is to upgrade the missile defence system and have spoken about the introduction of the type 45s and new PAAMS air defence system. However, the world is an uncertain place. Who would have thought 12 months ago that the Marines would be deployed in Afghanistan today? We have no idea where future threats will come from. We are highly vulnerable in many theatres, and the Government's decision will put at risk the lives of many men and women who serve the interests of this country.

Equally seriously, the Minister will be putting at risk major warships at the centre of our amphibious fleet. The potential to lose a ship is dramatically increased in the event of a missile attack on the fleet, and the result would be catastrophic. The Exocet that sunk HMS Sheffield is now out of date, but just as British and European technology has advanced, so too has other technology. Missiles now have all the capability in the world.

I have three questions. First, how good does the Minister think PAAMS, which is, unfortunately, a French system, will be on the type 45, and how much cover will it give to our amphibious forces? Secondly, what are his proposals for airborne early warning radar cover of the fleet? Thirdly, how do the Government intend to fill the gap I have mentioned?

If there are no clear answers, the consequences will be profound. If the fleet is lost as a result, I would not like to be in the Minister's shoes when he faces the House to explain the decision. Defence is the most basic function of Government, and a strong defence is the surest way to peace. By this decision, the Minister has put that status at risk, and he will be held to account if he gets it wrong.

9.49 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on securing the debate. It is a great pleasure for me to take part, because I represent the constituency that contains Yeovilton, where much of the Fleet Air Arm is based—although if the boundary commission has its way, it will be moved to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws). I would consider that a great loss.

We are proud of the Fleet Air Arm, which is the oldest air service in this country. We are proud of both its history and its future capabilities. I am pleased that the Government have recognised that capability in some of their recent decisions, but the decision on the Harriers has rightly caused some consternation, not least because of the personal issues associated with the crew and families at Yeovilton, who have faced considerable disruption in the past year or so. First, they were told that they were to leave Somerset for what I was criticised in the papers for calling "the wilderness of Lincolnshire". I withdraw that comment unreservedly. I am sure that Lincolnshire is a delightful place, but it is not where the crew and their families want to live, having built their lives in Somerset. They have faced considerable uncertainty. They have made career and family decisions based on a decision that was subsequently rescinded. It is regrettable that the information on which so recent a decision was based has in a short time changed so much that the decision has been reversed.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): The hon. Gentleman misunderstands the point. The fact that the Government were planning to transfer the Sea Harriers to Lincolnshire underlines the short-term nature of their decision. It was not the intended decision; they made it under budgetary pressures in the short term. It was originally intended to extend the life of the Sea Harriers and deploy them from Lincolnshire.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman pre-empts my point. This is an example of the Ministry's short-term thinking, which is difficult to defend to the people involved, however grateful I am to see a continuation of their presence in Somerset in years to come.

The hon. Member for Poole raised the wider issue that the decision strikes at the heart of the expeditionary strategy, which was the basis of the strategic defence review. I welcomed the development of the strategy, which puts amphibious operations at the heart of the future capabilities of the British armed forces, treats the Navy as a crucial element of that capacity, and envisages the amphibious taskforce as a basic unit of deployment in the Navy. However, if that strategy is to be successful, the decision on the Sea Harriers leaves many questions, because it leaves an amphibious force no air-to-air capacity and no forward detection capability beyond the horizon offered by rotary aircraft above the taskforce. The decision suggests that the Ministry has taken the view that within the relevant period an amphibious taskforce can and will be deployed only in the context of littoral warfare, and only with support from America or other navies that still enjoy air-to-air capacity.

Although I understand that rationale, it begs the question what happens in the case of the unexpected and the unknowable. To what extent is an expeditionary strategy constrained by that lack of capacity? As we have heard, eventually we will have type 45s, which will provide missile defence in the form of PAAMS, but that is an untried system, and as a replacement it will need to work from day one.

The second strand of replacement is the joint strike fighter, but there are questions about the JSF's design and how far advanced its marinisation is. There is a conundrum: the Government have announced that they want to have two carriers, but they cannot be designed until we know the form of the aircraft that will fly from those carriers. The whole process is held up while we wait for the Americans to work on the marinisation of the JSF.

[Mr. Heath]

Have the Government accepted a curtailment of the capacity of the expeditionary strategy during the interim period? How soon will we have firm proposals for the marinisation of the joint strike fighter, and at what stage will firm design proposals for the new carriers be possible? What will happen to our existing carriers in the interim—at what stage will one or both of the operational carriers be taken out of service? Do those carriers have the capacity to convert to rotary wing use, which would enhance our amphibious capacity and might supplement HMS Ocean, which is one of the most important elements of the strategy?

Is it clear that the contribution made by naval air capacity is crucial to the future defence of this country and to the deployment further afield that the Government clearly want to use and have used frequently in the past few years? If so, are they willing to put in the investment that will make the means equal to the ends?

9.56 am

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on securing such a timely debate. I declare an interest in that two members of my family are serving officers in the Royal Navy.

The Government's on-the-hoof decision to withdraw the Sea Harrier is bad for both the Navy and its personnel. I contend that it reduces the capability of the joint force Harrier. Most significantly and as highlighted by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), it will undermine the pivotal role of the Royal Navy in the future defence of this country and its role in an expeditionary force.

The Sea Harrier has served this country well. The original version was at the heart of the naval campaign in the Falklands, where, even shorn of its current capabilities, it showed its defensive strength on several occasions. Since then, the Sea Harrier has been radically upgraded. Only three or four years ago, at the time of the strategic defence review, it was clearly intended by the Government to be the provider of air defence for the Royal Navy all the way through to 2012. All the documentation and information that the Royal Navy has published clearly supports that intention, so the last-minute decision to withdraw the Sea Harrier 10 years earlier than was previously anticipated seems peculiar.

What is the reason? Ministers say, "Well, the aircraft is ageing," but we are discussing the FA2, which only began service in approximately 1993—indeed, one of those aeroplanes was delivered only three years ago, in 1999. It is not an ageing aircraft. If it were, Ministers might be less able to sell it to other countries. We are told that the engine will not be able to cope with the heat, yet it has served in Sierra Leone and the Gulf. It is said, "Well, don't worry because the Harrier GR7 and GR9 will replace it," but those aircraft are designed specifically as a ground attack plane—a specific and different purpose. To replace a defensive aircraft with a ground attack aircraft is like trying to replace a shield with a spear. They are inherently different in their function and, operationally, such a replacement makes no sense.

The unstated reason is, as usual, money. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poole pointed out, in practical terms, the Royal Navy will be left without a defensive fixed-wing aircraft for at least six years—and probably 10 years. We all accept that air defence should be provided in layers, the first and most important of which is the Sea Harrier; therefore to remove that layer will inevitably increase the risk to our ships and service personnel. I understand that the Minister of State for Defence has already accepted that possibility, but I ask the Minister present today whether he believes that our service personnel should have to accept such a risk. After all, it is their safety on the line, not his.

Another argument put forward by the Government is that the type 45 destroyer will fill the gap. That is to overlook the tiny detail that one is a ship and the other is a subsonic aircraft. There are other problems. The type 45 does not have the Sea Harrier's over-the-horizon radar and, as we heard earlier, there will not be sufficient numbers to provide complete cover in any realistic sense until at least 2010. Also, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome rightly pointed out, the much vaunted PAAMS missile system is still in a box and has yet to be tested. We do not know whether it will work: it may be superb, but it may fail. That is the risk that Ministers are taking.

Perhaps the most ironic result of the decision to scrap Sea Harriers is that the capability of joint force Harrier will be set back, because, as we have heard, Sea Harrier has the Blue Vixen radar and GR7/9 does not. Therefore, joint force Harrier will now have to rely on the one aircraft that does not have that radar. That is a retrograde step and although I appreciate that the Minister is not directly responsible for the decision, I hope that he will confirm that in his reply.

The Government's on-the-hoof decision will undermine the Navy's expeditionary role—a critical role that lies at the heart of the whole characteristic of the strategic defence review. All expeditionary sea forces need air defence—ask any Falklands veteran. Even 20 years ago, the Sea Harrier was able to take out 28 Argentine aircraft for the loss of only two of our own in combat. Sea Harrier is essential to any taskforce or similar naval operation.

Without our own naval air defence aircraft, the MOD is asking the Royal Navy to face an invidious choice. This country must either rely on the forces of another country if we sail beyond our own shores, or take the huge risk of travelling without proper cover; or we must play safe and the Royal Navy become a coastal defence force. The Minister does not have to take my word for that. Lieutenant-Commander Peter Burgess wrote to *The Daily Telegraph* at the end of March, saying:

> "Without the Harriers, the Royal Navy is reduced to a coastal force. Any attempt to operate elsewhere would place an unacceptable risk on any task group and the elements it supports."

Twenty years ago, this country sailed across the world in defence of its interests. Today, under the Labour Government, there is every danger that our services would be unable to repeat a mission on that scale and would instead be restricted to our coasts. I appreciate that this is not the Minister's area of responsibility and I am sorry that the Secretary of State has not seen fit to participate in this debate. Clearly, he has other priorities. However, I say to the Minister that the

decision represents a cut too far. It is operationally unsound and strategically inept, and I call upon him to reconsider, go back to the drawing board and plan again.

10.4 am

Patrick Mercer (Newark): I am grateful for this opportunity to speak and especially grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) for securing this debate, which goes to the heart of our future defence policy. I have never been in the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy or the Fleet Air Arm, but I have been carried by and served under the protection of the Fleet Air Arm, and I was hugely grateful in both instances for the professionalism and dedication of that service.

I should like to start with a quote:

"The removal of the air arm from the control of the Navy left the fleet vulnerable to air attack and meant that the endeavour that had cost so much British blood could not be completed effectively."

On St. George's day 1918, there was a combined attack on the German naval base at Zeebrugge. Admiral Sir Roger Keyes felt that, despite the death of nearly 1,000 bluejackets and Royal Marines, the nation's safety was still endangered because he did not have aircraft in his control, as the Royal Naval Air Service had recently been transferred into the nascent Royal Air Force. I suggest that we may be putting ourselves in a similar position today.

The lessons of history were heeded at first. Our understanding of the projection of power from or by ships into the air both for coastal and blue-water defence developed into the Fleet Air Arm. That led to our outstanding naval successes in the second world war, the Korean war and, most recently, in the Falklands. What worries me horribly about the gap of at least six years that will be left is that the lessons of history have been ignored.

A great deal has been said and, for the sake of brevity, I shall not repeat much of the technicalities. I shall talk about the essential difference between the FA2 and the GR7/GR9. We have heard the splendid analogy made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Prisk) of the shield and the spear. We should take that further and use it to try to understand the layered element that the use of Sea Harriers gives the Royal Navy.

We know about the medium-range Sea Dart, which has the limitations of its age and radar, and about the closer-range Sea Wolf. There is also the last-ditch defence, the Phalanx gun, which we trust and hope will—as it did in many cases in the Falklands—interdict enemy aircraft attacking the fleet. However, the Sea Harrier is the shield, or more properly the eyes and ears of the Navy. It is capable of seeing beyond not only the physical horizon but the radar horizon provided by the Royal Navy's current radar suite. Without that aircraft not only to interdict but to see and report for maritime reconnaissance, the Navy is effectively blinded.

The GL7 is and the improved GL9 will be an impressive aircraft that will fill much of the capability gap for ground attack. However, the aircraft has no defensive capability, and it has precious little reconnaissance capability without the radar system that the FA2 already has. These systems are still highly vulnerable to a sea-skimming attack by, for example, the Exocet and the much-improved modern versions of that missile, which are too numerous to mention. We are told that PAAMS will fill that gap much better than the Sea Dart can in the interim, before the joint strike fighter comes on stream.

I have personal understanding of two systems of radar and radar-controlled missiles. The first is Sea Owl, which was a naval system that was meant to be extremely well adapted, capable and competent for use at sea. We tried to adapt that system for use in the Victor towers in south Armagh, to oversee the landscape in that difficult countryside. Eventually, we got the system working, but it was not as adaptable as we had hoped, and there were all sorts of glitches. That meant that our operational effectiveness as soldiers on the south Armagh border was severely hampered until the equipment worked.

Secondly, and much more pertinently, I have experience of the Rapier system. As many of my hon. Friends will know, the Rapier was developed for point defence of military instillations against ground-attack aircraft. It worked extremely well, and was designed for the cold war. It was extensively troop-trialled, and was embarked with a naval force to go to the Falklands. It was thought to be highly effective until it was established as point defence in winds of up to 70 or 80 mph, at which point the system failed. Eventually, those involved got the thing working, but in the interim operational effectiveness had been severely curtailed and British Marines and paratroopers had died as a result of ground attack. The system simply did not work and had not been tried in such conditions.

I urge the Minister not to place too much faith in an untried system. Any soldier, sailor or airman will make the point that equipment must be tried. Until such time as it is tried, PAAMS cannot be relied on to plug the gap that will be at least six years in duration. I do not want to iterate points that have already been made, but an aircraft that may be ageing, obsolescent and under severe trial in hot and dusty conditions is none the less battle proven and, most importantly, still commands the faith and trust of its pilots. I speak from personal experience—a Harrier coming in at low level over the top of one is a hugely reassuring sight. Until such time as we have a proper, reliable and sensible replacement, I urge the Minister to reconsider his decision.

We have heard that the Navy has been reduced to coastal protection. I take that a stage further: it is almost a fisheries protection fleet. That is all that we have. Without the aircraft, the Navy is effectively blinded. Someone once said that, if nothing else, war is the province of confusion and uncertainty. Until such time as we can guarantee that we can operate without crucial help from allies, to propose that we should operate only under an American or French air umbrella is simply ridiculous.

One point that I do not believe has been mentioned is that there will be a vital training gap until such time as our two new carriers are on stream. That will be sometime between 2012 and 2015, by which time the Fleet Air Arm, or what remains of it, is likely to have lost any capability that it has for the style of operation involved. It is not an operational style that is quickly

[Patrick Mercer]

acquired or understood, and we do a grave disservice to both our surface fleet and our Fleet Air Arm by not allowing them to maintain that capability.

In conclusion, I simply say this: all the time, the armed forces have a finger pointed at them and are told that they are preparing for the last war—they are blamed for not looking over the horizon and preparing for the next war. However, in this instance we have neglected the lessons of the last war and previous wars. One thing is certain: we can never be certain. To protect against uncertainty, we must keep the Sea Harrier in service.

10.13 am

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Occasionally, the MOD throws up a decision that is so bizarre or so illiterate, as the shadow Secretary of State described the decision this morning on the radio, that some analysis has to be carried out to ascertain how it could possibly have reached such a conclusion. Inevitably, we find that the dead hand of the Treasury sits behind the reason why the MOD has reached an extremely strange conclusion.

I take issue with one point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Richard Ottaway). He said that he would not want to be in the Minister's shoes if and when Royal Navy sailors incur the decision's potentially awful consequences. By the time the decision comes into effect, the Minister will be long gone—being, in Sir Robin Day's famous words, "A here today, gone tomorrow Minister", as all Ministers are. It is likely that the Minister who will carry the can at that stage is sitting on the Benches alongside my hon. Friend. I therefore hope that the MOD will review the decision, but not merely in the interests of one of my hon. Friends, who may have responsibility for the matter in future.

The decision is important because the consequences at some point down the line are potentially catastrophic. The MOD is making a decision now that will have an effect in 12 or 14 years' time. The analysis that it has advanced in support of the decision not to upgrade the FA2s and to keep them in service until the joint strike fighter comes on line does not bear scrutiny. The risks that the Ministry is taking, such as those associated with PAAMS and the difficulty of bringing such technology into service on time, are far too great. The MOD's claim that the type 45s will be delivered on time and in sufficient numbers to cover the gap left by the FA2s does not bear analysis either.

In its 1998 strategic defence review, the MOD confirmed the decision taken by the previous Conservative Government and announced in the 1997 general election manifesto to replace existing carriers with new ones. It was an expensive decision, and the necessary investment must be behind it if it is to be delivered. I speak as a veteran of three long-term costings rounds, in 1993, 1994 and 1995. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will remember from your service on the Select Committee on Defence that at that time the defence budget was under significant pressure. Money is the reason why the MOD has come up with a decision that flies in the face of the overall strategy of the SDR and violates the principles of the entire direction of British defence policy as set out in 1998. The Ministry is plainly scratching round within each area of its budget for savings to meet the budget line.

The whole LTC process is always an effort to get a quart into pint pot, and it occasionally throws up painful decisions. Perhaps this is a case of royal yachting gone wrong. To those hon. Members who are not familiar with royal yachting, I should explain that when the Navy was asked for cuts, the first thing it offered was the royal yacht. It knew that as long as there was a Conservative Secretary of State for Defence, there was no question of the royal yacht being taken as a defence cut. Eventually that strategy became discredited, but it did not stop the Navy continuing with it from time to time. I suspect that someone may have made the suggestion about the FA2s in the firm knowledge that as we now have a carrier strategy and as the whole of the MOD's policy is predicated on expeditionary capacity and a proper ability to defend the fleet, there could be no question of taking the FA2s.

Optimistic calculations give us a six-year gap, but the aircraft will start to come out of service in 2004 and will be completely out of service by 2006. The gap will last between six to eight years—and that is an optimistic estimate. There may be problems bringing a new carrier into service. We may have to wait until we know the exact capability and requirements of the new joint strike fighter. The timetable may slip—they always do—and we could be carrying a risk for a wholly unacceptable period.

Those who put this measure in LTC 2002 may have believed that it would never be accepted, yet it has been. The decision may have been taken because of the consequences that the carrier strategy, which I endorse, has for expenditure in other areas. Some painful decisions are having to be taken in the land and air budgets. Perhaps this was an opportunity for a little bit of revenge to be taken inside the MOD. Who knows what happened in the internal MOD debate and exactly what the motivations are of the staff who accepted the measure and allowed it to be put to Ministers? None the less, Ministers must understand that their job is to take decisions, and they are the ones who have to engage with the Treasury to ensure that the defence strategy to which the Government have set their hand will be properly funded.

In the light of the decision on the FA2s, one has to conclude that the Government are not prepared to invest properly in the defence policy that they have announced and to which they have committed the country. It cannot be right for the Government to accept the appalling risk created by the length of time that the Royal Navy will be without a proper air-to-air capability that would enable it to act, if necessary on its own, in circumstances that it is impossible to predict, in the next decade and beyond. The decision vividly illustrates the fact that the Ministry of Defence appears to have lost its debate with the Treasury about securing proper funding for the 1998 strategic defence review and the new chapter.

The Government must collectively reconsider. The Secretary of State for Defence must make it clear that the position is unacceptable and that he must have a properly funded defence strategy. If the Government will not provide the means, they must re-evaluate their strategy—an uncomfortable conclusion—because there is no point in having a carrier-based, expeditionary strategy to enable the United Kingdom to operate around the world if that strategy is not properly funded

and equipped. We are conning ourselves about our ability to sustain that strategy if we are not willing to give the means to support it. Our servicemen will pay the price, and that is unacceptable.

10.21 am

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate, and I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) for having raised the subject. All our defence debates are important, but some are more important than others, and this debate addresses one of the biggest issues that has arisen in defence policy since the election—and perhaps for considerably longer than that. We are talking about losing for years not merely a small portion of our capability in a particular defence area, but our entire capability in that area.

The case for the prosecution has been made effectively in the speeches by the hon. Members for Poole, for Croydon, South (Richard Ottaway), for Newark (Patrick Mercer), for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), and for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Prisk) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). However, from the perspective of actually having a debate, it is a pity that we have not heard the other side of the argument, because that would have made it possible for us to engage more fully with the points that we will hear shortly from the Minister.

I take particular pleasure in being able to take part in the debate because of the proximity of the Yeovilton air base to my constituency. As my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome said, when we are both swept back into power after the next election, we may find that boundary changes make the Yeovilton air base part of my constituency.

The main arguments have already been thoroughly covered, but I wish to raise several points. The one common factor in all our debates on defence is the need for our forces to retain flexibility, so that we can respond to all the different challenges we face in this post-cold war era, wherein we do not know where the next threats will come from. In the 1970s, many people considered it unlikely that we would fight a campaign such as the one we fought in the Falklands in the early 1980s. The Sea Harrier was vital to our success in that campaign—indeed, it is difficult to imagine how we could have won that war without the contribution of the Sea Harrier. None of us are in a position to know whether we will have to fight similar campaigns in future, and the Government are making a serious mistake if they base their policy on the experiences of recent times.

On 28 February, the Minister of State for Defence sent a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch)—and, no doubt, to the Conservative defence spokesman—that explained the reasons for taking the decision. The Minister wrote:

"The SDR emphasised the requirement for increased carrier-based offensive air-power. This has been borne out by operations in recent years in which it has been the ground attack capabilities of the Harrier GR7 that we have needed most on our carriers."

That may be so, but the Minister was wrong to imply that because that has been the experience of recent years, it will remain the experience in the future.

The Under-Secretary of State for Defence will know that there is not only the question whether we need Sea Harriers to defend our fleet in the future, but the fact that in some conflicts we will need aircraft that can defend our ground-attack aircraft against attack from other aircraft. An officer who served with the Fleet Air Arm in the Falklands conflict put that point to me this morning. One consideration that we have perhaps underplayed so far is the great concern felt by experienced, serving and former members of the armed forces about the Government's decision. That includes the taskforce commander in the Falklands, who said that it would be impossible to mount a similar campaign now without the protection that Sea Harriers currently provide and that we will shortly lose.

I do not want to open up a gap between my Conservative colleagues and myself, but we should also address the Government's intentions in respect of European Union military capability. Were the Government not intending combat aircraft, including Sea Harriers, to form an important part of that military capability? What decisions have the Government taken about the gap that will be opened up with their future inability to deliver on their commitment to our EU partners regarding the availability of Sea Harriers to act as air defence for our fleet and, potentially, the ships of other EU navies?

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): My hon. Friend raises a very important point that relates to not only the European security and defence policy, but our NATO allies. The capability represented by the Sea Harriers is a NATO capability in the sense that it is available to NATO. Does my hon. Friend have any information about the extent to which the Government's decision was the subject of consultation with our NATO allies, particularly the United States, to whom we might have to look for the protection that the Sea Harriers currently provide?

Mr. Laws: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend, but sadly such matters are beyond me. No doubt the Minister will be able to enlighten us about any discussions that took place with EU and NATO allies before the Government took such a fundamental decision.

Other hon. Members have commented on the gaps that will exist in the lines of defence for the fleet and our other various lines of air defence. That is not only because the Sea Harriers—the furthest out line of defence—are proposed to be removed for some years with nothing in their place, but because there will be holes in the missile defence based on the destroyers. Again, the Minister of State for Defence did not reassure us in his letter of 28 February. In explaining the departure of the Sea Harriers, he said:

"The entry into service of the Type 45 destroyer, equipped with the Principal Anti-Air Missile System from 2007 will provide the Royal Navy with a world class maritime area air defence capability."

Not only are we talking about another gap before we can be sure that that capability is in place, but, as other hon. Members have said, no serious individual with even the remotest experience of military matters would

[Mr. Laws]

consider that a missile system based on a destroyer could offer any protection comparable to the types of defence that the Sea Harriers can and have offered.

Mr. Heath: Is not the obvious conclusion that the Government's decision represents, at least in the medium term, a substantial change to the strategy of the Royal Navy and United Kingdom forces? As such, is it not extraordinary that the Government announced that not as a change in strategy, but as either a procurement decision or a decision based on the location of units in the United Kingdom, neither of which does credit to the fundamental decision that has been taken?

Mr. Laws: My hon. Friend is right. It is difficult to deduce the significance of the decision in the press release in which the Ministry of Defence announced it. It merited a more significant statement, so that the matter could be properly debated in the House first.

The hon. Member for Newark mentioned skills, which are important. Over the past few years, aircrew have built up significant experience in air-to-air defence activities. If they no longer engage in those activities and if those skills are not in place for the next few years, we may lose a vital part of our capability. Even if we have new aircraft to fulfil the Sea Harriers' role, it will take some time to acquire the skills that were deployed to such effect in the Falklands conflict.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome mentioned, the decision raises a fundamental question about the Government's approach to defence policy. We understood that the Government wanted to have large carriers in the years ahead—hopefully, shortly after 2012; presumably, they would have not only ground-attack aircraft, but aircraft that could fulfil the Sea Harriers' role. How can the Government take a decision that involves so much expenditure on new aircraft and aircraft carriers that are so fundamental to our future defence needs and argue that we can limp along for the next few years with a couple of much smaller carriers with no serious air defence capability for themselves, the fleet or the ground attack aircraft? This is an important part of air defence policy, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Poole for having raised the issue.

On 29 April, the Minister of State was kind enough to acknowledge in the House:

"There is an associated risk attached to all of this".—[*Official Report*, 29 April 2002; Vol. 384, c. 660.]

Many hon. Members have concluded that the Government are taking not only a risk, but a serious gamble with their defence policy, and with the lives and security of the service men whom we ask to do important jobs on our behalf.

10.32 am

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on obtaining this debate on such an important subject. We have expressed the serious concern felt in this Chamber and by many well informed members of the defence community with little, if any, party political point scoring.

I agree with the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) that we have not had much of a debate so far. I will be brief, so that the lonely Minister can express his and the Government's thinking. It is disappointing that the Government have been so unwilling to engage in the debate. This morning's *Daily Telegraph* reported that it sought to publish the Government's point of view, but that Ministers declined to be interviewed. What sort of open government is that? The Government have an obligation to be braver and to explain more. It is an insult not to me, but to the Royal Navy and the services that the Secretary of State for Defence is meant to represent that he will not engage in the debate.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): My hon. Friend might not have heard the comment made twice by the Under-Secretary of State from a sedentary position. The answer to the question, "Where is the Secretary of State?" was, "He's working." That indicates his view that coming to the Chamber to answer this important debate is not work. Is that not a disgraceful attitude?

Mr. Jenkin: I have no animus towards the Under-Secretary of State, but I sent a message through him that I would be taking part in the debate and that I hoped that the Secretary of State would attend. That is why this Chamber exists. *[Interruption.]* The fact that the Under-Secretary of State is muttering betrays his embarrassment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Please do not be so pompous.

Mr. Jenkin: I shall not rise to that insult.

There is emotion attached to the question because the Sea Harrier became such a symbol of British military prowess and expertise during the Falklands conflict. It is worth recalling that 4 May 20 years ago last Saturday was the day that HMS Sheffield was hit by a sea-skimming missile. A year ago tomorrow, it finally sank. That is the price we may find ourselves paying for inadequate fleet air defence. We did not have enough of the previous variant of the Sea Harrier in theatre to provide round-the-clock air defence at that stage of the conflict. We were reliant on ship-based radar, which provided barely more than a minute's warning to manoeuvre craft to a more advantageous position and deploy counter-measures. As Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward subsequently explained, ultimately, HMS Sheffield was out on the edge of the defence perimeter to act as a sacrificial decoy, to save the more important ships of the taskforce. We might find ourselves in that position again because of the decision to withdraw the Sea Harrier FA2s from 2004 onwards.

The debate is not about the past or about emotion; we must engage constructively to ensure that we understand why the Government have made their decision. As we have heard from all hon. Members participating in the debate, that decision not only potentially puts the lives of our service men at risk and imperils the operational capability of the British Navy, but it is a militarily illiterate decision in the context of the expeditionary concept of warfare set out in the SDR and in "Options for Change" under the Conservative Government. The purpose of the Government's

supposedly foreign policy-led defence policy is to be able to deploy a battle group with the full spread of high-intensity warfare capability to fight medium-sized wars in any corner of the world. Without comprehensive air cover, that capability will no longer exist.

Many of the technicalities have been covered. The FA2 is not comparable with the GR7 or the upgraded variant, the GR9, which do not have radar that can track 20 targets simultaneously 70 miles away from the aircraft, 100 miles away from the battle group. The first key capability of the FA2 is its deep penetration 100 to 200 miles away from the battle group, seeing over the horizon. The second is the AMRAAM—the advanced medium-range air-to-air missile. Even the upgraded variant, the GR9, will carry only the Sidewinder missile, which is a short-range missile requiring visual contact that can be used only in daylight and is ultimately a weapon of self-defence rather than a weapon for taskgrouped defence. GR7/GR9 is a slower aircraft: if it encounters fighter aircraft—Russian Migs or French Mirages—it will be outrun. It will not be able to catch up with the target if it is attempting to attack. It will not be able to escape an attacking aircraft because it is too slow. That leaves the GR7s and GR9s—which are supposed to replace the FA2—deeply vulnerable to attack.

Reference has been made to the militarily dyslexic assertion that the type 42 and new type 45 destroyers

"will herald a quantum leap in our maritime air defence capability".

That is the sort of rubbish that should end up at the bottom of deep-trenched latrines in Kabul. It is no serious contribution to a debate on defence. Radar capability on these destroyers will be a mere 20 nautical miles. Even with the new helicopter-based airborne early warning system, it might extend no more than 70 nautical miles—not the vital hundreds of miles that provide the crucial first and second layers of air defence that the fleet requires in order to remain capable.

The only possible conclusion is that the Government have decided that compromise requires us to forgo a considerable element of our expeditionary capability. That means that they do not foresee the need for that capability—what an extraordinary risk to take. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer) pointed out, the only certainty is that things are uncertain. Who could have foreseen an amphibious assault on Sierra Leone led by British forces? Who could have foreseen that we would send a huge taskforce to fight in the Gulf war in the early 1990s? Who could have foreseen that we would send 1,000 Royal Marines to do battle with terrorists in the mountains of Afghanistan at the same time as an infantry battalion and headquarters were managing peacekeeping in Kabul? The precise purpose of our defence policy is to provide for the unforeseen. If the unforeseen happens, how long do we have to prepare for it? How many times in history can we look back and say that we wish we had what we have not? The Falklands was a case in point; we need go back no further than that.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): Does my hon. Friend agree that we have been here before? When a previous Labour Government decided to get rid of strike carriers, the Gannet airborne early warning system was scrapped as well. That proved to be the main weakness of the taskforce that went to the Falklands. We have been there before, but we did not learn the lesson. What on earth are the Government up to?

Mr. Jenkin: One can conclude only that Ministers have cajoled themselves into this decision on the basis of advice from the services about what is available. Our armed services are brilliant at making do. If they have been told that they must make do with less than they really need, they will not appear on the television screens to say that it cannot be done. That is not in their character and we should not expect them to do so. It is for Ministers to ask themselves whether the advice that they are receiving is the best that could have been provided if the strategic defence review had been properly funded from the start. We know from the comments of Lord Guthrie in another place in December that the SDR was underfunded from the start.

No doubt the Minister will speak about obsolescence: he will say that the aircraft is obsolete, the engine inadequate, and so on. Every piece of defence equipment becomes obsolete, but many obsolete pieces can prove extremely effective in certain types of conflict. We can all agree that it is desirable to upgrade the Sea Harriers' engine and we know that it will be expensive. Even if the Government cannot afford the engine upgrade, I submit that Sea Harriers with the existing engine remaining in service as long as possible is much better than no Sea Harriers at all. We should not be scrapping them all on the basis that they cannot deploy in extreme tropical conditions when they will be capable of deployment everywhere else. Even in extreme tropical conditions, we could deploy them, perhaps with fewer munitions and a lighter load of fuel, to perform their essential airborne early warning function.

That option would be better than scrapping the Sea Harriers altogether simply because the Government think that they cannot afford the upgrade. Money is, of course, at the heart of this issue. The real question is whether the Government are capable of funding the strategic defence review by which they set so much store when it was launched in 1998.

The purpose of drawing attention to the Sea Harriers in an emotional way is that the decision about them betrays what is going on in the armed forces in a way that we can communicate to the public. The scrapping of long-distance weapons programmes and the downgrading of other technical capabilities do not seize the public imagination. That may be why Ministers have chosen Sea Harriers: it is the bleeding-stumps syndrome, where something visible is cut to up the ante in negotiations with the Treasury. Those negotiations are the real crunch point in the Government's defence policy. It is meant to be foreign policy led, but is proving to be anything but.

I shall conclude my remarks now to give the Minister plenty of time to respond. I hope that he can also take one or two interventions. His purpose must be to explain a major change in the Government's defence policy and a major departure from their original intentions, but how he will square that circle, I do not know.

10.46 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on securing the

[Dr. Lewis Moonie]

debate, which has given us a chance to explore an important issue. I shall preface my remarks with a couple of points that have gone astray in the Opposition's fantasy football league equivalent of defence. All our decisions are taken within the framework of a finite budget, so they all involve some form of opportunity cost or benefit forgone elsewhere. It is worth remembering that when considering what we are trying to do.

Mr. Blunt: The Minister should say what programmes have been kept in the budget. The Government's decision to strike out the Sea Harriers for the period that has been mentioned indicates the enormous pressure that the Ministry is under because of a wholly inadequate budget. He should shed some light on the alternatives that produced such an extraordinary conclusion.

Dr. Moonie: The hon. Gentleman did not listen: I said that we had a finite budget. In the real world, when one is in government, that is what one has to deal with. It is only in opposition that people have the luxury of a fantasy budget that can be expanded infinitely to take in every choice that they want to make.

Mr. Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Moonie: No. In 12 minutes, I cannot go through all our programmes and the balance of choices that we had to strike when deciding what and what not to keep.

There have been many references to danger and past conflicts. I remind Opposition Members that all operational decisions that we make involve a balance of risk for our forces. We are well aware that we may call on our men and women to make the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. We need no reminders about that from Opposition Members.

Last week, Air Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, the deputy Chief of the Defence Staff, in charge of commitments, gave evidence to the Select Committee on Defence. I shall paraphrase his remarks, because the evidence has not yet been published as a minute and has merely been placed on the internet for information. His comments provide an appropriate framework for our discussion. He said that to sustain the Sea Harrier—the FA2—beyond 2006 as a viable weapon system would require a great deal of investment and entailed substantial technical risk. He went on to say that a number of other areas of the programme required investment and, as ever, it was a question of balance of priorities. Given the need to balance the priorities and the risk, the decision was taken that it would not be sensible for that period of time to make the degree of investment in the Sea Harrier that would have been necessary to keep it viable in service.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. May I assist the Minister? The fact that the Committee's sitting was public and the transcript has gone out on the internet means that he can quote every word of it.

Dr. Moonie: I am grateful for that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I would hate to have overstepped the bounds of propriety in quoting from a Select Committee.

Sir Jock went on to ask:

"what is that we seek in terms of capability from our carriers? We seek the projection of offensive power. That was the purpose behind the decision to procure two new larger carriers in the defence review. The carriers are about the projection of offensive power in which the Sea Harrier plays a very small part and a reducing part as the technology, in terms of offensive power, moves on."

When questioned further, he said:

"I need to make clear, before moving on some more detail about air defence, why we have carriers in the first place and it is not to provide air defence for the fleet, it is to provide projection of offensive power. Clearly, if you have a fleet at sea, you need to make sure that it is properly protected from the range of threats that it might face: sub-surface, surface and from the air as well. We are introducing, as you know, the Type-45 Destroyer".

He went on to describe the future systems.

Patrick Mercer: Sir Jock Stirrup also said that he could not see that destroyers would ever wholly fill the capability that aircraft currently provided.

Dr. Moonie: Absolutely. No one has tried to pretend otherwise for a moment. If the hon. Gentleman reads carefully the remarks that were made last week, when Sir Jock was speaking on behalf of the Ministry of Defence, he will see that we are well aware that any decision like the one that we are debating involves a balance of risk. Nobody has attempted to hide that— neither Ministers nor any of our senior military advisers who have led us to our decision

The Sea Harrier has had a long and distinguished career and the decision to withdraw the aircraft earlier than planned was complex. I welcome the opportunity to explain the decision that was announced on 28 February and how we plan to improve the utility of the joint force Harrier to meet today's and tomorrow's defence needs. The aircraft was procured in the mid 1970s to meet the threat posed principally by shadowing reconnaissance aircraft and long-range bombers threatening our anti-submarine forces operating in the north Atlantic in concert with United States Navy nuclear aircraft carrier battle groups.

The Sea Harrier entered service in 1979 and, as hon. Members have recalled, it achieved early operational success in the campaign to recover the Falkland Islands in 1982, accounting for 26 Argentine aircraft. Today, of course, the circumstances in Argentina and the nature of the Falklands garrison are entirely different. Beginning in 1994 the Sea Harrier fleet was upgraded to the FA2 standard to provide an enhanced capability for the following decade. When the Sea Harrier is withdrawn from service in 2006 it will have been in service for a significant length of time—more than 25 years, which is far longer than most of its predecessors in the Fleet Air Arm.

A strong theme throughout the strategic defence review was the importance of joint operations. The SDR concluded that the emphasis for the Invincible-class carriers had already moved away from cold war deep-water anti-submarine operations supported by the Sea Harrier providing a limited air defence capability. In future, as Sir Jock Stirrup said, the priority will be the delivery of flexible expeditionary air power, with an increased emphasis on ground-attack strike missions

from the embarked air group. That has been confirmed in the emerging conclusions of our post-11 September work.

Mr. Prisk: Is the Minister arguing that we do not need any air defence aircraft? Certainly all hon. Members present would accept that there is a case for having an increased ground-attack capability. The concern here is that the removal of all air defence capabilities removes the defence and security of the personnel. This long read-out passage, which seems to be replacing a speech, does not answer that question.

Dr. Moonie: I have already made the point, but I shall make it again. We are not saying that there is no change in the balance of risk, but our advice and the advice that we have received from the service chiefs on which we base our decisions is that the balance of risk is acceptable. We are not saying that in an ideal world we would not have every capability, but we do not live in an ideal world. We live in the real world and within that we must make decisions. The balance of risk has changed, but it remains acceptable.

Mr. Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman is arguing that the aircraft is old. The FA2, which was introduced in 1993, is a much newer aircraft than the Tornado GR1A or GR4A, which was introduced in 1989, or the Tornado F3, which was introduced in 1986, or the Jaguar, which the Government are keeping in service and which was introduced in 1973. The age of the aircraft is not relevant to the debate.

Dr. Moonie: Unfortunately, the age of the aircraft is relevant to the debate. The upgrade in the FA2 is concerned predominantly with avionics and other systems that are placed on the aircraft. The aircraft frame remains old. The aircraft structure remains old, and there is nothing that we can do about that. The hon. Gentleman has not properly examined what the upgrades involve. I now want to make some progress. As usual, I have given way far too often. I apologise to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) for not giving way to him before, but I want to finish my remarks.

The strategic defence review included a commitment to establish a joint force Harrier—a joint, flexible and deployable force that is ideally suited to the demands of the new strategic environment. It was formed on 1 April 2000 under the command of 3 Group, Strike Command, and it operates two aircraft types. During 2001, it became evident that both Sea Harrier FA2 and the GR7 would require substantial investment over the next few years to ensure that they remained effective until replaced by the future joint combat aircraft. Upgrades to both aircraft types were considered, but the improvement and maintenance of one type was deemed achievable and preferable to maximise our ability to deliver carrier-based offensive air power in a joint force.

To ensure that the Harrier GR7 fleet maintains a credible expeditionary capability by day and night from land and sea until the introduction to service of the FJCA, several important aircraft system enhancements will be necessary, and they have been drawn together to form the GR9 upgrade programme. The GR9 aircraft will be able to communicate securely with each other and with likely coalition parties, and they will be capable of employing the latest smart and precision weapons. They will enable the Harriers to deliver the Brimstone anti-armour missile, the precision guided bomb, the Maverick missile and so on. There will be considerable upgrades.

Mr. Francois: Those are tank busters.

Dr. Moonie: That is the ground attack role.

Mr. Francois: So the fleet is under threat from tanks?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr. Moonie: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Because of what the Sea Harrier was designed to do and where it was designed to operate, there are limitations on the worldwide operational deployment of the FA2. That renders it incapable of operating to its full capability for certain periods of the year in the Gulf and the middle east due to the thrust limitations of its engine. While the FA2 possesses a capable weapon system, it would also require significant investment to remain effective beyond 2005 to deal with obsolescence and shortcomings in its radar and self-protection systems. Unlike the GR7, the FA2 was not designed to be able to take the more powerful Rolls-Royce Pegasus, so any engine upgrade would carry considerable technical risk.

In the light of those considerations, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Defence announced to the House on 28 February the Government's intention that the joint force Harrier should migrate to an all-Harrier GR force, maximising investment in one aircraft type.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Moonie: No, I shall not. The Sea Harrier FA2 will therefore be withdrawn earlier than planned, by 2006. As a consequence of its earlier withdrawal from service, the planned relocation of Sea Harrier FA2 aircraft from RNAS Yeovilton to RAF Cottesmore and RAF Wittering in 2003 will not now proceed. The relocation of Royal Navy personnel will go ahead, but slightly later than planned, over the period 2004 to 2006. By 1 April 2007, joint force Harrier will have migrated to an all-Harrier GR9 force manned by roughly equal numbers of RN and RAF personnel.

Mr. Bacon: This is absolutely pathetic.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister is not giving way.

Mr. Bacon: This is absolutely disgraceful.

Dr. Moonie: Oh dear, I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to have so disappointed Opposition Members, but I have to give the reply that will show exactly why the decision was made—and that is what I am

[Dr. Moonie]

attempting to do. The decision was made in the real world, not the fantasy world that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues seem to occupy.

The immediate urgency of the announcements made was to minimise nugatory expenditure on enabling work—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up. I invite all hon. Members who are not staying to leave the Chamber quickly and quietly.

Biomedical Research Industries

11 am

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): I welcome the opportunity to talk about the impact of the biomedical industry on the economy of Scotland. Like you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I grew up in an era when the belief that there was a job for life was instilled in most of us. We went to school, we left school and we hoped to start an apprenticeship. We imagined that we would join the thousands of men and women who marched through the factory gate every day with a piece in our pocket. We thought that we would do that for 40 years and would retire with our gold watches and dig our allotments or look after our grandchildren.

That world has disappeared in the past 20-odd years. I am not saying that I regret it, but the Dundee that I grew up in is nothing like the Dundee of today. For decades, our national reputation as the workshop of the world rested on the assumption that we had a unique manufacturing capacity. When I first became a Member of Parliament, I had already served my time in a shipyard and had then become an engineer. I imagined that I would be an engineer for the rest of my life. Not long after I became an MP, the shipyard closed and other manufacturing sectors started to disappear. I remember arguing with the Scottish Development Agency, as it was then, that we should do something to revive manufacturing industry in Dundee, if not in Scotland.

We received a good response from the Conservative Government at the time, who were a good bunch of Tories. They understood the need to support the economy in Scotland and did one or two things right. They got it wrong for the next 17 years, but initially they did things right. We in Dundee realised that we also had to change and we established the Dundee Project, which was the first of its kind in Scotland. A Labour-controlled town council worked with a Tory-controlled regional council and a Tory Government through the SDA. Each put their responsibilities into one pot.

The Dundee Project was established in 1980 and has since become the Dundee Partnership. Instead of a person having to go to the Government, local authorities and universities to find out if there were development opportunities, land and skilled people in the area, they were able to go through one door and obtain the information that they needed. It paid off.

As an engineer, I maintained that we should be searching the world for manufacturing companies to come to Dundee. A guy called Geoff Lonsdale—who has since moved on but is still working in the enterprise industry—said to me, "Look, Ernie, Dundee's future lies in the medical area." I looked at him, thinking that he was having me on. I thought he was trying to deter me from pursuing manufacturing companies and I could not understand how hospitals and doctors could create jobs. The biotechnology industry may have existed in America, but it did not exist even in anyone's head in Dundee, far less in terms of wealth creation there. That is why I am glad that we are having this debate.

Scotland is now a global player in the biotechnology sector. At the recent BioSquare conference in Switzerland, Scotland was ranked equal eighth in the

international league table for biotechnology sector development. Scotland now has 86 research and development companies employing a total of 3,897 people, 192 supply and support organisations employing 5,571, 99 medical device companies employing 6,714 and 51 research institutions employing 8,224. That makes a grand total of 428 organisations in Scotland employing more than 24,000 people.

Biotechnology is important for the health of the individual and the economy. The medical and scientific communities are presented with new challenges as the world's population grows and ages, and the demand for new and better medicines is expected to grow. There are many conditions for which there are not yet effective cures, such as cancer, heart disease, allergies and tropical diseases. Scotland has a vital role to play in world health terms to try to resolve that problem.

During the past three years, the biotechnology sector alone has grown by 30 per cent. The European bioscience market is expected to be worth £100 billion by 2005, so the Scottish bioscience community has a vital role to play in our economic future as well as a contribution to make to our health.

Growth in the sector is bound to create new opportunities on our doorstep, so that we can offer better jobs than working in the Dundee jute mills. More importantly, as an engineer I witnessed a loss of skill and talent in the 1970s and 1980s. During those decades, some of our brightest and best scientists moved abroad to apply their talents and there were many inquiries into how to reverse that trend. We are now witnessing such a reversal, with Scotland attracting research scientists from around the globe. We should all be proud of that.

I have often heard—usually from Opposition Members—that Scotland gets more than its share. On this occasion, I am prepared to accept that argument—but we are entitled to receive more. Scotland consistently secures a greater percentage share of funding from United Kingdom research councils. That is one piece of evidence that shows the ground-breaking, important and high-quality work going on in Scotland. Earlier, I mentioned the world-class nature of the research currently undertaken in Scotland. That is backed by the most recent research assessment exercise, which concluded that an 18 per cent. improvement in quality had been recorded—a faster rate of improvement than in any other part of the UK. We are entitled to more than our share, because of the quality of work being carried out in Scotland.

Although we can be justly proud of what has been achieved thus far, the biotechnology sector as we understand it, is still in its infancy. In the years ahead, it must continue to develop, and it can do so only by working in partnership. That partnership will involve collaboration between the Government, universities, the enterprise network, research funding institutes, local government, the pharmaceutical industry and private investors—all have been critical to what has been achieved. That same determination to work in partnership will be critical to our future success.

I have spent years attacking the pharmaceutical companies for the prices that they charge for their drugs. Now, I must admit that Dundee has benefited. The Wellcome Trust, the largest research trust in the world, gave Dundee scientists a substantial sum to open the Wellcome Trust Biocentre in the university of Dundee. Although we want pharmaceutical companies to lower their prices, we welcome the contribution that the pharmaceutical industry is making.

The Minister, who knows Dundee well—as do you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—will not be surprised to hear that Dundee is famed for many reasons. We used to be famous for jute, jam and journalism; comics such as *The Dandy* and the *Beano*, with Desperate Dan; and shipbuilding, the industry in which I served my apprenticeship. I remember walking through the door of the Caledon shipyard in 1958. We were trying to compete with the Japanese—the Koreans had not yet started to build ships. I went into the shed where the platers worked and saw a machine punching out holes for the rivets to go into the plates. The machine that we were using was built in 1921 and the Japanese were then building ships in sheds.

The Caledon shipyard launched many ships, some of which are still sailing the seas. Dundee built the Discovery, the ship that Captain Scott used to go to the Antarctic. Although it was locked in the ice for at least a year, the craftsmanship that went into building the ship ensured that it came back. That ship is now back in Dundee and is in the Discovery's visitor centre as the centrepiece of our maritime history.

One of the largest whaling fleets in Britain was based in Dundee. James Chalmers invented the adhesive postage stamp and James Bowman Lindsay the electric light. When Mary Shelley was staying on the Broughty Ferry road she came up with the concept of Frankenstein. That was nothing to do with Dundee, may I add; it just inspired her. Those hon. Members who had marmalade on their toast this morning should know that it was first made by Janet Keiller in Dundee. One of our local councillor's predecessors, the Belgian de Gernier family, brought fish and chips to Dundee. There is also the famous Dundee "peh"—or pie for the *Hansard* reporter—Timex and NCR.

All those industries will, to a greater or lesser degree, ensure Dundee's place in history. However, many are predicting that the city's relatively new biotechnology industry has the potential to eclipse the importance of all those examples of what Dundee has given to the world. Dundee is home to one of the most exciting research and biotechnology clusters and some of the most eminent research scientists to be found anywhere in the United Kingdom, if not the world. Dundee is home to Sir Philip Cohen; the Wellcome Trust building that I have mentioned; Sir David Lane, famous for p53, the cancer gene; Cyclacel; Professor Roland Wolfe; and Professor Sir Alfred Cuscheiri, a pioneer of non-invasive or keyhole surgery.

Dundee is tremendously fortunate to have some of the world's most highly regarded scientists. Their presence in the city has attracted many other research scientists from around the globe to work in the city. Such a concentration of expertise in life sciences has in turn led to a growth of leading companies and cutting edge spin-outs such as Axis-Shield plc, the largest biotech company in Scotland, and Cyclacel, the cancer therapeutics company which last year alone attracted £34 million in investment. I was delighted that the Prime Minister recently accepted an invitation to open the new Cyclacel premises and witness for himself the nature and

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importance of the work being done there. That £34 million ranks it among the top three venture capital investments in Europe last year.

The city's two academic institutions have played a leading role in biotech development. Dundee university and the university of Abertay produce world-class research, develop extensive links with business, and demonstrate a willingness to exploit commercial opportunities. In Dundee university, Sir Philip Cohen, Sir David Lane and Peter Downes were named by the Institute for Scientific Information as three of the 15 most highly cited UK scientists between 1980 and 2000. That is the quality of person that we have managed to attract to Dundee. In the latest research assessment exercise, Dundee university achieved the highest—a five-star—rating for its entire school of life sciences, and the university of Abertay's environmental grouping, including the school of life sciences, achieved a four-star rating, its best ever.

The Wellcome Trust research centre in Dundee is home to a team of international scientists who are striving to understand the nature of diseases including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, allergies and tropical diseases. I mentioned a moment ago the role of the biotech industry in Scotland in halting and reversing the brain drain about which we are all so worried. In Dundee, the Wellcome Trust research centre houses more than 250 scientists and has attracted world-class research scientists from 48 nations, including the United States, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Ireland, Italy and Japan, all working on what I grew up knowing as the Hackie. The only prominent thing on the Hackie when I was growing up was the Princess cinema and a street that, when the Queen was crowned 50 years ago, had a marvellous street party. Other than that, the Hackie was full of old industries such as jute mills. There is now a Wellcome Trust building, with 250 scientists from 48 countries on the Hackie. When I visit schools, I tell kids that their future lies on the Hackie—the Hawkhill. When I was growing up, if someone had said that our future lay on the Hackie, people would have thought that that person was mad. They would have brought along the van and wheeled him away. Yet on the Hawkhill we have 250 scientists from all over the world, living in Dundee.

The city has had to work hard to provide the right conditions for growth, expansion and the attraction of biotechnology ventures. Dundee is now home to 20 biotechnology companies and an emerging professional support sector. The most important of those conditions is partnership. As I said, the conscious decision made in 1980 to give up some political control and work in partnership is now reaping the reward. If Geoff Lonsdale were here today, I would be singing his praises even more. He understood where the future lay.

The city's two universities, Scottish Enterprise Tayside, Dundee city council and the Dundee business community have all played their part in the success that is Dundee's biotechnology industry, and we in Government must play our part. Support for the new emerging industry is vital for not only the Scottish economy but, probably more importantly, the world's health.

I am enormously proud that so many of the world's leading scientists call Dundee and Scotland home. The industry has shown remarkable growth, and with our support—I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments—the potential is mind blowing.

11.17 am

David Hamilton (Midlothian): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) on having initiated the debate and on his tour of Dundee. I am akin to some of his words, even on the other side of the Forth. The history that he developed through Dundee and the historic significance of former industries play a significant part in my constituency, too.

In the past 10 years, biotechnology in Midlothian has expanded beyond belief. I am slightly younger than my hon. Friend, and I remember the coal industry in Midlothian. When I started in the industry at 15 years of age, people went down the pit at 16 years of age. There were some 20 pits in Midlothian alone. There is now not one. The bad news is that in Fife, the last of the coal industry has now gone in Scotland as a whole. On every street near where I lived there was a miner or someone who worked for Ferranti, a big company at the time. People were guaranteed a job either as an apprentice or going through life as a painter and decorator, electrician or plumber—all the jobs that people cannot find nowadays because everyone goes to university. Has anyone tried to find a plumber? It costs a fortune. There is a lesson in that.

From that proud tradition of 20 collieries in Midlothian, we have moved on at quite a pace. Midlothian has undergone a transformation from minor specialising in biotechnology research—a transformation that many other areas in the country would emulate. Dundee has been going longer than Midlothian in relation to biotechnology, but I am glad to say that we are beginning to move fast in that area.

In 1998, I and a group of people from research organisations went to north America to visit key centres of technology in Massachusetts, San Diego and Vancouver. During that week of hectic travel, we saw a mature biotechnology industry where both public and private sector groups are visibly working together to create a dynamic business environment.

People were positively encouraged to spin out of academic organisations to set up their own companies. We have still not mastered that. In the United Kingdom, academia takes a different view from the private sector, and they do not gel well, except in certain areas. That is getting better but, at present, we do not do what happens in north America, where the two sectors come together. That is a major area, in which we must make progress.

Support mechanisms were in place to ensure that the business planning processes were tailored to suit the individual needs of the company; that is another important area where we must begin to develop a strategy, if we want to move forward.

There were sensitive negotiations with regard to intellectual property, which were handled with fairness, against a background of partnership between the public and private sectors.

There was evidence of a mature financial sector, which understood the needs of the biotech sector; in particular, it was an environment where venture capital and angel finance seemed to be readily available. They are not always available in our country.

We saw an environment with a first-class range of incubation centres and science park developments that provide the technology sector with a range of physical facilities. That encouraged co-operation between academic groups and the business sector.

For me, the visit was a confirmation that what had already begun in Midlothian would have far-reaching positive effects for the entire region. For many years, the Bush estate—one of the development areas in Midlothian—has been recognised as a centre for agricultural research and development. That is where everything started. The concept of developing the Bush area as Edinburgh Technopole—a science city or precinct on the edge of the city—was first developed as long ago as 1990 by Edinburgh university, Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian, and Midlothian council.

The additional development of the Pentlands science park proved to be a key milestone, which has been further enhanced by several other developments at the Bush, such as the Roslin institute; everyone has heard of the cloning of Dolly the sheep, and other developments have spun off from that.

However, there is a danger that we might begin to lose some of the expertise that we now have, if we do not begin to work hard together. Given the lack of finance, some of the scientists at Roslin are beginning to consider moving out. That is a big danger for Scotland; it is not a Midlothian issue, but a Scottish issue, and it must be addressed.

Other developments include Edinburgh university's Dick Vet small animal hospital, and a new campus at Gowkley Moss where Midlothian council and Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian have purchased land to allow a range of organisations to expand and develop their research and development and their manufacturing on the same site, which is another major step forward.

It is estimated that £50 million of capital development has taken place in Midlothian over the past 10 years. As a result, Midlothian now faces a problem; we are running out of land that can be used for the continued expansion of the area.

One of the key stakeholders in the rapid development of the biotechnology sector has been the East of Scotland European Partnership, which has supported a range of projects with both capital and revenue grants. With a physical environment in place which can match that of anywhere in the world, the biotech sector in Midlothian is beginning to develop a range of support services similar to that which we saw in north America.

The financial sector in Scotland is also beginning to respond more positively to the needs of the biotech sector. However, there are still investment gaps—such as the lack of venture capitalists, as has been mentioned.

It is not easy for an individual to set up a new company or form a spin-out company from an academic organisation. Where that company is also involved with complex technology, the technical risk often brings added worry for the entrepreneur. Another sign of the maturity of the technology sector in Midlothian is that the public and private sectors are working together.

I learned from my trip to North America that Scotland is very small on the international map. I recall that our guide in Boston said, "We are just going next door to see the next place." Next door was 40 miles away. We drove there. That is how our guide thought of the concept of "next door". Therefore, when we discuss Scotland and Midlothian, we must talk about Glasgow, Dundee and Midlothian as one place. It should not be a matter of Glasgow as opposed to Edinburgh or Midlothian as opposed to Dundee. We must consider the market as Scotland as a whole and work on that basis. The European market is one which we can dominate, and we are dominating it currently. With the legislative changes that are taking place, we can capture a major part of the American market with new developments.

There are fewer than 100 companies in Midlothian that, including everyone's support network, employ 2,000 people. With a population of 90,000, they are substantial employers in anyone's figures. We aim to increase that employment to 3,000 to 4,000 in the next two to three years, and with that in mind, I suggest that Members who have an interest meet Scottish Enterprise, with which we can develop a strategy on how to develop Scotland as a whole.

11.25 am

Mr. Iain Luke (Dundee, East): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) on securing this debate on an industry that promises so much benefit in alleviating suffering and promoting health. We have both been keen on having the debate, not only because of the industry's medical significance but because of its growing importance to the economy of Scotland and the United Kingdom. It promotes jobs and economic well-being. My hon. Friend the Minister has taken a great interest in the subject and has also been keen to have a debate to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the biomedical and technical industry in Scotland to see what we can do to promote and foster it.

I am also glad to see the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait). This is an important debate for her party, and we look forward to hearing her contribution.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West commented, we are fortunate that our home town of Dundee is well placed to exploit the opportunities that have come its way as a result of successful research programmes in biomedical technology and the life sciences. I must point out that he has been around Dundee and Hawkhill much longer than I have, so he knows more about the differences in opportunities in Dundee's economic package, given the drastic changes in Dundee during the past 50 or so years.

The economic history of Dundee, and indeed Scotland, is characterised by innovation, excellence and the need to adapt to change, new demands, products and forms of production. That dynamic process has not always been easy, and sometimes it has been extremely difficult. Our city, and Scotland, has been blessed with an ability to adapt and flourish despite the difficulties that have beset us.

The universities have been mentioned, and it is almost unique for a city of Dundee's size to have two universities of such stature. Their long-term

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development has proven them to be vital assets in the constant drive to meet change. Although they are often referred to as new universities, both Dundee university and Abertay university, in the guise of the Dundee Institute of Technology, have been around for well over 100 years. As a graduate of Dundee university, I know its history fairly well, but I must pay tribute to the development of the first biotechnology course, which was started 15 years ago at Abertay university in its previous life. Although they are described as new universities, they have done a great deal during the past 100 years and more to promote economic enterprise and encourage innovation in Dundee. That has often produced industrial developments and economic progress.

Both universities have developed biomedical research facilities and degree courses in biotechnology. That has been married with the creation of a first-class teaching hospital at Ninewells and, through the work of the universities and the Government, the promotion of high-quality medical research opportunities. As my hon. Friend said, those opportunities have attracted scientists and medical men with global reputations.

Mr. Ross: And women.

Mr. Luke: Yes, and women.

Dundee has become a world-class centre. It has put itself at the forefront of research and academic renown. Points have been made about the strength of the industry. Outwith Cambridge, Dundee has the highest percentage of life scientists and researchers per head of the country than any other part of the country. Reference was made to the top 15 renowned scientists in the UK, and three of them are working at Dundee university. The city and the university should be proud of that track record.

The city has been blessed by developments at both universities. As my hon. Friend said, the siting of the Wellcome Trust building—a major research facility for the UK and the world—also helped. It has played a significant role in bringing research work to the city, which has led to the discovery of new drugs and treatments that cure many life-threatening illnesses and diseases. The pioneering biomedical work at the university is closely linked to practice at Ninewells—Dundee's university teaching hospital. Sir Alfred Cuschieri's surgery has had a significant impact on the medical engineering and biomedical research worlds. These are all added dimensions to the industry that means so much to Scotland.

Abertay university has not been as heavily promoted in this area, but it has moved on and is working harder to become a leading player in computer technology and computer games, which is another industry that has a great impact on Scotland's economic base. It is showing much promise, and is working with countries such as Japan. The point has been made that the UK, Europe and the United States are great at inventing things, but Japan is probably the largest producer. This country invented CDs and cassettes, but they are produced overseas, especially in Japan.

We must enhance the work of our universities to transform Dundee's and Scotland's economic bases. The impressive growth in both Dundee's universities has underlined Dundee's claim to be a city of academic excellence. That excellence has helped to create in Scotland the third largest biotechnology cluster after Cambridge and Thames valley. Dundee's success has been replicated in other areas of Scotland. My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton) also made clear the importance of that industry to his area. We must give credit to all who have played their part in creating such a vibrant and viable sector in the Scottish economy, which plays on traditional Scottish strengths of education, excellence and inventiveness.

The biomedical technology industry has given substance to the Scottish economy in which IT and the microchip industry have supplanted the old manufacturing base. The IT and microchip sector is global, but has had its problems with recent downturn. As the Scottish manufacturing base changes, those areas of excellence must be promoted to ensure that the economy continues to grow and prosper. The healing influences of the biomedical research industry will, I hope, provide a soothing ointment to ensure that in any future downturn and rush of attendant economic consequences, distresses are mended or even avoided.

It is important also to note the progress that has been made, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West made clear. Certain initiatives have helped, such as the research and development grants that the Budget proposed, and the review of the incubator grant—a fund specifically targeted to kick-start such facilities. My hon. Friend mentioned the progress that has been made in the Lothian area. The Dundee project provides a unique partnership, in which the local enterprise company, the local council, the university, chambers of commerce and the Wellcome Trust development play an important role in developing a strategy for the future economic growth of the city. That has to be looked at as a microcosm. Within that strategy, Dundee has seen, as in Lothian, the creation of a technopole, sometimes called a crucible, whereby the products of research development in the universities can be transferred to production, providing jobs and prosperity. Production can be diversified.

In February my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Scotland had an opportunity to see the fruits of this activity first hand when they visited and opened Cyclacel Ltd. in our crucible and technical park. The company is engaged in the production and development of novel cancer therapies in its new Dundee premises just off Hawkhill; it is also based in Cambridge. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister as well as the spokesman for the Conservative party will have the chance to visit the endeavour and see at first hand what goes on there. They would see the products of men and women employed in the research operation in Dundee. Sir David Lane and his wife Bridget have been at the heart of this enterprise, which is now of global significance.

The potential was made clear by Shield Diagnostic, or Axis-Shield as it is now known. The company started as a collaboration between Dundee university and Tayside region, as it was then, a council responsible for industrial promotion. An enterprise share fund was created and it financed the first steps of the development on the road to Axis-Shield, which is now another global impact company. It employs more than 100 people in Dundee. Others are employed in Norway, where the

company joined forces with the Norwegian-based Axis-Biochemicals. The company is now highly innovative and is moving into vital diagnostic products with significant global market potential in meeting future current and future health care needs, as set out in its mission statement. It is another success story. It started some time ago, but we should not overlook it because it points to the way ahead for the Scottish economy.

That follows in the steps of another pioneering Scot, Alexander Fleming, who discovered the wonder drug penicillin, which has saved so many lives. Medical research and the production of new medicines and drugs is a critical part of the sector, worth millions of pounds—£100 million was mentioned earlier—in the UK and globally. It is essential to recognise the importance of this activity, and we must understand how best to promote it. The Government recognised that in the Budget, which will help to foster the promotion of such enterprise.

It is an economic truism that economic activity never stays still and the market continues to move on. Over its long history, the Scottish economy has seen momentous changes, constantly having to reposition itself. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West referred to Dundee as a jute city, but no jute is left, only a museum to the former industry. We have obviously moved on and left that history behind. We have some fond memories, but also harsh memories of the conditions in which people worked.

Mr. Ross: Did my hon. Friend ever work in the jute industry?

Mr. Luke: No, I never worked in the industry. I am younger than my hon. Friend, so I missed that opportunity, though my family—certainly my father and grandmother—were employed in it at one time or another.

As I said, Dundee has had a history of change in which it has had to reposition itself to new and demanding types of production and products. My town provides a microcosm of the Scottish dimension. Globalism, the international development of the capitalist economic system, in which costs mean that labour-intensive forms of enterprise are always on the move, must be replaced by an alternative form of development. Only when enterprise, high-quality academic initiatives and proper investment are married together in conducive circumstances do mature economies such as the UK prosper and grow.

The 1998 DTI White Paper entitled "Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge Driven Economy", made the point that the UK no longer relies on its natural resources such as coal and steel. Our competitiveness depends on our making the most of our distinct and valuable assets that competitors find it difficult to imitate. In Britain's modern economy, these distinctive assets are increasingly knowledge, skills and creativity, rather than traditional factors such as land and other natural resources.

The validity of that comment is evident in the approach adopted in Dundee and throughout Scotland, and in the success in promoting the biomedical technology industry and its contribution to the Scottish economy. That industry must be fostered, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will make it clear that that it is at the top of his priorities and is the Government's programme for industrial and economic regeneration in Scotland.

11.44 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) on introducing this topic for debate, and the hon. Members for Midlothian (David Hamilton) and for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke) on their contributions.

I do not speak for my party on Scottish matters, nor do I represent a Scottish constituency. I do, however, speak for the Liberal Democrats on science, and to a large extent we are here to celebrate a great British success story in that regard: the development of biotechnology and the science base in Scotland, and the things that flow from that. It is a great shame that the debate has coincided with the sitting of the Scottish Grand Committee, because some hon. Members who would have wished to take part in this debate cannot do so.

The story of Dundee and the development of its industries is inspirational to the rest of the country. We should be clear about that. I cannot claim a huge acquaintance with Dundee. I can remember going there some years ago, when the conference of what was the Liberal party was held there. It would be fair to say that, at that time, Dundee's industries faced an uncertain future. The old idea of "jute, jam and journalism"—which owed much to its alliterative quality—as something to remember Dundee by did not clearly suggest a future. At that time, the city faced the possibility that the highest aspiration that a young person in Dundee could have was to be editor of the *Beano*, and that was about it.

All credit should therefore go to the people of Dundee, the local authorities involved and the universities that the city has the good fortune to have in its proximity for realising that they could invest in and develop new markets and activities. They have done extremely well, and I certainly look forward to my next opportunity to return to Dundee to see the splendid east European town hall, which we all love so well, and the progress that has been made.

As the hon. Member for Midlothian has said, this is not only about Dundee, but about what is happening in Midlothian and Glasgow, and the developments associated with the universities there. However, it is pleasing that, for once, it was not Glasgow or Edinburgh that took the lead, but another city in Scotland.

We have seen the rapid growth of the biotechnology industry to the point where it is quickly becoming the most prominent part of a growing Scottish economy. We should take note of that. *Business a.m.* of 26 April refers to seven gazelle companies, those companies that are leaping ahead of the pack. It says that Inverness Medical would have been the runaway, had it been classified as a Scottish company rather than an American offshoot of Johnson & Johnson. That is another example of biomedical development in Scotland. Mr. Gordon Maclennan from Scottish Enterprise Glasgow is quoted as saying that he expects biotechnology firms to make their presence felt over the next few years by filling up the gaps in the area.

[Mr. David Heath]

The Scotsman of 25 April provides an upbeat assessment of the biotechnology industries in Scotland. It says that they have not found their growth prospects seriously damaged by the events of last year and any economic uncertainty in the global climate, and are still progressing. That is valuable. I know that the Minister will wax lyrical on the subject when he replies. He waxed lyrical the other day in response to a question from his hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). He was not ashamed to proclaim the success story of biotechnology in Scotland. I do not wish to detract from that or to criticise it, but I want to put it into a United Kingdom context.

The Scottish economy is not divorced from the rest of the UK economy. We are seeing similar developments elsewhere. That is good. Cambridge, which has always been the brand leader, is developing links between its science base and industry. Similar things are happening in my area. Bath and Bristol universities are coming together to form a partnership with industry to develop biotechnologies. The hon. Member for Dundee, West used many vernacular terms to baffle the *Official Report*. I will not do the same with west country terms, as that would not be appreciated. The developments in the west country are to be encouraged.

The university of Ulster is doing something very similar in the different economic conditions in Northern Ireland. There is much to be said for that. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, when she was the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, said:

"The fact of the matter is that we have the second-largest and most mature biotechnology sector in the world. We remain the biotechnology leader within the European Union. Three quarters of the new drugs developed in the European Union are developed here in the UK".—[*Official Report*, 30 November 2002; Vol. 357, c. 1123.]

It is important to latch on to that fact. It should drive much of government thinking and industrial thinking about where we move forward. If we do not exploit the sectors where we have clear advantages, we will find it difficult to compete on a wider UK basis. It is by no means certain that we will retain our advantages in this sector. It will need constant support from the Government and the private sector. New companies will require constant incubation as they come along and we will need a research environment that aids our predominance.

I want to focus on what we need to do to maintain the progress that has been made. The first element is the research environment. Unless we are doing leading-edge research in our universities and in the private sector research facilities, we will not maintain our leading position. That undoubtedly means that guidance needs to be given to the Higher Education Funding Councils, for both England and Scotland, to understand that investment in research in science and technology in our universities is not only innately good because it expands our knowledge base but also economically good because of its potential for spin-offs.

That is why exercises such as the research assessment exercise—on which the Science and Technology Committee recently reported—are important. When exercises are carried out to assess the value and quality of research at universities, good performance is recognised by enhanced funding. The last research assessment exercise was disappointing because university departments achieved excellent research results but received no reward in terms of research grants for their improvements or maintenance of high standards. That is not good enough. Funds must match the performance of our centres of excellence.

Greater integration between the various research councils is needed. Medical biotechnology often cuts across various research council topics—medical, physical or whatever—and it is important to achieve cross-connections. Therefore I welcome the development over the past week of an umbrella body, Research Councils UK which will enable that integration. I hope that we will concentrate our funding not only on scientific applications but also on blue-sky research.

It is often people pushing the envelope of scientific research that results in great advances leading to greater economic performance. We should not assume that every development must be on the basis of existing science. We must give scope for our scientists and technologists to think outside the envelope. We must ensure that the research environment is not constrained by avoidable legal problems. I do not mean that we should throw away the rule book or that there should not be an ethical dimension to legislation on biotechnology—that is important.

It is also important that this place keeps pace with the great pace of change in science, and that it is prepared to legislate when required to maintain that progress. We had excellent debates on stemcell research. Whether or not we came to the right conclusions, the arguments were sound. We must be flexible enough to recognise where problems develop as research moves forward and to react accordingly. We should take a precautionary, but not superstitious, approach to the development of science.

The Scottish experience in the business environment has lessons for the rest of the United Kingdom. The development of the Scottish Enterprise biotechnology group and support systems such as the biotech business mentors programme, the Enterprise fellowship programme and the Proof of Concept fund, are positive ways of supporting people in the industry and helping them believe that there is an active environment in which they can develop.

I particularly like the frame of mind displayed by Scottish Development International's pronouncements on its website that

"the Medicines Control Agency . . . and the European Medicines Evaluation Agency, is based in London, which is one hour's flying time from central Scotland."

That is exactly the right focus. I add that it is three hours' driving time or a bad train journey from my part of the world.

Mr. Luke: Will the hon. Gentleman also recognise the good air links between Dundee and the rest of the UK that I believe have made so much difference in bringing renowned scientists to Dundee and promoting biomedical technology?

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman is right. Infrastructure is crucial, as is the rest of the business environment, and I welcome the research and development tax credits that the Chancellor announced in the Budget. As my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) said, according to the firms that are engaged in the business, the Chancellor has got it 95 per cent. right. If we could say that about everything that the Chancellor says and does, I would be a much happier man. Well done on that, and well done if the Government are prepared to support changes in patent law to ensure that it is consistent with scientific research. The one problem—as with all manufacturing industries—is the exchange rate and the effect that it has on the competitiveness of British biotechnology firms, but I hope that that will eventually be addressed.

There are two more components that I want to talk about. One is direct investment. I do not want to say much about that, but I welcome increases in the science budget. They are insufficient and I do not believe that they will be widely disseminated, but let us welcome them.

It is desperately important that we give higher education every opportunity to engage with local industry, to develop the sort of links that we see in Scotland throughout the United Kingdom. We give higher education the opportunity to train the top scientists of the future. I note that Scotland makes up 9 per cent. of the United Kingdom population, but produces 17 per cent. of all UK biotechnology-related PhDs, and 17 per cent. of the UK's graduates in first degrees in medicine and industry. That is a marvellous record. I should like to see it extended to the rest of the country, and it is something to which those who are responsible for education within England and Wales should aspire.

Finally, we must not neglect the teaching of science within the schools that provide the people who will work in the industries. At present, we are deficient in that area. British children—under the Scottish, English and Welsh education systems—are not sufficiently attracted into the sciences. We need to address that problem urgently.

David Hamilton: With your experience in the sciences, do you accept my earlier point about academia and business? There is a division within Britain that I did not see in the USA. We are educating people, bringing them through the universities and colleges—we are doing that in Midlothian and it is now part of the curriculum—but people in academia are holding back and not wanting to expand on the information that they have. On the other side, the business community is trying desperately to fund packages, but the information technology that we want to achieve is not there.

Mr. Heath *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. The hon. Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton) used the expression "you". That refers to me. As it happens, I have experience of the sciences, but I am not taking part in the debate.

Mr. Heath: I must not take part in the debate for much longer, other than to say that I think that the hon. Member for Midlothian is on to a good point, on which I hope the Minister will be able to expand. We should not be complacent about what we have achieved. We have competitors who are well placed to take markets from us, particularly the USA, which has a critical mass that we simply cannot match. That means that we have to be even more active, even more productive, and even more enterprising in our approach to science and biomedical industries. I believe that we have the capacity to do that and I hope that the Government will support it every inch of the way.

11.58 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It has been a pleasure to listen to all the contributions. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) on securing the debate. I lived in his constituency and worked in the jute industry in the late 1960s, a period which saw the demise of the industry. I worked for Jute Industries Ltd., which moved into North sea oil—the cutting edge of technology at the time. As everybody has said, Dundee and Scotland have always been at the cutting edge of invention. Life moves on and, with sadness, we have seen the end of the jute industry. Also, with sadness in a sense, we regard the oil industry as mature, not a state-of-the-art industry. Dundee is now sharing in the new industries that come from the research base, which has always been one of Scotland's strengths. For many hundreds of years, there were more universities in Scotland than in England, and we have seen the fruits of that endeavour.

I congratulate all who are involved in the Dundee Project for grasping what faced them in the 1980s and for making such a success of it. We must recognise that when big decisions are made, it takes a long time for the payback to come. We are now seeing the benefits of what people did 20 years earlier. Such a message is spreading more widely throughout the United Kingdom and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) was right to point that out.

The Government recently announced that there is to be a new high-tech university—based on the regenerative ability of a new university—in my former constituency of Hastings and Rye. I hope that Mr. Lonsdale can be tracked down and congratulated on behalf of us all. The effect of his decision that Ninewells should work with Dundee university and Abertay has come not to a satisfactory conclusion because I expect those industries to move on, but has progressed satisfactorily.

It is interesting to see how the change from emphasis on manufacturing is now being accepted throughout Scotland and is moving to the knowledge-based economy and the effect that that has on developing a sophisticated economy. I congratulate everyone who takes part. I should be happy to take up the invitation of the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke) to visit some industries in Dundee. After the debate has finished, perhaps he would give me some contact names. It is one of my objectives to visit as many industries as possible. I have already visited several throughout the rest of Scotland.

Hon. Members have talked about the need for the universities not only to compete with one another in Scotland, but to co-operate. The hon. Member for

[Mrs. Jacqui Lait]

Midlothian (David Hamilton) drew on his experience of the United States. If we are thinking competitively, we need to think of competing with MIT. It is with encouragement that I note that my old university, Strathclyde university, competes and co-operates with Glasgow university. I am sure that Dundee university does the same with Abertay university. I am also conscious that Aberdeen university has the same partnership with Robert Gordon university, and I cannot believe that Edinburgh university does not co-operate with Heriot-Watt university. It is the best way in which to create the critical mass that we need to move forward and to be more widely recognised as one of the world's leaders in the new knowledge-based industries.

As has been mentioned, we must make sure that we receive back-up. The hon. Member for Midlothian made cogent points about how business and academia in the United States have learned to co-operate in a way that we are having difficulty in developing in the United Kingdom. Having spoken to people who are active in the venture capital market in Scotland, I understand that while there is a willingness to invest in the new industries, some packages that are offered to inventors to encourage them to move into companies are not as sophisticated as in other places. Someone who is developing a company can be called on to put their house and their pension on the line, whereas other venture capitalists south of the border are developing much more sophisticated help packages so that there is not the same threat if something goes wrong. We need to take away some of the risks from our inventors who, let us face it, are not rounded business people. They need reassurance to encourage them to continue to invent new products and ideas. There continues to be a need for sophisticated packages of venture capital aid to encourage yet more people into the business world.

We are also conscious that although many universities are developing incubator companies and science parks, growing businesses and working closely with established businesses, there is wariness about whether that is the right way forward. Had I not been speaking in the debate, I would have attended the open day at the Hunter centre for entrepreneurship at Strathclyde university. The centre is encouraging people from the academic body who have ideas to make presentations to an audience of people who can help to develop those ideas. It is difficult for inventors to realise that to get a product to market, one needs the advice of experts in marketing, as well as accountants and lawyers, who can ensure that intellectual property as well as company formation is properly established.

The idea behind the open day is to get people to move forward towards the market. As it is my old university, I beg leave to bang its drum a little. I believe that the school of entrepreneurship is unique—in the world, not only the United Kingdom—in managing to marry up undergraduate degrees with entrepreneurial classes. As people leave university—with degrees rather than PhDs—they have an understanding of business and how to move products forward into the marketplace.

From small acorns grow the great oaks of academic powerhouses such as the MIT. That is what we should be aiming for. Dare I utter this heresy, but we should consider bypassing Cambridge and moving into a worldwide competitive arena. We must ensure that business, the universities and government in all their various forms work towards that end.

We must also ensure critical mass. Indeed, as the hon. Members for Dundee, West, and for Dundee, East both said, Dundee has probably already achieved that. Employees come to Dundee to be in the company of people with the same intellectual interests and ability. People can be hired from that mass to ensure that companies, in which people can move around easily, can grow and develop. These people are in many instances home grown, and we must ensure that others can come in easily from abroad. I hope that the Government will make it as easy as possible for people to get the necessary permissions to come in to contribute to the Scottish economy. That is crucial to its future development and success.

There are also broader areas of concern. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome referred to the regulatory environment. Having worked in the chemical industry, I am conscious of how quickly regulation that is developed to meet a particular situation throws into question previous regulation. We are not sufficiently adept at European Union level from where most regulation stems. We are in a global market, and it could be argued that a world body such as the World Trade Organisation should create the regulatory environment rather than Europe, but that is the subject of another debate. We must ensure that that environment can create modern regulation and that old and conflicting regulation is dropped and done away with. It is always a problem to make sure that that happens, because people are comfortable with old, established regulations. It is difficult to move on, and we Members of Parliament need to be well aware of that problem.

The use of animals in development is a controversial issue. We do not dare back away from it; we must address it. I was glad that the Government stood up for Huntingdon Life Sciences in the end. We must ensure that businesses that need to use animals do so in the most effective way, and that there are tight controls over the way that animals are used. However, we should recognise that there is need for such use from time to time. Science moves on, and many of the old tests have been replaced by more modern and less invasive techniques. In some cases, the use of animals has been done away with altogether. However, we must allow animals to be used when that is required.

We must broadly consider other potential impediments to development. What is likely to impede future development? I have talked about the critical mass of scientists and inventors. We also need to consider whether there are any external drawbacks, and whether factors such as the higher cost of regulation and business taxes will have a detrimental effect on those starting up businesses or investing in incubating businesses.

There is a new research and development tax credit, but we must ask whether it is outweighed by the other costs put on business. In Scotland, the business rate is 9 per cent. higher than in England. These issues matter at the margin—and beyond, when things get too far out of hand. If the Government stop people from investing, matters should be reviewed.

I am delighted to have taken part in the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee, West on securing it. I am sorry that the Scottish Grand Committee is sitting now; I am sure that he would have liked to have heard more contributions from other hon. Members from Scotland. It is worth mentioning in passing that I do not see any members of the Scottish National party here. One would have hoped they would be prepared to contribute to a debate on the future prosperity of Scotland.

12.13 pm

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): I also join in giving hearty congratulations and thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) on initiating the debate. It is appropriate that we have had a lively and extremely well informed debate on a subject that is important to Scotland and the United Kingdom.

I welcome the generous remarks of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who says that we are celebrating a success story for Scotland and the United Kingdom. Perhaps that answers the question put by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), who asked why Members of the Scottish National party are not present. Notwithstanding the meeting of the Scottish Grand Committee, I would have thought that the SNP could have managed for one of its five Members of Parliament to come along.

Biomedical research industries in Scotland are a success story, but the SNP does not like that; it does not fit into its political agenda of talking down Scotland and pretending that everything in Scotland is bad. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome mentioned the *Business a.m.* gazelle awards, which I had the privilege of presenting. It is remarkable that in Scotland there are 280 "gazelles", or companies with phenomenal 100 per cent. growth.

I congratulate and commend my hon. Friends the Members for Dundee, West and for Dundee, East. I visited Dundee twice recently and on each occasion had a fantastic welcome. I was greatly impressed by how the city is responding to the challenges of the 21st century, in not only this respect but others, too.

I was also impressed by how my hon. Friends are representing their constituents so well and so assiduously, and are quietly and effectively supporting innovation and new job opportunities, not only in this sector but in many others. It is not always the person who shouts the loudest and gets the biggest headline and their picture in the newspaper who is the most effective Member in Parliament.

The topic is close to the heart of my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West. Tayside benefits particularly from the industry's presence, as I shall discuss in more detail in a moment. I shall not cite the impressive statistics that both my hon. Friends mentioned on jobs and investment in the area.

Dundee, in particular, and the technology park, share the success in Scotland in biomedical research in the commercial sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West mentioned Cyclacel and Axis-Shield, but there are others, and both Dundee and Abertay universities have excellent records in the biomedical and biotechnology fields. I speak as a graduate of Edinburgh university, and if a Strathclyde graduate and an Edinburgh graduate praise both universities in Dundee, it must be true.

The biomedical research centre is part of the medical faculty at Dundee, and was set up in 1992 at Ninewells hospital medical school laboratory block. It aims to provide a focus of excellence in biomedical research. The level of excellence attained was underlined by *The Guardian*'s assessment of the top 100 UK universities in 2000, which placed Dundee second in the entire UK in the table for biosciences. That is a tremendous record.

Abertay, the newer but equally effective university, which I had the pleasure of visiting on Monday, was praised last month by the network director of Scottish Enterprise's biotechnology group. Almost 15 years ago, Abertay offered Scotland's first degree in biotechnology, from drug design to food and drink manufacture. It now boasts innovative and progressive courses.

The two universities are extremely effective, and I can confirm that they are working together. The expertise in biotechnical research at Dundee is world renowned and is fuelling the engine room of the industries in the Tayside region as a whole. Indeed, Dundee is now home to 25 per cent. of Scotland's biotechnology companies.

I am confident that, given continued support and encouragement of the right sort, growth will continue. Biotechnology offers huge opportunities. Following the publication of the map of the human genome—as some will know, John Sulston received the Robert Burns humanitarian award at Culzean Castle, at an event that my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Sandra Osborne) and I attended last Friday—there are huge opportunities for wealth creation, high-quality jobs and improving the quality of life. The UK has the leading biotechnology industry in Europe. I shall discuss later the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton).

Scotland is making inroads and grasping the vast opportunity that biotechnology offers. Industry, academia, the enterprise networks and the Scottish Executive must all play their part, individually and collectively, if we want to ensure that we do not lose our position as a potential market leader and allow others to exploit that opportunity.

The commercial and social benefits of biosciences are enormous. Genomics can be harnessed to develop radical new treatments for previously intractable diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and cancer, for which we have sought treatment for so many years. That is why it is vital. It also supports novel developments to improve the environment. Therefore, Scotland is well-established in this regard, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome generously said.

With just under 9 per cent. of the UK population, Scotland wins 12 per cent. of total UK funding for research, 13 per cent. of research councils' resources for research, 13 per cent. of the Government research departments' resources for research, and 12 per cent. of the EU research resources that are spent in the UK. Therefore, we are getting more than our fair share, and rightly so. The per capita income from research grants and contracts in Scotland is also higher than in other parts of the UK.

[Mr. George Foulkes]

Scotland produces 1 per cent. of all the research publications in the world; in that regard, it ranks third in the world per head of population. Scotland has the highest concentration of biotechnology provision in Europe; 18 per cent. of all UK biotechnology-related PhDs are awarded in Scotland.

We are not complacent. We can and we should do more; we should build on this foundation. However, we should also recognise and acknowledge what has been achieved so far, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome said.

The infrastructure is in place to develop the potential. We have several science parks—the West of Scotland science park, the Pentlands science park, the Stirling university innovation park, the Dundee medipark, and the Aberdeen science and technology park, which I had the privilege of visiting.

In his eloquent contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian mentioned the growing potential in Midlothian. He referred to plans to develop the manufacturing facility at the newly created national biomanufacturing centre at Gowkley Moss in Midlothian—these centres always have strange names. That is where PPL Therapeutics—which harnessed the Dolly technology to create the life-enhancing drug AAT for the treatment of cystic fibrosis—will construct its £42 million manufacturing facility, so it is a very important development.

In these parks, we can find some of the sector's globally-recognised companies: Cyclacel, which has been mentioned, is developing important cancer therapies; PPL Therapeutics is developing proteins to fight diseases such as pancreatitis and cystic fibrosis; Pantherix is developing anti-infective therapies and antibiotics; Axa-Shield is producing a kit that predicts heart attacks, which is very important for those of us who are moving on in years; other companies are also producing various diagnostic kits, and others are developing medical devices and heart valves. All of those are important areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian rightly averred that it is easier to raise finance for biotechnology in the USA than it is in the UK. Finance for biotechnology in the UK is a major issue, as we know. There is concern that the European drive in biotechnology will help other countries, such as Germany, to overtake the UK as the leading biotechnology industry centres in Europe. We are determined that that will not happen—in particular, by building on Scotland's lead.

Currently, the UK leads Europe in biotechnology, and Scotland's science base is second to none. Entrepreneurship is booming. The venture capital industry has stimulated more start-ups—in particular specialised biotechnology start-ups—than anywhere else. That is a good sign.

As the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome rightly mentioned, Scottish Enterprise has identified biotechnology as a key economic development driver, and it has implemented a £40 million biotechnology cluster action plan, which it launched in November 1999.

It is significant that the framework for action that Scottish Enterprise announced in 1999 has already been substantially achieved well ahead of schedule. In September 2001, employment in the sector was 24,406—above the 24,000 target that was set in 1999. There were 86 biotechnology companies, and 291 support and supply companies—we had anticipated 290. Allowing for possible mergers, we are almost on target already, and are well ahead of the target date.

On international co-operation, there are interesting collaborations such as the Scotland-Maryland biotechnology alliance, which was launched at Bio 2000 and signed in Edinburgh in August 2001. Scottish Enterprise and the Maryland science alliance are working together to stimulate further growth in our biotechnology industries through a series of activities over the next two years. A 27-strong trade mission from Maryland, which included 10 biotechnology companies and three universities, visited in August. As a result of the initiative, four Scottish companies have already secured deals with their Maryland counterparts that are worth more than £1.5 million. I want to see more such collaboration between Scotland and the United States. As my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian said, we can learn much from it.

We accept that there is a continuing need to boost industry's investment in research in Scotland. Scottish industry invests only 0.5 per cent. of its gross domestic product on research and development. That is half that of the UK, a third of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average and less than a fifth of Sweden's. The Government are determined to help. In the 2002 Budget, UK tax credits for small business research and development were extended to include large businesses, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome mentioned. That will encourage investment in the biotechnological and biomedical industries.

The Scottish Executive's science strategy for Scotland identified bioscience, genomics and medical research as priority areas. The aims are to build critical mass, improve performance, and strengthen local and international networks. The Government and the Scottish Executive will work in partnership: the Government will provide the funding and the Executive will provide their science strategy. The Government have also delivered the programme Bio-wise, which is led by the Department for Trade and Industry, to encourage industry uptake of biotechnology. They also introduced the £750 million joint infrastructure fund to update the science and research-base infrastructure, from which Scotland benefited by about £65 million.

My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian also talked about bridging the gap between academia and industry, which is what Scottish Biomedical exists to do. It delivers milestone-driven research projects on behalf of pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies by matching the needs of business with the skills, expertise and technologies of research departments of the universities of Scotland. A prime example of that success was the £5.2 million deal with Kyorin Pharmaceutical Co. Ltd. of Japan, the result of which was the state-of-the-art Kyorin-Scotland research laboratory in the West of Scotland science park. The formula "research plus business plus infrastructure" equals success.

I accept the point made by my hon. Friend that more needs to be done if the UK is to continue to lead in Europe and to catch up with the United States. I will meet the BioIndustry Association in the next few weeks to discuss that. More needs to be done to keep Scotland ahead of the field. Commercialisation is just the start. We must nurture and go for growth. Growth needs different measures, such as the Executive's refocusing of regional selective assistance. We must focus on growing indigenous Scottish firms such as those in our biomedical and biotechnology sector. Access to finance is also key. Ernst & Young noted that Scottish Enterprise's framework for action identified that two of Europe's three largest venture capital investments were in Scottish biotechnology companies.

Biomedical research and industry in the wider biotechnology sector already have a key role in the Scottish economy. My hon. Friend says that the Government should play a key part. I assure him and the Chamber that the Government have played their part and will continue to do so. Through partnership and sensible devolution, the Scottish Executive and British Government are working together on a commitment to fuel a knowledge-based economy based on excellence in research and innovation, delivering high growth and high quality jobs for a highly skilled work force. That is the way forward for Scotland and the United Kingdom.

Lottery Grants (Gloucestershire)

12.30 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I am pleased to secure this debate and thank the Minister for attending. I am listed to discuss lottery grants in Gloucestershire and, indeed, I want to do so, but I hope that you will forgive me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for making particular reference to my constituency of Tewkesbury, as we have lost out considerably in the distribution of such grants.

I held a debate on 20 December 2000 to discuss this issue. I met the then Minister, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who was helpful. Since then, in spite of her gallant efforts, nothing seems to have improved for my constituency. I discovered at the time that organisations from Tewkesbury were applying for just as many grants as those from other constituencies and for as much money, but they were being turned down.

There are six parliamentary seats in Gloucestershire, and Tewkesbury applied for about one sixth of the money, which was right. We played the lottery as much as the other constituencies. One sixth is about 17 per cent, yet we received less than three per cent of the money coming to the county. That did not seem right.

The Minister and I discussed a number of the failed bids in detail. I was assured that the Government were considering improving the processing of applications and the way in which help might be given to applicants at early stages. Despite that, there has been no change in the amount of lottery grant coming to my area. Since the lottery's inception in 1994, organisations in Gloucestershire as a whole have received £83.7 million, yet only £2.9 million—3.4 per cent—has found its way to Tewkesbury. If we divide Gloucestershire roughly into six, we should have 17 per cent of the money, equating to about £14.2 million. Coincidentally, that is the national average for lottery grants to constituencies. We are nowhere near that figure.

To put the problem in perspective, neighbouring Gloucester has received £28.7 million and Cotswold has received £20.2 million. I do not begrudge those areas their money—if they have made applications and been given grants, good luck to them. It seems odd, however, that compared with £28.7 million and £20.2 million Tewkesbury receives less than £3 million. I wonder why.

When I looked into the matter, met the Minister, held a debate and discussed the problem with one or two heads of the departments distributing lottery money, one of the criteria given for distribution was deprivation. That is not a good measure. What does deprived mean? Does it mean that it is a poor area, or that there are few facilities or amenities? I mentioned that Cotswold has received £20 million in lottery grants. One could hardly describe it as deprived, yet it received seven times as much money as Tewkesbury. I stress that I do not begrudge Cotswold its money, but I would rather see a fairer share come to Tewkesbury.

If the word "deprived" means poor, many better-off areas have pockets of deprivation, but because of the way the calculations are made they are not recognised, particularly if those pockets straddle two electoral wards. Deprived may mean few facilities, but many

[Mr. Laurence Robertson]

wealthy areas have no amenities. Some well-off villages do not have a single shop—are they deprived? What exactly do we mean by deprived?

The calculation based on deprivation tends to centre on inner cities and towns. As I have asked before, what about rural poverty? I highlighted that in my last speech, but since then the situation in the countryside has got worse. Farming incomes have fallen further and foot and mouth has devastated the rural scene. I am pleased that the Minister is replying to this debate because he is also the Minister for Sport, and he may know that the Cheltenham race course is in my constituency. We lost the Cheltenham racing festival last year. That hit my area hard and should be taken into account in debating deprivation and the allocation and distribution of lottery grants.

I do not want to go too far into this subject, but my area, given its dependence on the racing industry and the national hunt race course, will be hit hard if the Government decide to ban hunting. I say that as someone who does not hunt, but the Government should be aware of that problem. I am sure that I will be called to order if I go any further down that road. In those circumstances, from where would the compensation come for my constituency? Would it come from lottery grants, or because of the way that it is calculated, would we continue to slip through the net?

The perception is that Tewkesbury is well off, but that is not true. It is not poor, but it is certainly not wealthy. Like many other areas, it has problems with drug pushers, drug users and people who commit crimes because they are taking drugs. It has a town—Tewkesbury itself—that needs regeneration because there are many empty shops. It is a wonderful place to visit, but it needs some help. Other areas have few facilities and the constituency also suffers from having excessive housebuilding requirements forced on it. It is all right to build houses, but that does not create a community. We must keep those people in the area to create a community, but if the lottery grants do not help the projects, that creates a further problem.

The south-west is generally not that well off. It is poorly served by the railway network, although many constituencies could claim that, and it loses out on funding for services such as education, health, policing and local government. In recognition of the unequal lottery distribution, the Government introduced a system for fairer distribution and identified 51 areas for targeting. Again, the criteria were that the areas had to be deprived and have received less lottery funding than other parts of the country. So far so good, but of those 51 areas, 50 had received more money than Tewkesbury. As I said, we have received less than £3 million, while Brent, which was targeted for more money, has received £138 million. Portsmouth received £63 million. My home town of Bolton, about which I can claim to know a little, received £34 million, while Blackpool received £8.3 million—is it deprived? There are other figures: Doncaster received £61 million, Oldham £16 million, and Kirklees £35 million. Some of those areas may have bigger populations, but even if we multiple Tewkesbury's population proportionally, we do not get anywhere near comparable figures. However, those areas are targeted under what is called the English fair share initiative. Where is the fairness and how will things improve for my constituency?

Organisations in Tewkesbury have made many good applications and I have seen some in detail recently. There was an application to make improvements to the famous Tewkesbury abbey, one to upgrade the Bishop's Cleeve tithe barn and many other examples that I could mention. However, all were turned down and, despite promises, the area remains poorly funded in terms of lottery money. Indeed, Gloucestershire comes sixth out of six in terms of total funding. If we break that down into the six categories, it is bottom of the list in four, and fifth out of six in the remaining two, so we lose out in every which way.

Perhaps the Minister will be kind enough to answer my questions; I certainly intend to leave him enough time to do so. What about the merits of individual applications? How are decisions about the applications weighted and made? What is meant by "deprivation"? How is it calculated and how big an area in each constituency is measured? I ask the right hon. Gentleman to review that criterion as a means of deciding which areas should benefit from lottery funding. Why is the distribution of lottery money across the country still so unequal? I have given examples. Why does my constituency keep losing out so badly?

The national lottery was started in 1994 with the objective of helping projects that would benefit the community. It was a way of helping those projects without calling on taxation, which might be inappropriate. The lottery was set up not to supplement taxation, but as an alternative way of raising funds so that community projects could benefit.

The lottery has had much success in a number of areas. The one or two projects that have benefited in Tewkesbury have been tremendously successful, but there have not been that many of them. This is the second time that I have raised the issue in the House of Commons and I do not intend to let it slip because a number of organisations in Tewkesbury are pressing me to ask why we do not get our fair share.

12.41 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) on securing the debate. I know his constituency reasonably well. Indeed, we met at the Cheltenham gold cup, when I backed the winner. I am sure that he appreciates that Cheltenham, like all horseracing towns, has backed a winner in that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has provided help for the racing industry.

Since 1994, the national lottery has become one of the most successful lotteries in the world. We must acknowledge that, because sometimes in these debates we miss the bigger picture. It has raised about £12 billion and 100,000 lottery awards have been made. By those standards, it is a great success, which we should recognise and celebrate. We should also recognise that every part of the country has benefited in some way from lottery funding. However, some parts appear to have benefited rather more than others and the hon. Gentleman has initiated the debate to ask questions about his constituency.

We wanted to make changes so that people had confidence that lottery money was spread fairly throughout the country and different groups in our society. We wanted decisions on individual grants to be made closer to the area where the money would be spent and for it to be distributed according to need. We wanted to shift the emphasis from capital expenditure on buildings to spending on people and activities. In the first couple of years after the lottery was conceived, we probably went down the road of capital schemes a little more than was advisable, but we have gone through a learning curve and I think that there is consensus among parties in the House on that. We have reviewed the situation and taken those points on board.

The National Lottery Act 1998 and the new policy directions for distributors set out a broad network that reflected those changes. Lottery distributors take decisions on individual grants within the framework, while retaining the independence that is a fundamental principle of the lottery. Distributors now have more flexibility in the way that they distribute money to good causes. They can delegate decisions within their organisations to a more local level and to outside organisations, which is happening. They can pool funds and work together on joint schemes more easily than before. They must produce strategic plans that reflect the needs of their sector and provide proposals for addressing them.

The 1998 legislation also introduced a new lottery distributor, the new opportunities fund, to fund new initiatives in the areas that concern people most. According to a MORI poll that we commissioned, those areas are health, education and the environment. It also introduced a new scheme, Awards for All, which allows distributors to work together to provide a one-stop shop for grants of up to £5,000 to community groups. The latter has been particularly successful and overall the number of small grants under £5,000 to community groups has trebled. Earlier this year, we introduced the fair share initiative, which is designed to tackle inequity in lottery funding in deprived areas. Overall, 62 areas were chosen for fair share funding based on a methodology that evaluated areas according to levels of deprivation and the amount of lottery funding already received. That initiative is worth £169 million.

Fair share is just one of several targeted initiatives operated by the lottery distributors and the Government are committed to ensuring that all areas of the UK benefit from lottery funding. More generally, since 1998 the percentage of revenue funding awarded—the big argument in the early years of the lottery was about capital, not revenue—has increased from 9 per cent. to 31per cent., and 41 per cent. of all grants made so far have gone to the 50 most deprived local authorities. Many distributors now also delegate decisions on funding. For example, the heritage lottery fund established nine committees in the English regions to make decisions on applications between £50,000 and £1 million. Decisions about arts projects below £100,000 are made at regional level. It must be right that decisions about funding are made at the most local level.

The quality, efficiency and standards unit—QUEST—report, published in August 2000, made a number of recommendations for improving application and assessment procedures to ease the administrative burden for smaller groups applying for grants. It recommended that we put in a hot line so that there could be contact at a one-stop shop. That has been successful. There have been nearly 8,000 inquiries to date. It has been an extremely popular way of contacting the lottery and getting information without being bounced from one distributor to another. The service provides basic information about the types of grant available and contact details for the relevant distributor from a single phone number.

Lottery distributors have also established a lottery website, which also provides basic information and links to relevant sites. The site averages more than 6,000 hits each month. Distributors are simplifying application procedures for smaller grants. That has been welcomed. The heritage lottery fund has introduced a simple application form for capital grants under £50,000 and in April 2001 the community fund launched a new grants programme for awards between £500 and £60,000, based closely on the Awards for All programme, with a short, simple application form and a quick turnaround time.

The hon. Gentleman asked why some applications were being turned down. Distributors are working jointly to produce common minimum standards for feedback and appeals to ensure that unsuccessful applicants are given helpful and detailed information on why their applications failed and to increase consistency between distributors on how appeals are handled. That is important for the integrity of the lottery. In spite of those very real changes, it is clear that some areas still do rather better than others. I make no apology for our decision to target some lottery funding, via the fair share initiative, on those areas that are both the most deprived and have historically done badly from the lottery.

That initiative is not a panacea for all ills, however, and it does not address the issues of those areas, which, while they may not be classed as deprived, still rightly want to win lottery funding for worthwhile projects in their communities. It is frustrating when a constituency does not do as well as its neighbours—that has been graphically illustrated today—particularly when one knows from personal experience how worth while the applications are. However, it is important to look not only at the individual constituencies, but at the surrounding area. The hon. Gentleman referred to Gloucestershire, which is made up of six constituencies, some of which have done better from the lottery than others. Indeed, Gloucester is top of the league. It has received average lottery funding of £285 per capita. At the other end of the scale, which the hon. Gentleman illustrated graphically, the figure for Tewkesbury is £35 per capita.

We need to be careful when we interpret statistics. Large towns and cities often attract lottery funding for large capital projects because they have the infrastructure and necessary support needed to secure funding—big stadiums or concert halls. We see that up and down the country. The hon. Gentleman knows that Gloucester leisure centre is a good example. It is in Gloucester, but many people in the surrounding area have benefited from it.

Often, a scheme to be delivered across an area will be based for administration purposes in a single location. For example, Gloucestershire local education authority is based in Gloucester. It has received £2 million to fund

[Mr. Richard Caborn]

technology training for teachers and librarians throughout the county, so Tewkesbury will gain from that.

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister for his sympathetic approach. I believe he would agree that it is all right to spend money in inner cities, but people then have to travel to those areas. The town of Tewkesbury needs regenerating or there will be serious problems and we will waste a jewel of a place, but it has had applications turned down.

In order for people in Tewkesbury to benefit from something in Gloucester they have to travel by car. I was privileged to take part in the debate on communities initiated by the Government a couple of weeks ago. It is essential to keep people in the areas where they live for part of their leisure time if we are to build up communities.

Mr. Caborn: I take that point on board. The community fund is revisiting these issues—as we do continually—and announcing a rural initiative to help deprived rural communities that have received lower lottery funding than others. That is also the coalfield communities approach. We may consider Tewkesbury in that context.

The hon. Gentleman pointed out differences between Gloucestershire and Tewkesbury and other areas. Tewkesbury has received 116 awards, around the same number as Cheltenham, but Cheltenham's average fund per capita is around £166, much higher than Tewkesbury's £35. The other five Gloucestershire constituencies have all received funding well above the median level of £84 per capita. Tewkesbury sees fewer awards than most of its neighbours and those awards are for lower amounts. Those discrepancies appear in the calculations given by the hon. Gentleman.

It is not always easy to see the disparity from the bald figures, although we can bandy statistics around. Perhaps Tewkesbury does not make as many applications as other constituencies. Applications to the community fund from Tewkesbury are certainly lower. However, when they are made, they have a higher strike rate—44 per cent of Tewkesbury's applications to the community fund have succeeded, which is a better success rate than any of its neighbours except Forest of Dean. Voluntary community organisations in Tewkesbury may not be as experienced in applying for lottery funding as those in neighbouring areas. They say that nothing breeds success like success. One might want to consider that with regard to Tewkesbury.

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and for his advice on community fund applications. At the time of the previous debate, it was easier to obtain figures from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about the number of applications that were made, but I am told that it does not have that information now. At that time, applications from organisations in Tewkesbury were just as frequent and as many as those from other constituencies in Gloucestershire, and we asked for as much money as they did.

Mr. Caborn: I take on board the hon. Gentleman's point. I am aware that Tewkesbury borough council has now met the community fund to discuss those issues and how they can be addressed. He raised a genuine worry and it is one that we have to bottom, whatever the reasons for it may be. Clearly, the borough council has an important role to play in building up the capacity of Tewkesbury to increase successful applications, and that shows that it takes its role seriously. I will request a progress report on the meetings that have taken place to ascertain whether there are deficiencies, wherever they may lie, and whether we can address them. There are major discrepancies and I would like that bottomed. Once that analysis has been carried out, we can start to deal with the matter.

The Tewkesbury problem is not uncommon. Several constituencies are not as successful at winning lottery funds as they should be. Unfortunately, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, there are no quick fixes. Since the inception of the lottery, we have tried to move from big capital schemes and have focused on revenue. We have devolved that power into the regions in respect of some distributors. We are trying to bring decision making nearer to the point at which it applies and feeding in local knowledge. I am sure that that can be achieved. Decision making is thus more informed and effective and people will appreciate that.

The Tewkesbury problem may not fit into any of those categories. As I have said, we will consider the discussions with the community fund. I will ask for a report and write to the hon. Gentleman about it. Constituents may have other issues of a similar nature that we shall also need to address.

The lottery is an evolving financial instrument. It has all-party support throughout the House and we want it to be effective and successful. If there are specific problems, we will try to deal with them, but we have to do that in the totality of the funding regime and the way that the House has constructed the lottery. Nevertheless, I will take the matter on board and will write to the hon. Gentleman about the discussions that have been taking place.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. We thank the Minister for his reply. Although it is a little early, we can move straight on to the next debate.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

12.58 pm

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I am pleased to have secured this debate on such an important subject, although I would rather not have had to do so. In February, the British Medical Association published a report entitled "Sexually Transmitted Infections". It brought together an up-to-date summary of the situation with the most common sexually transmitted infections—STIs—in the United Kingdom. The information in the report was not new, but it was shocking. The number of new episodes of acute STIs diagnosed in genito-urinary medicine clinics in England, Wales and Northern Ireland rose from 887,760 in 1995 to 1,185,285 in 2000.

To give a couple of examples from that report, uncomplicated gonorrhoea increased by 31 per cent. in males and 26 per cent. in females between 1999 and 2000. Diagnoses of chlamydia have risen dramatically since 1993. Between 1999 and 2000, cases rose by 20 per cent. in males and 17 per cent. in females. It is accepted that the increase in diagnoses is as likely to be the result of increased testing and awareness as it is of increased transmission. However, the report further stated the sustained rise in diagnosis of acute STIs in the past six years, which is probably attributable to the increasing practice of unsafe sexual behaviour, especially in young heterosexuals and gay and bisexual men. The increase in the numbers of STIs is worrying and it is important that something is done, because having a STI is damaging.

The dangers of unprotected sex, such as the possibility of pregnancy and other problems, are well known, although apparently not by young women and young gay or bisexual men. Informal surveys suggest that many of them think that such issues simply do not apply to them—they do not feel at risk. However, there are further dangers from unprotected sex. If left untreated, either because of ignorance or because the infection is asymptomatic, as is often the case with chlamydia, those infected risk damage to their fertility or even death through ectopic pregnancy or other complications.

What information do we have about the problem? A study of 3,860 sexually active women in the United States attending sexual health clinics, family planning clinics or school health centres—women who, because of their attendance at such establishments, are more likely to look after their own health—found that, over a 33-month period, 31.2 per cent. of those under 25 were infected with chlamydia, compared with 9.6 per cent. of those over the age of 25. Worse, the majority of those cases were asymptomatic and the women concerned simply did not know that they had the disease.

On the Ectopic Pregnancy Trust's good website at www.ectopic.org. it states that

"a pilot study that has been carried out,"

suggests that

"10% of sexually active people under 25 are infected. It is probable that at least one third to half the population now in their forties will have had it at some time."

Since chlamydia is so widespread, one might think that infection would be accepted as one of the risks of being sexually active and that people would get regularly checked. Sadly, a survey of women in Scotland with a current or recent diagnosis of chlamydia found that most women thought that STIs were not relevant to them. The diagnosis came as a shock. The women felt that there was a stigma attached to attending the GUM clinic and found it extremely difficult to disclose their infection to current and previous partners. Evidence suggests that, the younger the woman is, the less confidence she will have about making a disclosure of infection and discussing it with current and previous partners. Such stigma is likely to promote the spread of STIs such as chlamydia.

The problems highlighted by the survey are worse when considered in the context of a recent survey carried out by PatientView, the Terrence Higgins Trust and the British HIV Association, which asked 100 consultants about the treatment of patients in GUM clinics. It found that more than 40 per cent. of people needing sexual health appointments had to wait more than a week to be seen and that more than one in 10 have to wait longer than a fortnight. That is worrying in the light of evidence suggesting that the longer patients wait for an appointment, the less likely they are to turn up. Thus, infections are likely to spread.

In my constituency of Reading, for obvious reasons it is almost impossible to acquire figures on the number of people having unprotected sex. To get some idea one needs to examine evidence that might provide a clue as to the nature of the problem. The dangers of unprotected sex for young women in Reading are real and present. The area covered by Reading borough council has the sixth highest number of teenage pregnancies in the south-east. Between 1996 and 1998, there were 107 conceptions in young women under the age of 16, which is almost double the average of 57 conceptions for Berkshire. For under-18-year-olds, Reading borough council's area has a conception rate of 436 compared with a Berkshire average of 280. When the survey considered the conception rate per 1,000 of people aged 15 to 17 in the same period, it was 62.5—the highest in the south-east. That is a worrying statistic for my constituency.

There is a part of Reading, which I shall not name, that sends pupils to a popular and well-respected secondary school in my constituency. One in eight young women in that area will become pregnant. I remember that when I was at school a long time ago—in the late 1960s—a girl in my year became pregnant and left school as a result. There was quite a scandal and fuss. According to the statistics, of the pupils attending that school in my constituency, three a year will fall pregnant. That is evidence that much unprotected sex is taking place in Reading. That is worrying for our public health.

I am grateful for information from Dr. Alan Tang of the Florey unit, which is the genito-urinary clinic in the Royal Berkshire hospital in my constituency. It has a waiting time of two weeks for a routine referral and a week for urgent cases. People at the unit think that that is too long. Those waiting times measure the period from a referral to a diagnosis, or possible diagnosis. They completely leave out of the picture those who did not appear at the clinic or did not know how to represent their symptoms so that the urgency or otherwise of their case could be determined. It is thought at the Florey unit that chlamydia, HIV and other STIs are increasing at the same rate as in London.

[Jane Griffiths]

In Reading, the greatest increases in STIs have been in genital warts, chlamydia, which has increased by 50 per cent., and HIV. The Florey unit operates an appointments system. It is aware that clinics in Slough and London have tried a walk-in system, which on the face of it might appear attractive. People do not have to make that embarrassing telephone call and do not have to wait; they can just turn up. However, long queues tend to form at such clinics. That is a sign of the level of demand for such stigma-free service. There is corresponding evidence that some people who join the queue do not reach the front—they give up and go away. The consequences, both for those people and for general public health, will emerge much later.

Dr. Tang and those at the Florey unit are working to increase the unit's size to cope with the growth in the number of cases with which they deal. There is an appeal to raise funds for that, which I strongly support. A bid has been made for a greater allocation to the Royal Berkshire and Battle hospitals national health service trust, so that the unit can continue to provide the service that the people of Reading, East deserve. For some reason, fund-raising for a genito-urinary clinic is not as easy as it is for a scanner. I wonder why that might be.

The number of people with sexually transmitted infections is rising significantly. In Reading, there is a serious problem with teenage pregnancy. Those problems are due to an increase in unprotected sex and they affect young women and gay or bisexual young men in particular. That is the problem; what can we do about it? In the mid-1980s, the threat of HIV/AIDS was new. Who can forget the advertisements on television and the leaflets that came through our doors? The level of sexually transmitted infection was then lower than it is now. The campaign and other information around at the time are credited with having played a part in that.

I would like the Government to launch another public awareness campaign about the dangers of unprotected sex. The campaign should focus on those most vulnerable to STIs and teenage pregnancy. Following the publication of the British Medical Association report in February, I tabled early-day motion 919, entitled "Sex and Death". It called for several measures, mostly those suggested by the BMA. One measure called for was for storylines in soaps watched by young people to feature STIs. Mersey Television should be congratulated. "Brookside" has had a storyline about Jackie Farnham and her ectopic pregnancy and the Ectopic Pregnancy Trust worked with the television company on that story.

I am even more pleased with Mersey Television for its storyline in "Hollyoaks", which has a younger audience than "Brookside". It concerned gonorrhoea and the consequences of unprotected sex. I am enjoying what is happening. Last night, I was interested to see which character was thought to have been the source of the infection. It is not always the usual suspects. The period that it takes to develop the storyline for such programmes means that it is unlikely that they carried them as a result of my early-day motion or even the BMA report. I also declare an interest as an unpaid founder trustee of the Ectopic Pregnancy Trust.

The Department of Health has been running pilot screening programmes for chlamydia in Portsmouth and the Wirral. For the past 15 years, a massive campaign has taken place in Sweden to educate and screen the population. Chlamydia is now rare; it is about 3 per cent., down from 15 per cent., and there has been a reduction in ectopic pregnancies for all ages, most markedly in women under 30. It is those younger women whose ectopic pregnancies are most likely to have been caused by chlamydia—although that is not the only cause of ectopic pregnancy.

The official view is that 50 per cent. of ectopic pregnancies are directly caused by chlamydia. That information from Sweden means that, for women under 25, almost all ectopics are due to a current or very recent infection. One in 100 pregnancies is ectopic. Thankfully, an increasing number are detected early and can be removed. In some such pregnancies, the foetus dies on its own. In all cases, however, there is damage to the fallopian tubes and the woman's fertility. Ectopic pregnancies kill up to 10 women a year and many result in emergency hospitalisation and a period of physical and emotional recovery for the woman. As well as the trauma caused by such a major operation, the fertility of women who have been hospitalised will have been seriously damaged.

Even a cold cost-benefit analysis of the cost of an education and screening programme, such as that in Sweden, compared with the later cost to the health service of ectopic pregnancy and other consequences of chlamydia supports the widening out of a screening programme to the whole United Kingdom. I ask the Minister to support an extension of the screening programme nationwide. As well as being good in cost-benefit terms, extending such a screening service fits with the philosophy of trying to reduce the number of health interventions and to move to a preventative health strategy.

I am grateful to Councillor Catherine Wilton from Reading borough council for passing me details of the recent report of the Office for Standards in Education on sex education. It showed that education about STIs is receiving less attention than in the past. Even though infections such as HIV remain a significant health problem, young people perceive it as less of a concern and that is contributing to the lack of use of condoms by those who are sexually active.

I am pleased that, as a result of the Ofsted report, my hon. Friend the Minister, who is responsible for public health, said

"sex and relationships education is most effective when it is taught in the context of relationships and values and is linked to contraceptive services that young people trust."

There is worry that that is not the approach being taken by all schools in Reading. Concerns have been expressed to me that some schools are teaching sex education in a mechanical way and not putting sex in the context of relationships, respect and the importance of contraceptive services.

In July 2000, the Department for Education and Skills issued guidance to schools on sex and relationships education. That provided guidance on the content of SRE, lesson plans and case studies. Work has also been taking place in Bristol on a programme that is targeted specifically at boys. The Department for

Education and Skills has also been seeking to reduce the amount of prescription in the national curriculum where it can. However, it is accepted that some elements are taught in the national curriculum.

The current position with STIs means that the teaching and the content of the teaching of SRE should not only be the subject of guidance. Such education should be part of the national curriculum. I ask the Minister to talk to her colleagues at the Department for Education and Skills about making the teaching of sex and relationships education part of the national curriculum.

Finally, I am pleased to have been part of a Government who have published a draft sexual health strategy. That there was not one in place before is nothing to be proud of, but the BMA report shows the importance of achieving a national strategy as soon as possible. However, a strategy will do nothing unless we implement measures to tackle these problems in a practical way. I look to the Government with the hope that measures such as the ones for which I have called in this debate will be introduced. I want a national screening programme for chlamydia, better and more focused sex and relationship education, and a national education and awareness campaign such as the one launched in the 1980s. It is not about promiscuity or behaviour; it is about ensuring that if people are sexually active, they are safe, and about reducing the number of sexually transmitted infections and the consequential risk of damage to fertility or death.

I look forward to the Minister's reply and to hearing her answers to the points that I have made.

1.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) on securing this debate and choosing to discuss something that is becoming such a serious public health issue. She mentioned in particular her concerns about chlamydia and teenage pregnancy and covered some of the wider issues relating to sexual health, including an information campaign. I want to try to respond to each of those points in turn.

My hon. Friend is right that the trend of increasing sexually transmitted infections is serious and needs to be turned round. That is why last year we set out the first ever national sexual health and HIV strategy. It follows the teenage pregnancy strategy launched three years ago and looks at sexual health across the board, but primarily in adults. The teenage pregnancy strategy already provides lessons from which we can benefit when looking at the broader issues surrounding adult sexual health.

Since the strategy was launched, there has been a drop of more than 6 per cent. in teenage conceptions in the past two years. There is still a long way to go, but that shows that it is possible to change outcomes. It is not a simple matter, as a number of complex factors are involved, but progress can be made. Tackling poor sexual health is an important part of addressing broader health inequalities. There is a strong link between social deprivation and sexually transmitted infections, abortions and teenage conceptions.

The reasons for the rising trend in sexually transmitted infections are complicated. Young people are at particular risk of catching STIs. There is some evidence of greater complacency in attitudes, but equally some evidence that condom use among young men has increased in the past decade. That is why it is important to link the work on STIs with that on teenage pregnancy. In planning for services, we must also recognise that the more that we improve testing and screening services, the more sexually transmitted infections we will find.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): On that point, the Minister will probably know that this is national condom week, sponsored by Durex—a campaign that I helped to launch in Cardiff. Will she welcome the message of that campaign, which is simply to say, in a non-judgmental way, "If you're going to have sex, make sure it's safe sex to avoid unwanted pregnancy and reduce the risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection"?

Yvette Cooper: Yes, I am aware of that campaign and I welcome work throughout the community to make people aware of the risks of unsafe sex, with its health and other consequences, and of condom use as well. I shall say a little more in a minute about the work that we are doing on an information campaign. We must also recognise that there are issues relating to HIV prevention too. Although our record on that compares well with that of other European countries, the level of new HIV diagnoses is still a matter of serious concern, with more than 4,000 new cases last year. Sex between men is still the predominant route of infection in the UK, but more than half of the new diagnoses last year were acquired heterosexually and it is estimated that more than 80 per cent. of those were probably acquired abroad. That is why the work of the Department for International Development in supporting HIV programmes overseas, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is so important and has so many repercussions in this country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East asked about a national campaign on the dangers of sexually transmitted infections. I agree that we should have a new national information campaign on the risks of such infections and the problems that can arise from them. We want to start a new campaign for young adults in the autumn and we shall start to invest in that campaign this year. We have already carried out some research into what might make a difference and looked at the national teenage pregnancy media campaign, which has a good evaluation with 70 per cent. of young people being aware of the campaign and having a good understanding of the key information being communicated. The teenage pregnancy campaign already includes information about sexually transmitted infections, particularly chlamydia, but we now need a broader campaign for young adults.

It is clear that the new campaign should not be a repeat of the fear-based HIV campaigns of the 1980s. They took place in a different context and in different circumstances. Evidence suggests that such an approach with the tombstones that we all remember would not work effectively if it were repeated today and that campaigns should be focused on the experience of young people today and the risks that they face. Such an approach must not be prudish or patronising if it is to work. The Government's role is not to tell people how

[Yvette Cooper]

to lead their sex lives, but to provide them with information about the risks of sexually transmitted infections so that they can make their own informed choices and understand the risks to their health.

We are planning to start the campaign in the autumn, although considerable work is already being done. However, we must continue to fund separate health promotion work for those most at risk of HIV and separate targeted work in local areas to try to reduce the rate of sexually transmitted infections.

My hon. Friend referred to improving sex education and mentioned the reports of the Office for Standards in Education and the British Medical Association on the importance of improving education in schools on sexually transmitted infections and HIV. Ofsted highlighted good practice and its report will be circulated to schools and local education authorities throughout the country because it sets out some of the issues that can make a difference and contribute to effective sexual relationship education, including matters such as inviting a local doctor to discuss sexually transmitted infections with students, providing a confidential health advice service in schools, and teaching in a context of relationships and not just biology.

My Department is working with the Department for Education and Skills to provide greater focus on sexually transmitted infections as part of the improvements being planned for sex and relationships education. The Ofsted report was commissioned as part of the teenage pregnancy strategy to try to drive up standards in sex and relationships education, but we must go further, including the commissioning of detailed practical guidance for teachers with lesson plans and good practice in education about sexually transmitted infections.

Ofsted also emphasised the effectiveness of specialist sex and relationships teachers and a programme piloting a new scheme to train and accredit such teachers will be available from the autumn through the healthy schools programme.

The issue is extremely serious. Many young women—equally, many young men—are simply unaware of the prevalence of chlamydia, or in some cases of what it is. Screening, as well as information, is important, as my hon. Friend said. Chlamydia is now the most common bacterial sexually transmitted infection in the United Kingdom, with as many as one in 10 young women infected in some parts of the country. Although it is easily treated with antibiotics, my hon. Friend is right to say that many cases are never diagnosed, and that untreated chlamydia in women can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, ectopic pregnancy and infertility. Some estimates suggest that that costs the national health service at least £50 million each year.

That is why we have stated a commitment to a national screening programme for chlamydia. I agree that such a programme needs to be introduced and it will roll out to 10 sites later this year, supported initially by new investment of £1.5 million. It will build on the successful pilot study carried out in Portsmouth and on the Wirral. The programme will primarily target young women, but will also promote greater uptake of testing among young men.

In future, we will rely on the development of new technology to make testing easier. Some interesting work has been done in partnership with the Ministry of Defence to provide new technology that allows much more rapid diagnosis of chlamydia. Using it, a simple urine test could provide results on-site within 40 minutes. That could lead eventually to a much more effective and rapid screening service that avoided the need for notification of test results by post and return visits for treatment. The project will be funded by a grant of £4.6 million during the next two years from the capital modernisation fund. It is an important and innovative example of cross-Government working, with technology developed for defence being used to improve NHS services as well.

My hon. Friend mentioned genito-urinary medicine services, which I agree face pressure from the rising trend in STIs. We are conscious of that and are considering related issues as part of the implementation of the sexual health strategy. We want to set out an implementation plan and some issues related to GUM services will be a critical part of that. We should also recognise the vital part that primary care trusts can play in implementing the strategy, by commissioning services from GUM clinics and others, and through earlier diagnosis. Primary care trusts could consider prevention, as well as providing and increasing services in primary care. They have a unique perspective across the community, hospitals and primary care, linking the NHS and local authorities, so they give us great potential to develop sexual health strategy in future.

My hon. Friend mentioned issues connected with the teenage pregnancy strategy, which has made some important progress, with a drop in teenage conceptions of more than 6 per cent. However, we need to go further. That partly relates to the same issues, such as improving sex and relationship education, building on the best practice that Ofsted identified and ensuring that standards can be raised across the board.

We must also build on the media campaign, which has so far been effective in terms of recognition, and on broader support for young people across the community by raising their self-esteem, and by providing them with alternative opportunities and information and advice about contraception. The number of youth clinics and health advice clinics for young people has increased by more than 20 per cent., which gives more young people the specialist support that they need.

As my hon. Friend said, there is no single solution for the problem, but action on a range of fronts—on information, services, advice, early diagnosis and improving treatment—can make an important difference. There is evidence of it having an impact in other countries and in other circumstances; and we need to recognise some of the international aspects. It is not something that one partner can do alone. The sexual health strategy is an important way forward. I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising those important matters.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. The House congratulates the Minister on the speed of her delivery and the amount of information that she delivered.

We now move to the final debate, initiated by the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael).

Public Service Obligation Orders

1.30 pm

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland): I am delighted to have secured this debate, which is the first that I have secured in Westminster Hall. I am especially pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, the hon. Member for Plymouth Devonport (Mr. Jamieson), will reply. I know that he has some Shetland antecedents and that his portfolio includes many of the reserved transport matters that remain of great interest to me and my constituents. I hope that he will find time to return to his roots and visit Shetland, where I assure him of a warm welcome. Shetland is famous—some might say notorious—for its hospitality. Indeed, if he brings with him a public service obligation order, I can offer him more than a warm welcome—I can assure him of a hero's welcome.

I have spoken in this Chamber before about my obsession with transport. It is an obsession for which I make no apology. If one lives in an island community, as I do, transport is crucial to everything: get that right and just about everything else will fall into place. Since 1997, the Government have placed great emphasis on the need for social inclusion. We in Orkney and Shetland regard air services and the provision of transport services as a matter of social inclusion. Social inclusion is as important for a peripheral island community as it is for a peripheral housing estate in Glasgow or Edinburgh.

Let me give a few examples of our transport arrangements. The ferry alternative to air services to Shetland is a 14-hour overnight journey from Shetland to Aberdeen. From Orkney, it is a two-hour ferry journey to Scrabster, and from there to Aberdeen is at least a four-hour car journey—I have done that, so I can tell hon. Members that four hours is pushing it slightly. In that context, air services are crucial.

The return ticket that I bought in Orkney for this week's journey to Westminster cost £528 plus taxes. I can say that without blanching and without needing to sit down because it is paid by the Fees Office. If I had to use my private or my business income to pay for it, I would be rather less sanguine about that sort of expenditure. The Minister can doubtless imagine how it is when, for example, a family suffers a sudden bereavement and has to fly south at short notice. The myriad conditions, such as having to fly on a Saturday, would result in the family not being entitled to cheap fares. Constituents have recently come to my surgery saying that it would cost in excess of £900 for two or three members of a family to attend a family funeral in Glasgow.

There is a massive knock-on extra cost for the provision of health services on the islands, because specialist services are increasingly provided from Aberdeen and Inverness. In education, the provision of orchestras or sports services or any extension of interest in drama involves travelling away from the islands. Doing that in a reasonable length of time is dependent on air services.

I hesitate to speak of rugby clubs in your presence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but there is a fine one in my constituency. Orkney rugby football club is striving to get into Scottish national division four. For a community of our size, that is a considerable achievement. We have a budget of £40,000 a year to run that club. I hazard a guess that there is not another rugby club in the country that cannot pack the first 15 into four cars and drive them wherever they need to go. That is the extent of the burden that is placed on us, whereas many communities on the mainland take ease of travel for granted.

The constant threat to communities such as those that I represent is that of depopulation. To make those communities attractive so that people move to them and stay in them, they must be made accessible, but if one speaks of subsidising air routes, state aid rules come into play. The Minister will be aware that derogations, through the provision of public service obligation orders, are allowed under European Union law.

The European Commission's third package of air transport liberalisation measures was adopted under Council regulation 2408, which trips very nicely off the tongue, in 1992. That regulation contains provisions under article 4 that permit the imposition of a public service obligation on scheduled air services within the European Union. Under the regulation, member states have the legal authority to impose a PSO in respect of scheduled air services on routes serving peripheral and development regions within their jurisdiction. The rationale for imposing a PSO should be based on the consideration that the maintenance of regular air services is vital for the economic development of the region in which the airport is located.

Furthermore, a PSO should be imposed where adequate provision of air services in terms of continuity, capacity and pricing would not be possible if air carriers considered solely their own commercial interests. That is very much the case in the highlands and islands. In selecting routes for PSO designation, member states are required to incorporate public interest considerations in addition to an assessment of the adequacy of services provided by alternative modes of transportation. A service that charges £528 plus taxes for travel between Orkney and London could not, within any reasonable definition of the term, be described as adequate.

I will examine briefly the experience of other countries within the EU that impose PSOs on domestic routes. The first example is that of France, where 46 domestic routes are subject to PSOs. The remarkable thing is that they are largely within France itself—they do not serve only island communities. A lot of them operate out of the big Paris airports. Some 18 of them have been imposed on links with Corsica, and the most expensive fare that I have been able to find linking Paris with Bastia or Calvi on Corsica is £84.

In Italy, there are PSOs on routes between Sardinia and Milan and Sardinia and Rome. The Cagliari-Rome route has eight round trips per day and the maximum one-way fare is £41. Sardinia has a much more robust economy than either of the two communities that I represent, but the Sardinians are supported by their central Government because they are valued by them. Sadly—this is not a comment on the present Government—Governments for time immemorial have failed to place a proper value on peripheral and island communities such as Orkney, Shetland or the Western Isles.

[Mr. Alistair Carmichael]

In Portugal there are PSOs on 10 domestic routes, four of them linking Lisbon or Oporto with the Azores. In 1999, the total subsidy was £16.9 million and 1.4 million passengers were carried. Again, we see the sort of community that is subject to all the conditions that are attached to PSOs by the EU and that is able to have PSOs placed on it. One has to wonder why, if we are all supposed to be on a glorious level playing field in the EU, people living in island communities in Italy, France, Spain and Portugal are given that sort of treatment by their Governments but we are not.

It is not, however, all about cheap fares. Fares are the most easily identifiable issue about which constituents who approach me speak most animatedly. With PSOs, there are all sorts of possibilities. With them comes the opportunity to stipulate minimum service standards, the size and nature of the aircraft that is to be provided, the seating capacity and the timetabling—people can leave the island for the mainland at a time of day that is useful and that will allow them to return when they have completed their business.

The penalties that can be imposed for non-compliance with a PSO are also of great importance. Many of the benefits that I see in the imposition of PSOs stem from the fact that at present we are greatly dependent on our air services, yet we have little control over them. I pay tribute in particular to Loganair, which operates the British Airways franchise to Orkney and Shetland. The company is meticulous about keeping me and my colleagues in the Scottish Parliament informed about what it is doing and how it feels the service can be better operated. That is because it chooses to do so. If it chose not to, I could do nothing about it.

For something that is so important to many aspects of island life, that measure of local control is absolutely essential. We already have some experience of PSOs, as all the internal flights within Orkney and Shetland operate under them. Until recently in Orkney, that was limited to a handful of flights. However, the difference that the operation of PSOs made to communities like Papa Westray and North Ronaldsay was immense. It gave them the confidence to attract and keep people in those vulnerable communities. What happens to North Ronaldsay today will happen to mainland Orkney in five or 10 years and, no doubt, to the rest of the highlands and islands in 20 years. If we allow that constant drip of depopulation, we shall eventually find that we are all living in London—and heaven help us when that happens.

It is probably awfully poor form to refer to one's maiden speech, but I cannot help recalling time and again something that I said when I first came to the House—that I come here to represent communities that are proudly self-reliant. We are not subsidy junkies; we have a great contribution to make to the rest of the United Kingdom, not least that which flows through Flotta and Sullom Voe in the form of revenue to the Treasury from the oil industry. We have a lot to offer. The strength of the United Kingdom comes from the diversity of its communities. There is an obligation on central Government to ensure the survival of the widest possible range of communities. If communities such as Orkney or Shetland, or even the smaller ones such as North Ronaldsay or Papa Stour, Papa Westray or Graemsay, are depopulated, we shall all be the poorer.

I am conscious that I have spoken for almost 15 minutes. I am keen that the Minister should be allowed as much opportunity as possible to give a full exposition of the Government's thinking. Perhaps, in the course of that, he might be kind enough, if I conclude my remarks now, to allow me the occasional intervention.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I call the Minister, who is a very regular contributor to debates in Westminster Hall.

1.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Mr. David Jamieson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) on having secured the debate and on the sensible and clear way in which he has presented his case. The proud and self-reliant people of Orkney and Shetland can be proud that they have a good advocate. He is a doughty fighter for them, and may be for many years to come. I also congratulate him on having mentioned my antecedents. More than a century ago Magnus James Jamieson left Shetland to find his fortune in England. I could not have moved further away—in Plymouth, I am about as far as one can be in the United Kingdom from the Shetland Isles.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Bar Solihull.

Mr. Jamieson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Given the peripherality of the constituency of the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, it is hardly surprising that he should be such a forceful advocate for good transport links between island communities and the mainland and I am aware that he spoke in a debate on rural and island transport on 8 January. At that time, he said that the chance to discuss island issues in the House is rare, so I am sure that he is glad to have had an opportunity to put the spotlight on the concerns that he has raised for Orkney and Shetland today.

As the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, the ferry journey from Shetland to Aberdeen takes 14 hours and it is, I believe, quite a rough one at many times of the year. No one can doubt that air transport is the only means of transport capable of providing the adequate links to the mainland that are essential to ensure the economic and social well-being of island communities. I can well understand the concern that those services should be reasonably priced and within the means of ordinary people.

Perhaps I can begin by setting out the regulatory framework that governs the air transport market and the extent to which Governments may intervene in it. There is a fully liberalised air transport market within the European Community. That means that Governments are not at liberty to interfere in the operation of the market. However, the European law that establishes the single air transport market recognises that special provisions may be necessary to maintain adequate services to regions It therefore creates the ability for Governments to intervene in the

operation of the air transport market by imposing PSOs. A PSO is an obligation imposed on a carrier to provide a set level of service on a particular route to ensure that the service satisfies fixed standards of continuity, regularity, capacity and pricing. The aim of a PSO is to ensure the adequate provision of scheduled air services to such standards, responsibility for which air carriers would not assume on a commercial basis.

The regulation empowers member states to impose a PSO in respect of scheduled air services on a route serving a peripheral or development area or on a thin route to any regional airport, where such a route is considered vital for the economic development of the region in which the airport is located and where an adequate standard of service would not be provided by carriers having regard solely to their commercial interest.

The hon. Gentleman was kind enough not to mention it, but one of the other links in the country is between Plymouth, Cornwall and London, which has some of the features that he mentioned. It is a different circumstance but has a similar effect for the people in my area.

The adequacy of standard of service is defined against criteria contained in the regulation, including public interest, the availability of other forms of transport, air fares and conditions for users, and the combined effect of all carriers operating or intending to operate on the route. A member state may, therefore, impose a public service obligation on any route that meets the criteria stated in the regulation.

I should make it clear that imposing a PSO does not in itself subsidise the service, although a route must be subject to a PSO before any subsidy may be paid. When the PSO has been imposed on a route, provided that no carrier has commenced a scheduled air service on that route in accordance with the PSO, the regulation allows the route to be restricted to a single carrier, subject to an open competitive tendering and for remuneration of operating losses incurred by the carrier selected to operate the route.

The Government's overriding policy since the inception of the liberalised air transport market in 1993 is not to intervene in the market unless it is felt absolutely necessary. We consider that the level of air fares is a commercial matter for airlines. The airline takes several factors into account when setting fares, such as the effect that fares would have on the volume and need to maximise capacity.

Mr. Carmichael: That is a fair statement of Government policy, and that of the last Conservative Government, but does the Minister understand the frustration that is felt in the isles when we see other Governments in the EU taking a much more interventionist approach to PSOs? Why should we not be given the same opportunities as others?

Mr. Jamieson: I can assist the hon. Gentleman on that matter. For a PSO to be placed on those routes, the Scottish Executive would have to make an approach to my Department, perhaps jointly with the local authority for the area. The Scottish Executive would have to take into consideration any financial implications. As yet, however, we have not had an approach from the Scottish Executive or the local council.

Mr. Carmichael: I am reluctant to ask the Minister to speculate, but could he give us a general steer? If such an approach were made, is there any reason why we should not take the same route as that taken by other EU countries?

Mr. Jamieson: Obviously, the United Kingdom Government will interpret the regulations in our own way. However, I shall move on, as what I am about to say may help the hon. Gentleman.

The exceptions to the policy of non-intervention are economically vital lifeline services that would not be commercially viable without subsidy. In such cases, the Government provide subsidy in accordance with the PSO provisions. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, there are several lifeline air routes in Scotland, which are considered essential to the economic and social welfare of remote communities. The subsidised services include a number of inter-island Orkney and Shetland services, as well as other routes serving the highlands and islands. That shows the commitment of this Government and previous Governments to providing PSOs when it is deemed appropriate.

Aviation safety and regulation are reserved matters. My Department has overall responsibility for UK aviation policy and, therefore, for administering policy on PSOs. However, the Scottish Executive have day-to-day responsibility for considering applications for PSOs within Scotland and for overseeing their imposition, consulting my Department when necessary, especially on new applications. In the case of inter-island routes, the Scottish Executive work closely with the islands councils on their PSOs.

The Scottish Executive have, in the past, provided their full support to the local islands councils in their imposition of PSOs on Orkney and Shetland's internal air services, and they will continue to support the councils when the contracts are renewed.

I want to discuss assessments of the air services from Orkney and Shetland to the mainland against the criteria used for imposing PSOs. All that the PSO can do is specify standards of service that air carriers would not assume if they were solely to consider their commercial interest. If one or more carriers were able to meet those standards and already operated without subsidy, there would be no case for a PSO under our interpretation of the criteria.

I understand the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman about high fares, but costs are inevitably higher per passenger on low-volume routes than on highly packed traffic routes. However, for the Government to impose a PSO on a commercially viable service would mean overriding the long-standing policy of non-intervention other than when the market fails. It would set a precedent that could lead to requests for PSOs on many routes on which fares were perceived to be too high. One from my part of the country might be discussed at that time. The Government do not believe that such an approach would generally be helpful.

Mr. Carmichael: I feel that the Minister makes a bald statement when he says that such an approach would

[Mr. Carmichael]

not be helpful. I would not deny the people of the south-west of England the opportunity for cheap air travel although, given the availability of road and rail links, I suspect that other considerations would be applied there.

Does the Minister not understand that the distances involved and the reliance on air travel make the case for a PSO compelling? Is there any point in the Scottish Executive approaching his Department to ask for a PSO on, for example, Aberdeen-Kirkwall and Aberdeen-Sumburgh if the policy that his Government pursue is, as he says, one of non-intervention?

Mr. Jamieson: As I explained, it is not entirely a matter of non-intervention, because several routes already have PSOs. Routes have to meet the criteria as we interpret them within the European Union. I was not trying to draw direct comparisons between the south-west and Scotland. I appreciate that there are considerable differences, such as the distances and the hard stretch of water between the mainland and those islands.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether there would be any point in the Scottish Executive approaching my Department, but that is a matter for the Scottish Executive to decide. That is what devolution is all about. It is not for us to tell the Scottish Executive or the islands council what to do. The Scottish Executive and the people in his locality have to analyse and assess whether the case is worth their consideration, bearing in mind that it could have continuing financial obligations. They would not ignore such obligations, which would probably fall on them.

We feel that we have to interpret the regulation as we think appropriate, but pursuit of the case is up to people locally. The devolved Parliament could make the approaches if it thought that appropriate. Should such an approach be made, we would carefully consider it within our policy framework. If the hon. Gentleman wanted to pursue the case, that would be his first port of call. My officials are in regular contact with colleagues responsible for transport in the Scottish Executive. We would be ready to respond quickly to any changing circumstances on the routes.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's points, which he made clearly. If circumstances change, we will respond. Should the Scottish Executive make an approach to us, it will be considered with great care, especially in the light of his arguments.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 May 2002

[SIR MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

End of Life Vehicles Directive

[Relevant documents: First Report from the Trade and Industry Committee Session 2001–02 HC 299 and Second Special Report (Government Reply).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I am pleased to obtain this debate because the end of life vehicles directive is important. It was the subject of the first inquiry on which the Select Committee on Trade and Industry embarked after the general election. That inquiry resulted in a report that was published at the end of November last year. The Government responded towards the end of February. Their response was in the public domain in March. The directive took effect on 21 April 2002.

The purpose of the directive is to ensure harmonisation of the different schemes for dealing with cars that have reached the end of their useful lives. On average, that occurs after 16.3 years. However, as with all averages, it is probably misleading because some cars have engines that continue to operate much longer and some have bodywork that will not stand up to the engine—rather like human beings.

The intention of the directive is to provide a Community-wide framework to deal with 8 million to 9 million tonnes of waste throughout the European Union. Its aim is to reduce that amount of waste by encouraging and facilitating the recycling of some of the materials used in the assembly of motor cars. The directive has a preference for reuse and recycling.

The directive requires member states to ensure that systems are in place for the collection, treatment and recovery of end of life vehicles. The last holder or owner of a car is required to deliver it to an authorised treatment facility without cost, even when the vehicle has no value or even negative value. Member states are required to ensure that producers meet all, or a significant part, of the costs. The directive covers end of life vehicles, components and materials, as well as spares and replacements, without prejudice to safety standards, air emissions and noise controls. There is an exemption for vintage vehicles.

It must be emphasised that, from conception of a vehicle, preventive measures should be implemented to avoid waste and heavy metals being integrated into design and production, with quantified targets for those objectives. The directive is both retrospective and prospective: it covers cars that have already been produced and that, after 2007 vehicles, will be constructed in a way that allows recycling and a reduction in heavy metals. Obviously, it is desirable to have a smaller amount of unacceptable materials included in the construction of cars. Their construction and design, and the components from which they are assembled, should effectively and economically facilitate recycling.

The directive is nothing if not prescriptive, and the areas to be covered are clear. The motivation behind it is to protect the environment, end the abandonment of ELVs and recycle dismantled parts, but the Select Committee's main concern was its impact on the car industry and on the infrastructure for dismantling and treating the materials that remain. Ensuring that due attention is paid to the environment is not the direct remit of the Department of Trade and Industry, although it is part of it. The Committee was, therefore, preoccupied with the protection of the British manufacturing base, particularly the car industry.

There are different areas of concern within the car industry's manufacturing and assembly base. Of the old, established firms, which are responsible for a substantial part of car production, Rover, General Motors and Ford have the biggest car parc—they are responsible for the largest number of cars in production—in the earliest period considered in the directive. New entrants such as Toyota, Peugeot, Honda and Nissan have different difficulties, which I shall consider in a moment.

Rover, GM and Ford have, however, all seen their market share diminish, which has left them with a smaller resource base to fund their obligations under the directive. It could be argued that multinationals such as Ford and GM are major international players, which could be expected to shoulder their burden and to spread it over a broader cost base. They are, however, still vulnerable to the cut-throat competition on the world market. If the Department of Trade and Industry and the other ministries responsible for this issue make the wrong decision, it could have implications for investment into Britain. Areas such as new plant and new models could be subjected to a shift of priority from one country to another, which would have consequences for British manufacturing.

MG Rover is not a multinational, but a British company. It is emerging with some success from a difficult period, but will face the consequences of a marked decline in market share. As a result, its existing base will be extremely limited and vulnerable. Proper consideration must be given to its problems with meeting its responsibilities under the directive. Although it is making a good fist of the targets that it has set itself, it has yet to reach even medium-term self-sustaining growth. It has done well in the short term, but there is a long way to go. It would be tragic if this British manufacturer, which could be great again, was encumbered with responsibilities that it could not reasonably be expected to meet.

The plight of the newer players is different, but none the less parlous. Companies based in the UK are already wrestling with the eurozone and the prospect of further price cuts in the UK following the, I hope, dramatic changes in the block exemption, which we hope will come before too long. The financial position of those firms is not too robust. Were a company to introduce a model in 2003 with a lifespan of four or five years at most, by 2007, there would be a requirement for production by that manufacturer, whether of the old or new generation, to comply with the directive and to be recycle-friendly. Unless proper guidance is given very quickly, lines that are being designed and built might

[Mr. Martin O'Neill]

have to change in the middle of the production cycle, resulting in considerable cost to the company. Companies should know from the outset what the requirements will be and how they will be incorporated in production runs, if there is a case for the production line to be changed in mid-life.

Both the old hands and the new players fear that the cost apportionment of current versus historic market share could result in some companies paying considerably more than they should. Companies with ambitions to increase their share—some new players have recently experienced a dramatic increase in their share of the market—may become responsible for a contribution based on market share at a time that does not relate to the number of motor cars that fall into the ELV category. Therefore, they would pay more of their share than companies such as Ford and GM, which can better shoulder the burden, even if they experience a decline in market share.

No part of the car assembly manufacturing industry would remain unaffected by a clumsy and maladroit application of the directive by the DTI. I am not saying that such a clumsy application will necessarily happen, but flagging up a concern. There is a great responsibility on the Government and officials to take proper account of important concerns such as the impact of declining market share and how to evaluate the size of responsibility, based on an arbitrary application of market share rules.

Mr. John Taylor (Solihull): The hon. Gentleman referred to the big players among motor manufacturers. Will he concede, for the sake of the record, that Ford in United Kingdom terms means not only Ford but Jaguar and Land Rover?

Mr. O'Neill: I take the hon. Gentleman's point and do not want to dispute with him, but my main interest is in volume production cars. That is the area of greatest concern to me. A German Member of the Bundestag might ask about Mercedes, but Jaguars, Land Rovers and Mercedes fall into a different category from volume production cars. Cars such as Mercedes and Jaguars are made to a higher specification and have a longer potential life, so the ELV question is not quite of the same order.

Also, when luxury cars reach the end of their life in the United Kingdom, they can become attractive elsewhere in the world, in places where such marques are too expensive earlier in their life. The second-hand market is of a different order. I take the point made by the hon. Gentleman but it is not so important compared with the worries of the volume car producers—new entrants to the UK market—which see themselves producing even greater volumes in the not too distant future.

One theme that was raised several times in our report—it will probably be repeated today—is that the Government must make up their mind early in the day, in order to give companies the opportunity to plan and to make proper provision.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I tend to agree with the hon. Gentleman, but does he concede that one month after the directive was supposed to be transposed into international law could scarcely be described as early in the day?

Mr. O'Neill: The hon. Gentleman confuses the requirement to transpose the directive into international law and the requirement to put it into effect. There is a time delay, and the clock is running perhaps more quickly than the Government would like. He used a cheap debating shot in asking that question. He would have done better to save it for his summing up. He may yet choose to do so, but it is not a good shot. There are good ones, but that is not one of them.

It can be explained simply. There are about 12 months between the directive entering the corpus of legislation and its beginning to bite. We have to take decisions by 2007, but we must remember that those who design and assemble new cars in the UK will want their production runs to be on all fours with the objectives of the directive, and they need an indication of the decision as soon as possible. Before we get to that stage, however, we must take account of the concerns of those responsible for dismantling, recycling and shredding vehicles. They will need to know what will be required of them and how it is to be funded. As important, of course, motorists will want to know how much they will be expected to contribute.

Underlying it all, the system for ELVs needs to be effective and enforceable, not only to ensure the collection and dismantling of vehicles, but to resolve disputes. The matter of dispute resolution is central when it comes to the apportionment of cost. How valuable is a car? Has it a negative value, or is it worthless? As a consequence of the Finance Bill, changes will be made in the requirement to inform the authorities, so the abandonment issue is beginning to be addressed, but at somewhat glacial speed. The press notice from the Departments for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for Transport, Local Government and the Regions of 10 April goes some way to meeting concerns about abandonment, but apart from issuing platitudes about the Enterprise Bill, the Minister will need to tell us what is being done about the processing of ELVs, and particularly what will happen to cowboy shredders.

Will the Environment Agency have the necessary resources to play its part? Will it have the finance and the people to police things? We are talking about a sizeable number of small enterprises, which will come and go and which will probably be barely registered for value added tax and the like. The other irony is that if the Environment Agency gets the resources, has the people and is able to police the measures, and there is a consequent diminution in the significance of the cowboy, a greater burden will be placed on legitimate operators in this area. They will have to carry out far more work, probably to more environmentally demanding standards than ever before.

Those operators will have to be carried along, and their trade association is correct to express anxieties about the issue. It does not know how much will be demanded of them. It is not necessarily confident that those who are interested in participating in this activity will be in a position to do so if they are not sure how profitable it will be in future. It is all very well hiding

behind the froth of the Enterprise Bill, but we need rather more than that, and I hope that the Minister will address the matter this afternoon.

The question of the permitting of authorised treatment facilities is simple. As I understand it, no proper assessment has yet been made of the costs of getting such facilities. People will want to work out what their investment responsibilities will be if they continue in that area. That is dealt with in a rather intriguing part of our report. Anyone coming to it without having read the rest of the report—I know that the Minister will have read all of it very assiduously—might think that the term "certificates of destruction" suggests more a heavy metal band than a certificate that shows that vehicles should have been destroyed.

My only worry about that is that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency will have a central role in the certificate of destruction process. It would stretch the truth to say that, in the world of public administration, the DVLA is among the sharpest tools in the box. Many of us, when dealing with the agency on behalf of constituents, have found that it is one of those arm's-length Executive agencies with which one must, to say the least, be patient and tolerant. Its flexibility on occasions has not been as evident as one would like. We hope that it will be able to raise its game sufficiently to meet the challenge. The Minister is doubtless giving a sigh of relief that the DVLA is not the responsibility of his Department. However, he might nod in its direction and give us some reassurance. I would like to think that he could consider that area.

There is still a yawning gap as regards finance. We have considered various options, but the question of the trade-sponsored option 4 still has to be dealt with. We would like to know how the dialogue is progressing between vehicle manufacturers and shredders and the Government on that option. When can we expect a Government response? The reply that we received is peppered with phrases such as, "You can expect a response before too long." If the Government do not have a clue, they do not even put a time qualification on it. However, option 4 is of such significance that I would like to be given some guidance today on what is happening. The issue is not of earth-shattering significance, but many businesses, involving many jobs, are looking to this debate for some indication of progress and development in Government thinking.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests. I am not sure that I agree that the issue is not one of earth-shattering importance. The industry has changed dramatically during a 20 or 30-year period. There are different manufacturers in the marketplace. If the Government get the decision wrong, the impact on the industry—old or new—could be severe. Therefore, it is important that when the Government take a decision, which I hope they will do sooner rather than later, they recognise the realities of the motor industry and do not damage employment in the industry.

Mr. O'Neill: Had the hon. Member been present for the opening part of my speech, he would have heard me say that. In the great scheme of things, it is not the biggest issue, but it is important to many who want to make important management decisions that require some indication of what the financial basis for their future actions is to be. It might be the man in the yard who realises that he must get his act together in order to keep dismantling, shredding and doing that kind of work, or the company that wants to know whether it should have another model in the UK, or whether the uncertainty will make it prohibitively expensive to get a line here. The issue affects a broad range of people, and will become important only if things that should happen do not—then it will be too late. That is the point that we are probably both groping towards.

I should like to think that we could get some guidance today on the matter of funding. Where will it come from, to whom will it go and in what order will it go? In such areas of dispute, what kind of arbitration procedure is likely to emerge with the negative value adjudication scheme?

I have barely mentioned the car owners. I was going to say "poor car owners", and could do so in the sense that I am sorry for them. Many of the people we are considering have bought cars towards the ends of their lives. They are among the poorest drivers in the country and have the lowest incomes. They have cars not for joy riding but because they need them for their employment. They can buy only the cheapest cars available. The responsibilities of such individuals must be made clear to the rest of the motoring public. We need an indication of the Government's thinking about whether there should be a levy on car insurance, an increase in vehicle excise duty or some formal contribution. If sizeable sums are to be spent in the short term, one would imagine that the funds raised in any year would be insufficient to meet the challenges. It could be the subject of a medium to longer-term taper.

We are conscious that this measure is necessary. It is, in some respects, desirable. It would be helpful if our motor cars were easy to dismantle and assembled from environmentally friendly components, and if we could avoid the disfigurement of our towns and villages by abandoned cars. It is little consolation, when one drives past an abandoned car, that after the third day there is a sticker on it from the police saying, basically, "We know that the car has been abandoned, we do not think that it is criminal, but we do not think that it is very important either; we have far more important things to do." Before long, kids start taking the wheels off, somebody sets fire to it and it becomes a hazard. We can do without that. That is one of the elements that is most evident to the public. We need clear guidance.

I recognise that my hon. Friend the Minister is not responsible for those matters, but we are talking not just to the DTI; we are talking to Government. The message will, perhaps, trickle down to other parts of the broader Government machine, which we would like to think could handle these matters. However, I am sure that my colleagues on the Select Committee, as well as other hon. Members who are assembled here today, would like an assurance that the DTI will not only continue to promote the measures that are required by the directive, but monitor their implementation to minimise the dangers of confusion and disruption, and that the Government will make the appropriate information available to the players as early as possible.

In the report that we produced at the end of November, which was published at the end of December, we requested that there should be some form

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of information programme early in the new year. When I looked at the DTI website today, I did not see much evidence of proaction. Apart from the froth relating to the Enterprise Bill, it included little from the DTLR or other Departments responsible. Having said that, I do not wish to suggest that we are running out of time yet—we are not. We still have some months in one or two areas and a little longer in others, but that is no grounds for complacency or for hand-wringing and saying, "It may be difficult, but we will get round to it eventually." Many clever people are employed at considerable expense to take on responsibility for solving such problems.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. O'Neill: I am just about to finish.

There are many people who, when presented with a European directive, are energised into providing a form of words that is so all-encompassing and watertight that no one can ever get around it, but there is a more pragmatic, flexible approach abroad. When one asks British civil servants why they took a certain line, they say, "Because we do not want to be challenged in the courts." There is paranoia, especially manifest in the DTI headquarters at Victoria street, that European directives must be perfect, and that nothing can be done unless that perfection is matched in their implementation, and then we find that there are contradictions, problems and difficulties.

I would like to think that, in this instance, we could show some pragmatism and realism. The best need not necessarily be the enemy of the good. Many jobs and important work in this country depend on the successful and appropriate implementation of the directive. I would like to think that this debate could reassure those outside, who will be looking to the Minister for guidance and leadership, that the directive can be successfully implemented, and not at the expense of British manufacturing, jobs or motorists.

3.3 pm

Mr. John Taylor (Solihull): I wish to make a brief contribution to the debate. I have a west midlands motor-manufacturing constituency, although I carry no one's brief into the discussion. I have other duties elsewhere in the Palace of Westminster later this afternoon, so if I do not stay to the end of the debate, no discourtesy is intended to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the Minister or to the Chairman of the Select Committee.

The Select Committee has done a good job in providing a report on a subject that is probably far more urgent and important than has so far been suggested. That is not a criticism. I am anxious, because the largest component of the economy in my constituency is an organisation that everyone will have heard of, Land Rover. The company employs 9,000 people in my constituency, and it is said that for every job on the plant, there are eight or nine off it. Land Rover is a serious employer in the midlands, although the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) and I have already realised that Land Rover is not central to the focus of the directive. In every general election, I have a Land Rover for a campaign vehicle. On one occasion I said the Land Rover that I was driving was 17 years old. I then received a furious telephone call from its owner, who had lent it to me, telling me that I had no business saying that as it was 27 years old. Land Rovers that were made immediately after world war 2 are still operating.

My constituency is not in the eye of the storm or likely to be heavily affected. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) might feel that the storm is closer to him, likewise my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride). I come to the issue from a rather unusual angle, which might be seen as uncomfortable or unexpected. However, hon. Members will be relieved to hear that my speech will be brief as it will not take me long to deliver my message.

In the normal course of commerce, someone manufactures a commodity and sells it either directly or through an agent or distributor, as is common in the motor industry. The moment of sale—the point at which money and goods are handed over—is sometimes the end of the matter, but not always. There are continuing rights and obligations after sale: for example, if goods are dangerous, criminal law may have something to say about their sale; the law of tort will have something to say about goods being fit for purpose and of merchantable quality; the law of contract may partially override those common-law concepts in the form of warranties and guarantees. When I was a practising lawyer, I used to advise my clients to be wary of signing warranties and guarantees, because they generally take away more rights than they give. The common law is a good protector of the buyer, and it is usually superior to the warranty.

Part of the story of the 20th century is concerned with hire purchase, finance agreements, credit sale and the like—arrangements in which the buyer might complete paying the price over a period of time. For various reasons, business between the seller and buyer may not be concluded at the moment of sale. We are used to the fact that the sale of merchandise is not a cut-off point. In this debate, however, we are dealing with something new: we are imposing on the manufacturer an obligation that lives long after the sale, possibly onward to the sixth or seventh owner of the motor vehicle, who is unknown to the manufacturer at the time of manufacture. I am concerned about creating that new obligation on manufacturers.

I unashamedly come to the matter from the position of the manufacturer. We all know that the motor industry is extremely competitive, and that there is huge overcapacity in the world. That is why the Ford Motor Company has changed its original philosophy from one of great quantity and small margin to one of small quantity and high margin. Range Rovers—vehicles of which everybody will have heard—are made in my constituency under the ultimate patronage of the Ford Motor Company. One can pay £65,000 for one of them, and the profit margin will be far greater than on the humble Escort. I am not demeaning the Escort, which is a fine piece of engineering. Like most Ford products, it is subject to the highest degree of research and development and it is a fine car, but nobody should imagine that the profit margin for those involved in its

manufacture and sale is the same as that derived from a Range Rover, which is why Ford is moving to a different part of the market.

Given the overcapacity in the world automobile industry, we must try to minimise the disadvantage to manufacturers in the United Kingdom. That is not protectionism; it is common sense. The directive is a new obligation that will ultimately fall on the manufacturer, and I am concerned about it. Why are we doing that to motor cars and not to anything else? As the old Greek geometers used to do, let me reduce the matter to absurdity by asking why do we not apply the directive to pairs of shoes, or even newspapers? The pragmatic answer is that it is easy to throw a newspaper in a waste-paper bin or to throw a pair of spent shoes into a dustbin.

Perhaps the key to the matter is size or chemical content. It is true that motor cars contain metal chemistry that could be dangerous. I shall not pursue that line of argument unduly, save to say that the directive is unusual, special and targeted, and it must carry a cost.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that precisely the same logic has been applied—with disastrous consequences—to refrigerators and will be applied in due course to televisions? The directive is far from unique and there are lessons to be learned.

Mr. Taylor: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which has widened the horizon. I am glad that he spoke along those lines. If we want to live in a free society we have to live in a responsible society. That means that responsibility rests above all with the owner of a product that is coming to the end of its life. We cannot live in a nanny state in which a European directive will magically come along and save us. To borrow the hon. Gentleman's example, if a television set or refrigerator has come to the end of its life, my proposition, which is at least worth examining, is that the person responsible for its disposal is its owner. The owner should make proper inquiries with whatever disposal agencies there are in the area to discover how to get rid of that television set. In my borough of Solihull in the west midlands, the waste disposal authority will answer that question and will often provide assistance.

The hon. Gentleman might have persuaded me that the directive is not unique; however, it is relatively narrow. My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) will say in due course that there will be no end to it because it will expand and extend. The old adage used to be caveat emptor—let the buyer beware. Adages that should not be lost in this debate are let the owner take care, let the owner make inquiries and let the owner dispose. Please do not add a further burden to our industries in a very competitive area of overcapacity.

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): The hon. Gentleman mentioned constituents who ask how to dispose of certain products. Surely something needs to be done about individuals who do not ask that question. That is why the directive is necessary.

Mr. Taylor: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am talking about a responsible society, and I am not sure that the directive moves us further in the direction of a responsible society; if anything, it moves us further away from one. The person who wants to dispose of an item should make such an inquiry. Later in the debate, the hon. Gentleman might suggest what sanction he has in mind for the person who is relatively reckless, but I do not design my society around reckless people. I conceive my society around responsible people. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ochil makes a comment to which I would be happy to respond, but I did not hear it.

Mr. O'Neill: I was being facetious, but I thought that in his previous incarnation the hon. Gentleman was a criminal lawyer.

Mr. Taylor: I accept that point, but I have to say that I am still in the same incarnation as I was then. If I do come back, it will certainly be to this place, if that is possible, and as a Conservative. My useful remarks have reached their conclusion. I thank hon. Members for their courtesy in listening to me.

3.15 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I must try to work out how to follow that last comment—something about there being life after death in the Conservative party springs to mind.

I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor), whom I know well. I am speculating on the concept of a Land Rover ever reaching the end of its life. That is a condition not often applied to Land Rovers; they tend not to do that. I welcome the debate, and compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), the Chairman of the Select Committee, on the comprehensive way in which he has introduced it.

In this place, we have quick Corridor discussions in which as well as saying, "Hello, how are you doing?" people ask, "What are you up to at the moment?" or "What are you working on?" There was a period during the Select Committee's inquiry when I was getting approaches from the motor industry, dismantlers and others, and the end of life vehicles directive was occupying a great deal of my time. At that time, when asked those questions, I would turn and answer, "Well, actually, I'm doing quite a lot on the end of life vehicles directive," which would prompt a rather pitying look in people's eyes. That look became even more pitying when I shook them and said, "I know it sounds boring and tedious, but it really is very important." I almost got the impression that while trainspotters have a—perhaps unwarranted—bad name, end of life vehicle spotters have an even worse one.

However, we have to deal with this important matter. The hon. Member for Solihull took a philosophical view of whether such a directive should exist. I might take issue with some of his arguments, but his view does not acknowledge the position that we are in. The directive does exist, and we must deal with it and work out the best way to apply it. That presents us with various

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problems in different areas. We must apply it in such a way that, so far as possible, the directive helps to address the real problem of abandoned vehicles and does not exacerbate it.

Competitiveness, including the competitiveness of the manufacturing industry, is important. The hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil rightly stressed the fact that vehicle manufacturing is a highly competitive and ruthless industry in which price means a great deal and the margins for particular manufacturers can be very slim. We are also dealing with issues of competitiveness in another industry—the disposal, shredding and dismantling industry, which can also accurately describe itself as a cut-throat industry where competition causes real problems.

We need to get our policy right and do so in a way that takes account of not only those two legitimate interests, but the interests of those whom my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil referred to as the "poor car owners", who must not be forgotten. He is absolutely right to point out that the car owners most affected in practice by the directive will often be those who are least able to pay. It is a difficult problem, and one on which the clock is ticking. We must get it sorted out, but we also have to get it right.

I will concentrate on three issues, although the directive covers many different ones. First, there is the question of accrual to which my hon. Friend referred. How should producer responsibility be calculated within the vehicle manufacturing industry? Accrual involves the question of historic car parc versus current market share. Secondly, we should explore the relationship between what we do in the United Kingdom and the way in which the directive may be applied in other parts of the European Union. Thirdly, what is the fairest way of implementing the directive, which states that from 2007 producers have to meet all or a significant part of the cost of take-back and treatment? I would like to explore the relationship between the directive and questions of fairness, efficiency and competitiveness in the vehicle manufacturing sector and the dismantling and disposal sector.

If there is to be a liability in the vehicle manufacturing industry, how is that to be spread? How can the problem of historic car parc and accrual be taken into account? Even though Ford Escorts are no longer manufactured, it is clear which company manufactured them: the company was and still is called the Ford Motor Company. Even if we went back further and considered a much older model, the Ford Popular, it is pretty clear which company manufactured it. It is still Ford.

Mr. John Taylor: What would be the position regarding an end of life car that was originally made in Japan?

Richard Burden: If the hon. Gentleman can contain himself, I am coming to precisely that point, but before we consider cars that are made in Japan, I would like to mention other historic names that are not around any more. What if one owns a Standard Vanguard, a Triumph Toledo or a Wolsley Hornet? Which companies produced those cars, and who has responsibility for them now? The names are quite well known in the industry.

Miss Kirkbride: The hon. Gentleman raises an important and interesting question. My fear is that our joint car company actually owns those makes now, even though they are not being made. Will he clarify whether the responsibility, under what he thinks that the law might be, would rest with Rover?

Richard Burden: The hon. Lady has got two out of three. I mentioned the Standard Vanguard, Triumph Toledo and Wolsley Hornet. In fact, they all transmogrified into the British Motor Corporation, then British Leyland, which was taken over by BMW, and two are now owned by a company called MG Rover. However, Triumph is still part of BMW. That was an issue in 2000, but I will not go down that road.

The assumption behind the directive, and an assumption often made about the motor industry generally, is that smaller players are gobbled up over time by bigger and bigger corporations. That is what happens in most cases, most of the time, but it does not happen in all cases, and that is why the hon. Lady is right. She is particularly right about MG Rover. Those little companies did go into the British Motor Corporation, then British Leyland, and eventually they became part of BMW. When BMW pulled out in 2000, MG Rover was created, which is clearly a small to medium-sized car producer.

I have to declare a constituency interest. MG Rover's manufacturing plant is in Longbridge in my constituency. The engine plant is in the hon. Lady's constituency across the road. The company has achieved great things since it became MG Rover in 2000—in fact, it has achieved things that at the time most of the industry analysts said were impossible. However, it is still a small company operating in a very competitive market. If the directive is implemented in the wrong way, the consequences for the company could be severe.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil said, there is no easy answer to how to spread the cost within the industry. MG Rover has about 4 per cent. market share. It is struggling, but it is doing very well and shows every likelihood of making it. If one hits such a company with a liability to pick up the tab for about 10 per cent. of the historic car parc, which is the proportion accounted for by the historic names, one places on it a potential burden—I always find it difficult to use that word—that could have serious consequences for its future. We need to work that through.

If we say that that is not a fair way to do it, what is the alternative? A suggestion often made is to base liability on market share. The hon. Member for Solihull mentioned the number of companies that are in Japanese ownership. They now have a substantial market share—rightly so, because they make quality cars—but they arrived relatively recently in the British vehicle market. Is it fair that they should pick up the tab for vehicles for which they have no responsibility? It is not an easy question. It is a question of balance, and it is important that we get the balance right. We must think it through.

The Select Committee report and the Government consultation papers mention that the average age of an ELV is around 10 to 12 years. Therefore, sometimes the assumption is made—I believe that we made it in the report—that no manufacturer would be unduly penalised if historic car parc liability were adopted. I thought that through, and I am not sure that that assumption is correct. I am sure that over time market share and historic car parc will come together, but when the directive is first implemented, there will be a very large number of very old cars, and the bulk of them will carry the traditional UK names of Ford, Vauxhall, MG Rover and some others. That great and disproportionate weight, falling particularly in the early years, is something that we must address.

Market share is a problem, but if a choice has to be made—I am not convinced that it does—between historic car parc and market share, market share appeals more to me than historic car parc, at least on the basis of ability to pay. I would say that, wouldn't I, because of my constituency interests; but judged on the evidence and on questions of fairness, that approach has more to commend it.

The industry rightly asked us to consider another issue. When considering implementation of the directive, one must also deal with the question of balance sheets and book value of companies. One can put a figure on how many ELVs there are now and how many there will be in the future. If the directive is implemented in such a way that motor manufacturers have to put in their books a reserve specifically to cover the cost, the solvency of companies of any size, whether Ford, Toyota, MG Rover, would be affected in theory, and in the case of smaller companies such as MG Rover, the impact might not be theoretical, but real. It is therefore vital that the directive is implemented in a way that assesses liability for ELVs on the basis of contingent liabilities rather than specific reserves in companies' accounts. There is a way to do that which could make a big difference.

Secondly, there is the issue of how we in the UK deal with the directive compared with other parts of Europe. I am pleased that the Government have said in their evidence to the Select Committee, and in their consultation document and response, that they want a broadly level playing field for the implementation of the directive. It is right that we implement the directive properly and thoroughly, but in a climate as competitive as that of the motor industry, it makes no sense at all—indeed, it would damage competitiveness—to implement it overzealously or in a way that brought forward UK time scales. I have reason to believe that that will not happen. I hope that all Government signals will indicate that it will not happen. I commend staying on that course to them.

Thirdly, we have the question of who ultimately pays, and the relative responsibilities of the final user, car owners in general, vehicle manufacturers and the disposal and dismantling industries. The worst thing about the discussions is that there has been no consensus on how policies should be implemented or on the relative responsibilities of different players. We expect different industries to argue their corner and act in their own interests, but every industry involved in this issue has been blatant about doing so, and the end result has been that it is virtually impossible to get an agreement on how to go forward.

The British Metal Recycling Association has rightly and understandably argued that if dismantlers and shredders are to pick up the tab and they are expected to make the investment necessary for the disposal and de-pollution of vehicles, it could have a big impact on their profitability, especially if dismantlers pick up the more profitable ELVs before they reach the shredders. The association also rightly draws attention to the fact that the value of scrap materials such as metal and glass has decreased. It urges us to consider the establishment of a central fund, perhaps financed by the vehicle manufacturing industry, but more likely—according to its evidence— financed by an addition to road tax or some other fee paid by car owners. It says that that would offset the extra costs that the disposal industry will have to bear.

Those are serious comments, which we should take seriously. However, we must also consider the small print of the disposal industry's comments. In the brief provided to Members of Parliament, the association says:

"The BMRA therefore believes funding of de-pollution for all vehicles (including positive-value vehicles) needs to be derived from a centrally administered scheme, whether it be via a small increase in road fund licence, insurance premium or an identifiable impost on new vehicle purchases."

It is fine to say that a measure that will stop industries going down the pan needs to be established, but we must question the BMRA more closely if it is suggesting that a fund is needed to finance activities, including those involving positive-value ELVs, that would be profitable in any event. That is what the BMRA seems to be saying. If a fund can be made available to the disposal industry and it can name the price for the disposal of ELVs, where is the incentive for efficiency? The industry must answer that question.

I have had some harsh words for the disposal industry, and I now turn to manufacturers. In option 4, they put forward their own plan. It is no surprise that in their evidence the vehicle manufacturers pointed out many of the weaknesses in the disposal industry's arguments. They stressed that, instead of simply giving the disposal industry money to remain inefficient, it must be given an incentive to become more efficient and competitive. The vehicle manufacturers urge on us what they describe as a "market solution". Vehicle manufacturers' option 4 has some features to commend it, but there is a problem: some important questions remain unanswered.

First, option 4 contains no clear mechanism for distinguishing between a positive-value ELV and a negative-value ELV. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil is right to say that that is a key question. Who decides? Also, when considering the extra costs that the disposal industry will face, the manufacturers say that there could be a subsidy if losses were demonstrated across the industry. That sounds all right, but there is no mention of what will happen to individual companies in individual places and individual sites. Therefore, while option 4 has something to commend it, as does the disposal industry's option, it leaves some important questions unanswered. Both sides have produced figures to back up their arguments that could almost be drawn from a parallel universe.

After the Select Committee report was published, discussions sponsored by the DTI were intended to take place between the various industries involved. I

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understand that those discussions have started, but no agreement has been reached. While we as Members of Parliament must put pressure on the Government to ensure that those discussions take place and answers are found, there is also an obligation on the industries to try to find common ground, reach agreement, and produce something workable. If different lobbies simply line up on different sides of the argument without meeting in the middle, the directive will not be implemented sensibly and everybody will suffer, including the poor old motorist.

The matter must be sorted out. Something like a central fund will probably be necessary, but I caution against going back to the days of taxes on new cars. Some years ago there was a new car sales tax that got itself into a great deal of difficulty and was eventually removed. Nevertheless, it might be useful to add something to the road fund licence or elsewhere, which could spread costs across vehicle users over a period of time, as is done in parts of Europe, rather than load it on at the point of sale or at the end. That needs to be thought through, but I do not reject the idea of funding in that way. There must also be funding from the vehicle manufacturing industry. Producer responsibility is in the directive, and we cannot ignore it. To the disposal industry I say that even though it will face extra costs, it is possible that extra business will be created. Therefore, there must also be something in the equation for the disposal industry.

The Government have a difficult job to bring those disparate interests and conflicting pressures together, but it is an important job. The danger in getting it wrong is that the problem of abandoned cars will be exacerbated, not alleviated, by the directive. If the accruals issue is handled wrongly, the theoretical book value of certain motor manufacturers could be adversely affected and the health of certain manufacturers seriously jeopardised. If the accruals issue is handled wrongly in another way, while none of us wishes the cowboys to be in the disposal industry for longer than is necessary, it would be crazy if the directive were implemented in such a way that the legitimate disposal industry's extra costs were not dealt with and the industry was destroyed. If we are to achieve our objectives, different parts of industry and the Government must work together. On the evidence put to us, they are not working together yet. They must start to do so.

3.39 pm

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): It is a great pleasure to follow my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who gave a lucid exposition of the problems that UK plc and especially the motor industry face over the end of life vehicle directive. Having listened to him with great interest, I am not surprised that many of his friends and colleagues did not want him to explain how serious the matter was. It is enormously complicated and, as he rightly said, enormously serious, particularly for our constituencies of Bromsgrove and Birmingham, Northfield. Many workers at the MG Rover plant live in our patch and the directive will have serious repercussions for them, as the hon. Gentleman spelled out and as I hope to do as part of our lobbying of the Minister who is obliged to sit here and listen to us for a little while.

I pay tribute to the Select Committee Chairman, the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), for an honest and detailed report which bears examination and for going through it in detail for those of us who are not as expert in the subject as he and his colleagues. I was a little disappointed that he did not allow me to intervene because I wanted him to explain further how the issues are being dealt with in Europe. He spoke a little, as did the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield, about the way in which Europe is dealing with the directive and I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) will be able to help. It seems that other European countries have a lighter touch in the implementation of directives and, having gone further in implementing this directive, they may have relevant examples for the Government to take on board. The Minister was nodding his head just now and perhaps he will be able to help us.

Mr. O'Neill: I did not intend to be discourteous. I was coming to the end of my comments and thought I had probably taken too long. It may not be valuable to attach too much weight to international comparisons. It is very difficult to find similar markets, similar climates and so on. In New Zealand, for example, cars may last 25 years because of its climate, but in countries with freezing, salty roads, problems of rust and so on arise. We should not place too much emphasis on international comparisons because various factors may result in cars having shorter lives, so a different format is required for recycling.

Miss Kirkbride: I thank the Select Committee Chairman. He spoke as a true Scot. I suppose that the weather in Scotland is a problem for the life cycle of vehicles.

It is disappointing that we are saddled with the end of life vehicles directive, but saddled we are, so we must do something about it. Recycling in general is good and there is scope for legislation. Perhaps one of the benefits of the European Union being more interested in such matters is that it will push the manufacturing industry as a whole into thinking more about its responsibilities to the environment. The more we can do to recycle cars and stop dumping into landfill sites by having a more viable recycling industry, the better. I suspect that the only way to persuade manufacturers to proceed with this important matter is through legislation, which must have a long lead time so as not to affect investment plans and profitability.

I have some sympathy with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) about the liabilities that are being imposed on manufacturers and how that affects competitiveness among manufacturing companies. Some European manufacturers are more heavily based in the European market and are bound to be adversely affected by the directive, however it is implemented. That will affect the global market and the global competitiveness of those industries. It is a shame that when Europe considers directives, it does not consider the effect on Europe plc, the European car market and the profitability of our car manufacturers. Many are already diversifying into

other markets where profitability may be more easily maintained than in Europe if we continue to impose more liabilities when profitability is under such severe pressure. I recognise that the Minister will have difficulty in sharing the burden, given that he is saddled with the need to do so.

I simply want to add to the comments of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield about the special position of MG Rover. It is not merely a small to medium-sized company but a stand-alone company. The company has no plants in the United Kingdom other than in the midlands, and no plants abroad, so it is a special and unique case. It faces a worrying future with the prospect of the roll-out of the directive.

As the Minister will know, there are signs of optimism at the plant because we are hoping for a long-term deal with China Brilliance. He will also be aware that the models being made at the plant are reaching the end of their life cycle and that a new range of cars must be produced. If contracts are to be signed to create a successor to the smaller Rover car, China Brilliance and MG Rover will need some certainty about the market in which they are investing and the potential liabilities.

Time really is of the essence, because until MG Rover knows its position, it cannot reach a conclusion in its negotiations with China Brilliance or create an agenda for investment in the old Austin Rover works, which are 100 years old. We have significant liabilities in our car parc, which the present company could clearly not sustain. It would be not a severe problem so much as a knockout blow, if the company had to pick up the liabilities as the directive seems to suggest. That would be a bitter blow for those who work there and who have done a magnificent job in the past couple of years pulling up the plant by its bootstraps and giving it a future.

I recognise that the Minister has difficult decisions to make and look forward to what he has to say. Sadly, a decision must be taken, and the sooner it is taken, the better for the people of the west midlands, who need to know what future there is for the plant.

3.47 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), the Chairman of the Select Committee, on steering us through a complex subject with a great deal of spirit. He did not suffocate the discussion, but kept us focused on the matter in hand.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) on articulating the subject with great passion. Only he could have done real justice to the subject, because it was his idea that we should carry out the inquiry. I am not giving away any secrets by telling the Chamber that. It is to his great credit that the Committee was persuaded to hold the inquiry, and it is no wonder that he speaks so passionately and eloquently.

I do not want to speak for as long as he did, however, as I am aware that time is pressing. I want to focus holistically on the Committee's findings and draw attention to some facts and figures that elucidate the tensions that some hon. Members have mentioned. I refer to the tensions between the operation of a free market and the need to maximise our nation's potential to meet the end of life vehicles directive.

During the Committee's discussions, we were all conscious of the need to ensure that the British industry remains highly competitive and can adapt to change, while accepting our responsibility for the environmental issues that we have focused on today. We all realise that the growth in the number of motor cars will cause great environmental problems. There are 26 million cars on the road and about 2 million of them are scrapped every year. The growing number of new vehicles means that unless there is a big sea change in the industry's practice, we will have big disposal problems.

The end of life vehicles directive gives us a tough target, which is that 85 per cent. of parts and materials from cars must be reused or recovered by 2007. That is only four years away and it will definitely hit us during the next Parliament. The next target is for 95 per cent. by 2015. That is not far away either. We also have to meet new standards in our recycling facilities, with an associated need to de-pollute cars to aid recycling. Given that we have a largely untraceable scrapping infrastructure in this country, that is a key factor.

Paragraph 13 of the report highlights the present structure, adding that between 700 and 800 scrap merchants are probably acting outside the law and outside the planning regime. Those scrap merchants may be a blot on the landscape to many people, but we must concede that, in their own particular way, they are very good at recycling. At present, the Environment Agency indicates that we have collectively recycled or reused about 75 to 80 per cent. of end of life vehicles, and we adduce in paragraph 12 that that figure was reached without the Government applying significant pressure.

The directive sets the parameters for the first test, and I have no doubt that by 2006 we shall have to increase the level of recycling by some 5 to 10 per cent. In my former life, I was an engineer and worked in industry, so I think that those targets are achievable, although recycling, by its very nature, means that the extra proportion will be more difficult to release into a market environment. We highlighted some of the difficulties in paragraph 15, including the particular problems of disposing of fluids and tyres. However, I believe that, if thought is given to the design and material composition of new cars, we can produce vehicles more suited to being recycled once their days on the road are over.

If investment is based on the assurance that recovery and recycling facilities are to be properly accredited, we can begin to open more end of vehicle life centres, which will be properly managed and controlled. The financial architecture under which the new recycling regime will operate is at the heart of the Committee's report, and we conclude in paragraph 48 that the questions of who pays and how much is important to the implementation of the directive.

Processing end of life vehicles in the fashion proposed is not a revenue-neutral affair. The cost will have to be met by car manufacturers or the last owners of vehicles, through public spending or a combination of those methods. As the last owner of the car is unlikely to pay to have the car taken away, even if a tough certification system is introduced, it appears that a combination of public spending and cash contributions from the

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manufacturers is the most likely result. We have to accept that that will affect the price of new cars, and in paragraph 50 we conclude that manufacturers will have to make specific provision to cover the costs of disposal of end of life vehicles, and that new car prices are likely to rise to finance that. We add that the cost of take-back to producers will ultimately be passed on to original purchasers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield said, we must get our approach right in the coming year, particularly if we are to start planning a new generation of accredited disposal facilities for 2006. In the first instance, we must consider introducing a small financial incentive to bring a car to a facility. There must be a Government guarantee that such facilities will, at the very least, remain committed to free take-back.

We must also examine what market mechanisms exist or are needed to deal with recycled or reused components. Pilkington Glass, the UK's biggest producer of car windscreens and windows, gave evidence that graphically demonstrated the problem, and appendix 8 contains a chart and a detailed explanation. The firm noted that there were immense production quality problems with recycled glass. To put it bluntly, that is not something that companies such as Pilkington would want to contemplate in an ideal world, let alone in the present financial climate.

The same issues arise with waste tyres and plastics, and we must overcome particular problems as regards proper recycling. Granulated tyres can be used for athletic tracks, carpet underlay, and playground and road surfacing. Tyres and plastics can also act as fuel in waste-to-energy plants, although that is definitely an unpopular option for many people.

The simple lesson is that we can implement proper recycling, but that we need a stable financial regime first. Such a regime would allow a recycling operator to invest safely, in the knowledge that he was immune to the swings and variations in the economic cycle of the product that he was handling. The Government can play an important part in that, perhaps by considering some form of tax credit. After all, tax credit schemes are on the agenda thanks to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is very good at developing them. Many economists might argue that that would introduce a distortion into the market, but we shall have to deal with the problem in some way. We should tell the European Commission that we can meet the end of life directive, but the competition directorate will have to accept that some form of change is necessary, and we shall initiate an amendment to the financial structures that underpin the markets for the new goods and commodities that will flow from recycling facilities.

I recognise that most of the report is very technical and that it is not the kind of riveting reading for everyone's bookshelves. However, it seriously tackles the issue and recognises the demands of a lightly regulated market and the social need to put the recycling of materials on an important footing. That is important.

The Government can play an important part by setting the agenda and the direction. The Committee examined the issue in great detail because we recognised its importance. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield said, it is crucial that discussions have started between the environment lobby, the waste disposal industry and everyone else who is involved. If we are to make the progress that needs to be made, it is important that the Government give a lead in the spirit in which we tackled the report, and that we get this thing right once and for all.

3.59 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): It is a pleasure to be able to take part in this debate on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. This is a tricky and complicated subject and we are grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), and to others, particularly the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who explained the issues in lucid terms. I took this 110-page document home as homework yesterday, along with the complicated briefs on insolvency law from the Enterprise Bill. Although I did not believe it possible, by the end of the night the stuff on insolvency seemed rather simpler than the material in the report.

I am not sure that as politicians we can greatly advance the detailed arguments that have already been made, so I will content myself with some general remarks about the principles that should apply. I particularly want to tease out an indication from the Minister, who said in early March that he was close to coming to conclusions on the apportioning of costs, of his preliminary conclusions on the principles involved. I hope that we will, at the very least, get that from this discussion.

I want to touch on three basic issues. Lest we lose sight of it, one issue is the principle of the directive. The second is that of the perverse economic consequences of directive-driven recycling, some of which are already upon us. The third concerns abandoned cars—not that this debate is about such cars, but the issue gives us a pointer to the social costs of not having a properly funded arrangement.

The key point is that the "polluter pays" principle must apply. The industry provides an important and valued commodity that generates pollution, not just through the use of fuel but through waste. Somebody has to pay for it. Clearly, we have moved on in the past half-century. During my formative years in the 1950s and early 1960s, books such as "The Hidden Persuaders" and Galbraith's "The Affluent Society" were published. Those books were all about built-in obsolescence in the car industry—mass production based on short life, rapid rusting and volume production.

The industry has moved on a great deal from there. Not all cars have a 27-year life like those Land Rovers, but there has been a lot of technological advance. When I was in the oil industry before coming to the House, we talked about supercars built using light materials, with long life and high fuel efficiency. In time and with prodding, the industry is gradually and slowly moving to technologically satisfactory solutions to environmental problems. None the less, we are left with a big waste disposal problem that has to be faced.

I spoke recently to my hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael), who explained to me that among the biggest problems faced by

Shetland is that of a mounting stock of cars, accumulated over a generation or so. The geology of the island does not permit landfill, they cannot incinerate and the economics of a small island do not permit recycling, so they have an ever-expanding mortuary of used cars. Although that is only a microcosm, it illustrates the nature of the environmental problem that must be addressed and ultimately drives the directive. The European Union is applying its environmental standards to a genuine problem that has to be accommodated.

However, we are beginning to realise that setting environmental quotas and targets for recycling can have all kinds of perverse consequences unless they are properly thought through. We have had many examples of that. We have begun to see the impact on the fridge industry and there will be consequences in other durable goods industries as they are brought within recycling directives. Several impacts are already being felt.

First, there is a big impact on the markets for the products that emerge from the recycling process. That has been happening for years with paper. The same is true in the car industry, with recycling having an impact on the market for scrap metal, tyres and glass. Although the response from industry in this debate has largely come from the car makers, the adoption of tough recycling standards has widespread implications for industry, some of them negative. Somebody is paying, and in practice it is those other industries.

The second economic consequence is the creation of a new type of commodity that we have not seen before, a commodity that has a negative value. If a product has to be disposed of at some cost, it is of negative value to the last user when it reaches the end of its life. We shall see more and more such commodities. Unless, as a society, we produce an answer to the problem of negative value, we shall experience more and more dumping—that is a natural human response to holding something that has negative worth.

The third economic consequence is the impact on the economics of the recycling industry. It is clear from the disastrous experiences with refrigerators that, unless the recycling industry is profitable, recycling cannot happen. What emerges clearly to me from the report, as a lay person, is that unless each stage of the recycling of vehicles—dismantling, scrap wholesaling and then shredding—exists and is profitable, there is no mechanism to enable the targets to be met.

As the report indicates, much of the current activity is illegal. It is operating outside proper health and safety standards. If those standards are to be raised, not only must the industries be profitable, but they must operate at a higher cost base as well. Much more money must flow into the recycling industry to make it work. There are serious economic consequences to consider.

My third and general point concerns the abandoned car problem. This is not a debate about abandoned cars, but they are very topical. I noticed that, in his statement earlier this afternoon, the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions was grasping at the issue of abandoned cars in his wider embarrassment, so it is topical. It is important because of the staggering costs involved. It is not trivial—we have all seen the problem in our constituencies and the economic costs are piling up considerably. There are probably about 2 million end of life vehicles a year. Some 350,000 of those, about 20 per cent., are abandoned at the end of their lives, not because of the directive but because of MOT certification and so on; they are simply left. It costs from £65 to £150 to dispose of each of them.

The worst problem—this is where the massive social cost creeps in—is torching. We all see the growing number of cars that are bombed out by kids. The police and fire authorities estimate that each burned-out car costs them between £5,000 and £10,000. With a bit of mental arithmetic, we can tell that if 20 per cent. of the abandoned car population is being torched at that cost, and with projections that the number of abandoned cars will double, it will cost around £1 billion a year to dispose of the problem. That is a staggering cost—it needs to be set beside all the costs to be borne by the recycling industry, the manufacturers and the car consumers. It must be taken into account in the equation; it is a very big sum.

Although the Government are, creditably, responding—and we support the measures that they have introduced in the Budget and elsewhere—what tends to be forgotten is that such measures reshuffle the cost among different Government agencies. I am not a Birmingham MP, but I understand that the Birmingham scheme is largely led by the police. They have been proactive and are getting rid of abandoned cars. That is good for the council and, to an extent, the fire brigade, but the police pick up the cost. The Maidstone scheme, which was encouraged by the Government as a pilot, is another good and successful scheme. That is led by the council, which is helping the DVLA to save a lot of money. That may help the police and the fire services, but the council is footing the bill, and it is a large one.

There is a large social cost to consider, and I argue strongly that any financing solution that leaves the costs in the hands of public authorities is not acceptable. That is why we should not favour the option 4 solution, which has been proposed by the industry. Anything that leaves cars in the hands of their last owners as commodities with negative value will lead to a massive proliferation of the abandoned car problem, with enormous costs to society, so we should not be contemplating that option. The question then arises of what other possible options there are for handling that set of problems. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield has talked us through the various options in a fair-minded way, and I cannot add much to what he said. There are essentially three options that we should be considering.

The first is the simple idea of a deposit scheme for new cars, whereby a person buying a new car pays a deposit, possibly including an element of bounty, which is passed down through successive owners to the last, who can then use the value of the deposit to pay for disposal and perhaps receive a cash bounty on top. Many of us had experience of that sort of scheme as kids who took bottles back to the local grocer. It provides a small cash incentive to be environmentally prudent. Such a scheme would deal with the abandoned car problem and has been tried in many different contexts. Its drawback is that it would not really help us until 2012 or 2015, so there would be a big transitional financing problem. How would we finance the transition until a sensible deposit scheme was introduced? There are two ways of doing that. One is simply to levy the industry, including

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importers. That would have to be done on a market share basis. There are obvious problems and inequities with such a scheme, but it would, at least, bring in cash which could be used later to finance the purchase from the last user by the recycling industry. A levy scheme would have some attractions, but for reasons that have already been described, it would be perceived as very unfair by those car companies that are relatively new to the market.

The second scheme, with which I have some sympathy, would be to set aside a segment of vehicle excise duty for purchasing cars from the end user and prevent them from being abandoned. The problem with that scheme is that, in a general environmental sense, the Government are trying—there is a broad consensus on this—to move away from taxing car ownership through vehicle excise duty towards taxing car use, so that option would cut across public policy, although the Government should consider it.

In conclusion, I hope that whatever financing mechanism the Minister comes up with will not leave responsibility in the hands of the last user, because that is the road to disaster and to the massive proliferation of the highly antisocial abandoned car problem. I hope that the Minister will give us some indication of his thoughts on that.

4.12 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Not for the first time, I find myself agreeing wholeheartedly with the principal conclusion of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable). I, too, want to say something about the problem of leaving responsibility with the last user of a vehicle.

Although I am now privileged to be a member of the Trade and Industry Committee, I was not a member when the Committee prepared the report, so I came to it in the same way as the hon. Member for Twickenham did, taking it home and reading through it as a layman. I am somewhat disappointed that I was not a member of the Committee at that time, because it is an excellent report. I congratulate my colleagues on the Committee on its quality and the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) in particular on his presentation of the report to the Chamber this afternoon.

I know that my hon. Friends the Members for Huntingdon (Mr. Djanogly) and for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), both of whom are members of the Select Committee, would have very much liked to be here this afternoon but are unfortunately detained in the Standing Committee considering the Enterprise Bill. I am sure that they would want to associate themselves with my compliment to the Chairman of the Select Committee.

We all recognise the problem that the EU directive attempts to address, and we all want to ensure a system that delivers environmental benefits and works in practice. The EU directive was not conceived to deal primarily with the problem of abandoned vehicles, but in the UK context the impact on abandoned vehicles will be an important factor, and I shall return to that in a moment. I believe that the watchwords, in seeking to implement the EU directive in the UK, must be "proportionality"—between the costs imposed on industry and consumers and the benefits that will accrue to the environment—and "practicality" in devising a scheme that is simple, non-bureaucratic and self-regulating, so that it will be easy to implement and easy to ensure that it will meet its objectives. It is not clear to me that the underlying principles of the EU directive are either proportional or practical. I hope that in transposing them into UK law the British Government can do a better job than the EU did in the original directive.

The directive has two primary thrusts. First, it is about ensuring that vehicles are manufactured in the future in a way that makes them more friendly to recycling and that excludes materials damaging to the environment. Secondly, it deals with end of life vehicles and their recycling, take-back and reuse. This afternoon's debate, like the Select Committee's report, has focused very much on the second of those thrusts. Before I join in that general trend, I should like to ask the Minister to address the first issue when he replies—the banning of the use of heavy metals in car manufacture and the targets for changing the nature of motor car production and the materials used in that.

Is the Minister quite satisfied that the objectives are sensible from an environmental point of view and that eliminating materials obviously harmful to the environment will not result in solutions that might, in totality—looking at energy use, greenhouse gas emissions and so on—be more costly to the environment than the problems that they are intended to solve? Is he also satisfied that, on an objective cost-benefit analysis, the elimination of all heavy metals from motor car manufacture is a sensible aim to pursue? I want to ensure that we are not jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.

Returning to the principal issue of the take-back and reprocessing of end of life vehicles, there is a problem of considerable scale, which the hon. Member for Twickenham identified. Using the brief that the Automobile Association has kindly circulated to Members, I can illustrate that by looking at the 1989 cohort of vehicles. In 1989, 2.296 million vehicles were registered in the United Kingdom, of which just over 1.5 million were re-taxed in 2000. That leaves 787,000 vehicles untaxed, of which 145,000 were declared scrapped and 18,000 were officially off the road. That means that some 600,000 1989 vehicles are unaccounted for. They are either driving around the roads untaxed, or have been scrapped without being officially declared scrapped and deregistered, or have been abandoned somewhere.

The Minister for Industry and Energy (Mr. Brian Wilson): Or they are in Shetland.

Mr. Hammond: Or, as the Minister says, they are piled up in Shetland, competing for space with the mountain of fridges following close behind them.

Mr. O'Neill: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman has given proper weight to the possibility that a number of those cars have been exported to other countries.

When they are traded in, many cars are now exported in bulk to eastern and central Europe, where there is a market that did not really exist in 1989.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am glad that he has raised that point, which came out of the earlier contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor). Some vehicles, especially those of higher value, are exported. I am not an expert in the matter, but I assume that the proper procedure when exporting a vehicle is to notify the DVLA and for it to be recorded in the same way as a vehicle scrapped. I also assume that the AA would have taken account of that in its figures.

The hon. Member for Ochil raises another interesting issue, which is that we will have to address the question of exporting our problems to third world countries. That issue often arises when we talk about tightening regulations in the European Union. What will we do about vehicles that are exported, either to avoid tough regulations and tough regimes here or for genuine economic reasons because they have a value, and are subsequently scrapped in an environmentally unsatisfactory way outside the European Union? I am sure that in addressing the requirements of the directive, the Government would want to ensure that we do not inadvertently create incentives to export vehicles that are then scrapped outside the United Kingdom.

Currently, the industry is recovering and recycling about 75 per cent. by weight of all end of life vehicles, and has set a voluntary target to increase that figure to 95 per cent. by 2015. Those figures have been quoted before, and it is very interesting that 75 per cent. recycling is being achieved entirely by the marketplace. We have to consider that against a backdrop of scrap metal values that are radically lower than just a few years ago. The figure was about £35 a tonne for scrap ferrous metal in 1998, but is now down to about £10 a tonne. That is a fundamental problem of any market-based recycling scheme. Supply and demand in the marketplace may be affected by such schemes and depress the values of the products produced by the recycling process.

The end of life vehicles directive introduces three issues that are new for the UK vehicle reprocessing or end of life vehicle handling system. The first is the concept of free take-back, and I shall say something about that in a moment. The second is the concept of de-pollution as part of the processing system. At the moment, most vehicles are simply stripped of any useful parts and then crushed with their polluting contents left inside. The third is the concept of authorised treatment facilities: registered plants that would deal in a compliant way with vehicles turned in for end of life processing. The Government's own estimate of the administrative cost of running an authorised treatment facility is about £12 per vehicle processed. That is not an inconsiderable sum just for dealing with the administrative issues involved in the operation of an authorised facility.

To establish authorised facilities will require major investment. We do not have them in the UK at the moment. We have had one or two fairly graphic illustrations of how the vehicle dismantling business operates in the UK. I know that in some European countries it is a very different, much more capital intensive industry, which is conducted in closed plants, not under railway arches or in odd yards at the side of railway lines. Clearly, a large investment will be required in the UK dismantling and shredding industry to deal with those issues.

The hon. Member for Twickenham made what I think is the key point that we have to focus on in this debate. In the absence of anything that addresses the problem, negative-value end of life products will lead to more dumping. That is especially true in the case of cars, when the last owners are typically marginal owners, as the hon. Member for Ochil explained earlier. They are people who cannot afford newer vehicles and use vehicles on the margin of serviceability. It is a sad fact that many of those vehicles will be operated on the margins of legality—without MOT certificates, road tax and possibly without insurance. A significant number of vehicles on our roads are without insurance. I suggest to the Minister that anything that attempts to apply the stick to the final owner of a vehicle to get them to behave responsibly is likely to be a misguided approach that is bound to fail.

Although there will certainly be responsible last owners of vehicles, it is a fact that many last owners will not be able or willing to behave responsibly if it costs them to do so. We can have any regime that the Minister cares to propose. We could charge people £1,000 if they do not scrap their vehicles through an authorised treatment facility, but the general lesson from collecting fines and penalties in the courts is that one cannot squeeze from a stone what is not there. It is no good talking about a group of people who, almost by definition, are among the poorest in our society and saying that we will make them behave properly by threatening to fine them £1,000.

We have to address the problem through economics. Consider a situation in which the value of an end of life vehicle were high enough to support the de-polluting, dismantling and shredding process. If the value of the products coming out of such a vehicle exceeded the cost of the dismantling, shredding and de-polluting process, it would not have a negative value. Indeed, it might even have a positive value, which would start to address the problem of incentives for last owners. I submit that if the system is going to work, we must support an economic value in end of life vehicles that is sufficiently high both to pay for the dismantling, de-polluting and shredding process and to provide a value to the last owner for turning a car in. Instead of using sticks, we should use carrots. That would lead to a situation in which the end user would almost always turn in the car in practice because it had a cash value. If they dumped it, as with the deposit bottle example, someone else would pick it up and turn it in because a cash value was attached to it.

If we go down the route of looking at market-driven solutions, we will be able to avoid the bureaucracy and complexity of some of the other proposed solutions. A market-driven solution clearly involves attaching additional value to end of life vehicles, and there are a number of ways in which that might be done. It is also worth noting at this point that anything that can be done to support the marketplace in dealing appropriately with end of life vehicles will avoid one big problem that other Members have identified during the debate—the historic car parc. For reasons that are probably known to those who have been involved with the issue for a long

[Mr. Hammond]

time, but are not known to me, in this context the historic car parc is spelled with a "c". I do not know whether that is a gesture to the debate's European origin, and perhaps the Minister can enlighten me during his winding-up speech on why it is a car parc.

Mr. Wilson: Only if someone enlightens the Minister.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister probably has more resources of enlightenment available to him in the Chamber than I do.

I should like to see a solution that works by attaching a positive value to all end of life vehicles. That leads me to raise another important question about the motivation behind the European directive and its wording. I acknowledge, as other hon. Members have, that vehicles scrapped to landfill are, on the face of it, a significant source of waste, but in the United Kingdom they represent only 0.3 per cent. of controlled landfill. Why have end of life vehicles been targeted by the European Union in its first attempt to deal with sources of waste by addressing the problem at the producer stage?

I am curious to know why the directive specifies that producers must meet

"all, or a significant part of, the costs".

If the directive is intended to deal with the environmental issue, surely its proposers should be neutral as to how the cost is borne. I wonder whether the directive arose from green hostility to the motor car industry. The motor car represents the preferred target for the green lobby, which is a powerful force in the European Union.

The directive will impose a significant cost—I believe about £300 million a year—in the United Kingdom and, if I read the Department's analysis correctly, will deliver about £1 million of measurable benefits. Any proposal to impose a £300 million cost to deliver a £1 million measurable benefit deserves serious scrutiny, and that was what the Select Committee sought to do in its inquiry.

As I understand it—the Minister will no doubt correct me if I am wrong—if an end of life vehicle has positive value at the point of scrapping, whatever process we use to ensure that positive economic value attaches to it, the part of the directive that says producers must

"meet all, or a significant part of, the costs"

will not apply, because there will be no cost at the point at which the vehicle is scrapped: the vehicle will have a positive economic value. An economic mechanism will have to be found to attach that value to the vehicle. There is no reason why that could not still be funded partly by the producers, if that were considered appropriate, but that would be a domestic issue that the Government could debate with the various economic players and with representatives of consumers and motorists, without being driven by the constraint in the directive that the producers must

"meet all, or a significant part of, the costs".

In an ideal world, the value of the extracted salvage materials and components, driven up by increasing demand supported by regulation for use of recycled materials in production, would ensure that the end of life vehicle had a positive value. It is conceivable that on the distant horizon, when recycling has become part of our culture as a result of legislation, the market will naturally deliver a positive value to end of life vehicles, but we all recognise that that will not happen in the short term. In the short term we will have to find a way to attach a bounty to the end of life vehicle, to ensure that its positive value in the hands of the last owner is a sufficient incentive to him to turn it in and pay for the proper destruction process. That could be done by a premium on new vehicles, as has been suggested. I can see no reason why a premium on new vehicles, on a pay-as-you-go basis, could not fund the system from the outset. It could be achieved by a levy on the road fund licence, a small charge per annum, so that each owner throughout the life of the vehicle contributed to a fund attaching to the vehicle. The hon. Member for Twickenham said that that would cut across other thrusts of public policy, which are moving away from the vehicle excise licence towards taxation that reflects usage. If that is the case, we could consider a levy on vehicle insurance that attaches to the annual use of the vehicle. Or, disposal could be funded by producers on an historic basis as vehicles are scrapped, which would raise some of the problems to which other hon. Members have alluded.

Are the Government willing to sidestep the intention of the directive, which appears to be that producers should pay? Does the Minister agree that a methodology that avoids placing the burden on producers should be considered? Does he agree that by using a market-supported mechanism to ensure that end of life vehicles have a positive value, we can sidestep the directive's requirements on producers? As the Government know, the alternatives could threaten the UK motor industry's competitiveness with additional annual costs of £300 million to £500 million, which are the figures that I have seen, and may place an intolerable strain on the balance sheets of individual companies. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) alluded to that.

I am not an accountant, and I know that the Government have taken specialist advice on how such contingent liabilities would be treated in the balance sheets of motor car companies. However, accounting standards evolve. I would be very concerned about UK manufacturers having those contingent liabilities hanging over them. Even if there were a way to keep them off their balance sheets under current accounting standards, there is no guarantee that they would not have to take them on to balance sheets in the future, with all sorts of ramifications, such as breaches of banking covenants and so on. That might have serious consequences for UK competitiveness, for the survival of UK companies and, consequently, for employment in the UK.

Having considered all the briefings that I have been sent and having read the Select Committee's report, I am tempted to think that some kind of levy on the vehicle as it goes through its life, to which each successive owner contributes, would be a sensible approach to the problem. It would lock in a fund of value that travels with the vehicle to its grave, not wishing to sound too rhetorical.

To many people, it would be superficially attractive to talk about making the producer pay, but we all know that the producer never really pays. It is the consumer who pays. We are simply discussing the mechanism by which we impose an additional burden on consumers, whether as a charge on producers that would be passed back through higher car prices or as a levy on annual car use through a surcharge on the vehicle excise licence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull raised some fundamental questions about the direction in which the EU directive takes us. As the hon. Member for Twickenham pointed out, it is not the only one, although I think that it was the first off the block. Like it or not, we are moving into an environment in which manufacturers will not be able to kiss goodbye to their products at the counter or showroom door and disregard questions of ultimate disposal.

I share some of my hon. Friend's concerns about travelling in such a direction, but we have to face the fact here and now that the directive is in place and the United Kingdom is required to transpose it by April 2002. Notwithstanding my chastisement by the hon. Member for Ochil, that date has already passed. I was interested to read in *The Guardian* on 20 March 2002 an article about the fact that the date would soon have passed. It said:

"The next deadline, this time for cars, is April 21. This is a new regime for disposing of scrap cars without spilling oil and other nasties. The problem this time is not lack of machinery, but who is to pay . . . since scrap metal merchants say they do not make enough from recycling to pay the cost. They would, they declare, simply refuse to take old cars. The prospect of adding another million or so dumped cars . . . to the piles of fridges terrified the Government. But Meacher"—

that is to say, the Minister for the Environment—

"said the Government had come up with a simple solution: "We won't do it." A delightfully honest man, he explained that the EU does not prosecute for non-compliance of directives for six months or so. That gives the Government breathing space".

Opposition Members would welcome any sign that the Government have decided to be less assiduous in implementing EU directives. Many in industry have always suspected that we are a little too enthusiastic in implementing EU directives compared with our European neighbours. If the Minister for the Environment is now espousing as Government policy the proposition that, because the EU does not prosecute for six months or so, we will in future not implement directives until they are at least six months over their due date, that might be generally welcomed by industry.

We shall have to implement this particular directive. Opposition Members want to ensure that, in implementing it, the Government impose the minimum possible cost burden on industry and extract the maximum environmental benefit from the costs that are borne. I urge the Minister to commit himself to making a proper cost-benefit analysis, on an item-by-item basis, where environmental benefit is being claimed, to ensure that what we are doing in the spending of money to achieve environmental benefits makes common sense. I urge him to ensure that the directive is implemented in a way that supports and enhances—certainly that does not degrade—the competitive position of British industry and, crucially, that is not bureaucratic. That is why I suggest that the Government should look at market-led solutions that support the market and the end of life vehicle value, rather than complex schemes paying rebates against documentary evidence, which will involve the Government in a complex stream of documentation.

A market-led solution, however the value is attached to the end of life vehicle, will require a competitive shredding and dismantling industry to support it. The Select Committee report clearly signalled that. That will require investment. We do not currently have, in the UK, the capacity to implement the directive. I am not trying to score cheap points by keeping on mentioning fridges, but everyone will want to ensure that we do not end up with the fridge problem or the Shetland car problem. We do not want piles of cars heaped up, waiting for the appropriate facilities to be built in order to process them. Investment requires certainty, and certainty, in this case, requires an urgent response from the Government, clearly setting out the mechanism that they will adopt and the funding process to underlie that.

I raise a general issue of importance on cowboy dismantlers. There are all sorts of good reasons to regulate sometimes the way in which business operates, but every time we increase the amount of regulation that surrounds legitimate business, we also increase the competitive advantage of the illegal, illegitimate cowboy business. We make it more and more difficult for marginal businesses operating in the legitimate economy to compete.

The Government must urgently set out the regime that they will adopt and stop telling us that they want to focus on the mechanics rather than the incidence of cost. Those two issues cannot be clearly separated; they are part and parcel of the same problem.

Most vehicles have approximately zero value at the end of their life and, broadly speaking, the dismantling industry is "paying its way"—to quote from evidence given to the Select Committee. It does not make huge excess profits or large investments. The large additional cost that will arise from processing vehicles in accordance with the directive, and the fact that there will be no significant rise in the value of what is being extracted from vehicles, will require additional funding. Hon. Members have rightly drawn attention to the problem of the historic car parc, and to the pitfalls of some of the methods of funding that have been suggested.

We should not go via manufacturers to get to consumers or drivers, which is where the ultimate incidence will lie. We should consider a solution that addresses the problem, that supports the market value of ELVs directly and transparently, and that recognises that the consumer always pays. The interests of consumers, the industry and the environment will be best served by a solution that is market-led.

I ask the Minister for a commitment today that the Government will not bring forward any deadline set out in the directive, as that would risk putting the industry at a competitive disadvantage to its European competition. I ask him not to impose burdens on UK industry that will create an unlevel playing field, which will mean keeping a close eye on the way in which other European countries implement the directive. Most importantly, I ask him to be realistic about last owners of ELVs; they will respond to carrots, not sticks. We must have a regime that not only puts enough value into

[Mr. Hammond]

the ELV to allow it to be economically dismantled and shredded, but leaves enough residual value as a worthwhile incentive for people who may be marginal users of the vehicle to take the time and trouble to deliver it to an authorised facility rather than dump it at the side of the road or in a public open space.

4.47 pm

The Minister for Industry and Energy (Mr. Brian Wilson): We have had an interesting and important debate, to which I am pleased to reply. The debate has reflected the significance of the issue and the complexity of the directive. I have some sympathy for the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) going home with the literature on the ELV directive and the Enterprise Bill—I hope that he managed to fit in time for Manchester United and Arsenal.

The directive is detailed, complex and important. A Bill on ELVs may not be the biggest headline grabber, but we are all aware that unless things are done properly, somewhere down the track they may jump up and bite us. Nobody has a monopoly on wisdom, and I assure all hon. Members who have contributed that their views, which have been knowledgeable in many cases, will be taken fully into account. This will be a holding statement, as well as a response to the report, because the issue is work in progress, for obvious reasons.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) referred to the fact that we missed the 21 April transposition date for the directive. We regret that, because the Government supported the directive, and welcomed its adoption. We support it because we think that it will bring environmental benefits by reducing the waste arising from end of life vehicles, and it will raise the environmental standards of the businesses that treat those vehicles. We want an established network of professional dismantlers, and scrap yards that have carried out sterling work over the years, to benefit from the restrictions that will be placed on those not willing to be properly registered and permitted. We are also committed to increasing UK recycling rates. The achievement of the demanding targets contained in the directive will help us to meet that commitment. For those reasons, we support the directive and we regret the missing of the transposition date.

The other side of that coin, however, is that we are so keen to move ahead with the implementation of the directive and get it right that we think that any delay is justified. It is more important to get it right than to rush through legislation that turns out to be ill-judged. That is exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) was saying. It is a complex and significant directive, which has implications for many businesses and organisations, and for motorists. I have been particularly struck by some of what has been said about the implications for the car industry and the lead times that they require. All that has been carefully noted. From that perspective, it is crucial that we get the implementation right. Our discussions with the industry and others are continuing, we are making good progress, and we need to ensure that all the practical implications of the directive are understood.

The other point to make about the 21 April deadline is that all member states are in the same boat. None of them will have completely transposed the ELV directive in time. That is not surprising, because the directive, as adopted, is incomplete. Only in the past fortnight have we seen the Commission's final proposals for restricting the use of certain heavy metals in cars. The Commission has yet to give member states its proposals concerning the detailed rules through which they will be able to demonstrate achievement of the recycling targets in the directive. Transposition by the due date will only have been partial, and further legislation will be required once agreement is reached on the missing elements. Therefore, missing the date is not as grievous an offence as it may have first sounded.

The Select Committee's report was very helpful and constructive. The Government's response to it highlighted several key considerations that we are determined to reflect in implementing the directive. We have always said that we would implement it with a light regulatory touch at first—it is important to re-emphasise that—with the minimum disruption to current market systems and, to address the last point of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, without putting UK business at a competitive disadvantage to its EU counterparts. That is one of the three golden rules, and our position has not changed. We also want to ensure that we secure the important environmental benefits of a directive at least cost to the United Kingdom. I agree with the hon. Gentleman's remarks, and that is the balance we want. We want the maximum environmental benefits, but we want to minimise the cost.

We have a very important objective relating to those outcomes, which is to reduce the number of illegal dismantlers and scrap yards that undermine the legitimate sector. There is a list of virtuous objectives, and the debate is about how exactly we will achieve them. Fridges have inevitably turned up—as they tend to do in many places these days. We have heard frequent references to fridges, which is a warning of why we should take our time and ensure that our discussions with industry are complete. We shall also have to ensure that treatment facilities have sufficient time to invest in the right equipment, so that cars can continue to be scrapped. That is what has gone wrong with fridges—the industry is not there to deal with them.

Let me review the main areas covered by the Government's response to the Select Committee's report and update hon. Members on the progress that has been made since that response was presented to my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil. Abandoned vehicles have featured very largely in the debate. They are a legitimate concern, which has been echoed by all hon. Members who have spoken. In our response, we emphasised that we are very conscious of the impact that abandoned vehicles can have on local communities and the cost implications for local authorities, and we have all seen evidence of that in our constituencies.

The announcement on 10 April by the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and the Minister for the Environment on measures to enable local authorities to deal more quickly with abandoned vehicles—24 hours rather than seven days—and to improve access to DVLA vehicle records will have been welcomed by everyone. The

measures are major steps forward on that front. My right hon. Friends' long-term proposals for tightening the vehicle register will make it more difficult for vehicles to be abandoned with impunity. The measures are virtuous in their own right, but they are also relevant to the implementation of the directive.

Mr. Hammond: Does the Minister agree that those measures will be costly and are no substitute for attempting to create a situation in which end of life vehicles are voluntarily delivered by their owners because of an economic imperative, rather than attempting to use a stick?

Mr. Wilson: I am about to say something about cost, which is obviously one of the big issues. We are looking at all options, none of which has been closed down. Equally, none is easy and each has its difficulties. If, as a consequence of our implementation of the directive, additional costs fall on local authorities, under the new burdens arrangement it is likely that they will be picked up by the Department of Trade and Industry. There is no doubt that treating all end of life vehicles, including abandoned vehicles, to the new standards required by the directive on the drainage and storage of fluids, which are not currently removed from old vehicles, will involve extra costs.

The potential impact on the number of abandoned vehicles will be among the factors that the Government will take into account when we decide the best option for implementation during the period up to 2007, which is, of course, the latest date allowed under the directive for introducing producer responsibility and free take-back for end of life vehicles. We hope to make an announcement on that in the coming weeks. I had intended to make such an announcement today, and we are close to being able to make it, but we are unfortunately awaiting final agreement from one of the devolved Administrations, which precludes me from giving an answer in debate. We will make a statement soon on the situation up to 2007.

The Select Committee expressed a hope that the present number of illegal dismantlers—cowboy shredders is the colourful term by which they have been described—would be reduced by implementation of the directive. It also expressed concern about the adequacy of the network of authorised treatment facilities—ATFs—that will be able to treat vehicles to the new standards. The directive provides an opportunity to close those illegal operators, who have been able to undercut legitimate dismantling and scrapping businesses over the years.

Operators in the illegal sector will need to obtain a permit under the ATF permitting system, which will be operated by the Environment Agency, and permission from the DVLA to issue electronic certificates of destruction to trigger the removal of an ELV from the vehicle register. Licensed or registered dismantlers and scrap yards, which have been legitimately processing ELVs to current standards, or new businesses wishing to enter the sector, will be given a realistic time in which to comply with the new site and treatment standards. As I said earlier, I want to build on the excellent work that the legitimate sector has been doing, and we are confident that legitimate businesses will recognise the unique opportunity that the directive presents.

The directive requires certain processes to be carried out on end of life vehicles. The dismantlers and the scrap yards have the knowledge and experience to carry out those processes. A captive audience of around 2 million ELVs a year is waiting to be de-polluted and dismantled prior to crushing and recycling. The requirements of the directive will be in place next year and subsequently, so there is a long-term market. It will not go away and dismantlers, scrap yards and others who carry out de-pollution will have the certainty of knowing that their services will continue to be required.

Mr. O'Neill: My hon. Friend has not yet addressed the problem of removing the cowboys, which will impose a greater demand for the services of legitimate dismantlers. If they are working to well nigh full capacity now, there will be an increased delay in legitimate treatment because there will not be enough firms to do the work. There may then be a second phase of cowboys who take cars off people's hands. Is the Department considering the possibility of helping businesses that may want to expand? A legitimate ATF may seek planning permission to expand its business but the application may become clogged up in the local authority system and the business opportunity may be lost for months.

Mr. Wilson: My hon. Friend makes a fair point that goes back to the issues surrounding fridges. If the directive is to work, it is in our interests to ensure that legitimate businesses are in place before demand increases. I am happy to consider with other Departments any measures to stimulate legitimate business and ease the transition. Officials have made good progress in developing site and operating standards and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment intends to consult on draft regulations before the summer recess.

The Select Committee asked the DTI to set out clearly how the issuing of certificates of destruction would work. Our response was that we would do so and work continues towards that end. The DVLA's pilot project continues to run and officials have encouraged greater participation by dismantlers. The number is increasing and now stands at 38, with a further 38 at different stages of joining. However, we want more to participate because the more businesses that are familiar with the electronic exchange of information with the DVLA, the smoother will be the introduction of the system when the directive is implemented. I am pleased to report that the DVLA is now targeting a further 400 salvage businesses with a view to stimulating their participation in the pilot project. Notwithstanding the comments about the DVLA, we look forward to rapid progress with that project.

The Select Committee registered doubts about the practicality of option 4, but it was suggested by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders to encourage dialogue between car makers and ELV shredders. We have responded to that. The DTI's consultation group was formed to help us to identify the strongest option for implementation and to develop an alternative by bringing together the key stakeholders. Car makers and shredders, with representatives of the dismantling and salvage industries, have discussed a

[Mr. Wilson]

number of possibilities for distinguishing between positive and negative value ELVs, including the system proposed in option 4.

Option 4 remains under consideration as part of the process, along with the three options set out in our public consultation document. They received varying degrees of support and others have been identified since. All the options remain under consideration and have their pros and cons. One may favour a particular segment of the ELV chain and another may disadvantage a newer car maker to the benefit of longer-established manufacturers. Where the cost falls is at the centre of every business's thinking. The Select Committee's report states in several places and the view has been expressed today that the DTI's consultation paper last year was remiss in not addressing the issue of funding. Our view then and now is that it was better to consult on the mechanics of implementation before deciding where the cost should fall. We wanted consultees' views on the operational practicalities rather than on the perhaps more divisive issue of who should pay. Our consideration of the matter continues and the views that have been expressed today are timely and highly relevant. They will feed into the continuing debate.

The Select Committee noted that if the introduction of producer responsibility were delayed until 2007, it would not expect any particular category of car maker to be excessively penalised. I alluded earlier to the implications of different implementation options in that regard. We are alive to the accounting implications of the various options for deciding exactly where responsibility for the historic car parc—I still have no information on the spelling conundrum—should lie. As we have said repeatedly during the past year, we shall seek to ensure that the UK's approach to implementing the directive does not disadvantage UK business compared with competition in other member states.

I turn to some of the specific points made in the debate, starting with those of my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil, the Chairman of the Select Committee. He mentioned an information programme and, in particular, the use of the DTI website. I accept entirely that we shall have to have such a communication programme and that clear messages will have to be given. The problem at the moment, as hon. Members have probably gathered from my remarks, is that the messages are not all that clear. The information programme must await the key decisions on implementation that we shall have to take in the near future. Those messages will then be promulgated via the DTI website and other channels to heighten public awareness, on which so much of the scheme depends.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) mentioned orphan vehicles. No matter which system is adopted, orphan vehicles will be a problem. To put that in proportion, they represent about 1 per cent. of the total car parc, and will need to be accommodated under whatever approach we decide to take. On manufacturers that own orphan names, responsibility will depend on the terms of acquisition, but it is unlikely that those terms would include responsibility for obligations that did not exist at the time. As I said, whatever solution or approach we come up with, responsibility for orphan vehicles will somehow have to be shared around those involved.

Richard Burden: The issue of orphan vehicles is a specific one. I am reassured by what my hon. Friend the Minister has said, but I also raised the question of brands that are, so far as I know, not technically orphan brands. It is clear that those brands can be owned by a company, for example, in the case of MG Rover, that is much smaller than the companies that were in existence when those brands were producing cars. My issue was not only about orphan vehicles, but about existing car companies owning brands, which gives them a liability to the historic car parc that is rather out of proportion to their size today.

Mr. Wilson: The case of MG Rover has been well made. Obviously, there is a danger that a solution that is right in general could create an anomaly in the particular case of MG Rover because of the evolution of that company and its contraction since the heyday of manufacturing. If my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) can leave that well-made point with me, I can assure them that it has been noted.

The hon. Member for Bromsgrove asked about what is going on elsewhere. No other member state has yet transposed. We understand that France and Germany are delaying producer responsibility until 2007. Denmark has a fee on car insurance that can be recovered when the ELV is disposed of. The Netherlands has a fee on the sale of a new car that goes towards disposal costs. The whole gamut of options is in operation somewhere or other, and that is the range of options that we are looking at. I have a briefing on what is going on elsewhere in the EU, which I am more than willing to share with the hon. Lady and anyone else who would like to see it, without reading the whole thing out now.

The hon. Member for Twickenham mentioned torching. It is important to repeat that local authorities will have new powers to remove abandoned vehicles in 24 hours rather than seven days. That will reduce the incidence of torching, as vehicles usually lie around for a few days before somebody gets round to setting them ablaze. As I have said, the DTI accepts responsibility for picking up additional local authority costs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Mr. Kumar) said that he believed that the 85 per cent. recovery target was achievable. I agree with him. The Automotive Consortium on Recycling and Disposal, an industry group, has reported that around 80 per cent. of the weight of ELV scrap was recovered in 2000, so it is not as if we are starting from a low base. The problem exists at the margins. Industry and DTI research into new uses for recycled materials should help to achieve the increase and take it beyond 80 per cent.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge asked about the heavy metal restriction. The directive has been adopted and contains restrictions on the use of heavy metals. What is being negotiated now is a list of derogations—time-limited exemptions and so on. We are seeking to ensure that the derogations are based on

sound environmental and economic analysis. Most car manufacturers are already voluntarily moving away from using heavy metals. I recognise that we cannot suddenly lower the drawbridge without looking at the consequences, so we are taking the approach that I have described, including the possibility of derogations where appropriate.

The question of the export of vehicles arose in an exchange between the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil. Not much exporting takes place from the United Kingdom, for the fairly obvious reason that not many people anywhere else in the European Union want to buy right hand-drive cars—I do not know whether they do in Gibraltar—whereas many other member states export up to 50 per cent. of their cars as second hand.

The origins of the directive lie in a series of priority waste streams identified collectively by member states as worthy of attention. Producer responsibility was adopted because the sensible view was taken that producers can best design out environmentally harmful materials and design in recyclability.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister raises an important point. If the purpose of identifying producers as the people who have to pay is to give them an incentive to design out environmentally damaging materials, that implies that the system must be producer and product specific and there must not be an overall industry pool approach. Is he saying that if he charges producers for the cost of end of life vehicle disposal, he will make his scheme producer specific, so that the amount charged will relate to the recyclability and environmental friendliness of the individual vehicle?

Mr. Wilson: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman appreciates that I shall not give an answer to that question today, as it is inherent in the wider questions that we are considering. It is an explanation of why producer responsibility is correct. There is no point in introducing a system that does not place an onus on the producer to make the end product better. With producer responsibility, there is a strong onus on the producer to change the design in ways that are compatible with the directive's objectives. Again, I am happy to come back to the hon. Gentleman on that point.

Producer responsibility is not an optional element, but is clearly stated in the directive, so it must be reflected in our transposing regulation to the extent that it is in respect of complete end of life vehicles with negative or no value.

Mr. Hammond: Does the Minister accept that if end of life vehicles have a positive value, by whatever mechanism that is achieved, there will no longer be an obligation to place the ultimate cost burden on producers, as the EU directive is framed?

Mr. Wilson: That is inherent in what I said. The directive does not place an onus on producers for vehicles that have a positive end of life value. The distinction is made in the directive, so there would be a logic in transposing it into our own regulations.

The hon. Gentleman seemed to favour a levy on each owner of the car. That is one of the options that we are considering, but I just put down the marker that it has not been proposed in other EU states, and it is a complex way of doing it because it is a long-term as opposed to a one-off process. I am not shutting doors but simply saying that, like all of the options, it has an upside and a downside.

The hon. Gentleman asked when producer responsibility had been introduced. Fortunately, he did not ask who introduced it. The policy of producer responsibility was introduced by a previous Administration in 1993, and it has been applied not only to vehicles but to electrical and electronic equipment, newspapers, packaging, tyres and batteries. Perhaps a good point to finish on is that the issue is not party political. Everyone has signed up to the principles; we are discussing how to get the implementation right. The debate has contributed to my understanding and, I hope, to the understanding of others about how we should approach such issues.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at sixteen minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 14 May 2002

[SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Accident and Emergency Provision

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Jim Fitzpatrick.]*

9.30 am

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I welcome the opportunity to debate the important subject of accident and emergency services, and to question the Government on their national strategy. As we witnessed in the tragic events of last week, the national health service is brilliant in emergencies. All the emergency services rose to the occasion in Potters Bar, and for that we are most grateful.

I want to focus on the national picture, but I speak also from personal, local experience. In my constituency of Meriden, the local accident and emergency department has already been radically downgraded. Solihull hospital is a relatively new hospital; it was opened in June 1994 with an all-singing, all-dancing accident and emergency department. In 1997, after the merger with Heartlands, the Minister of State at the Department of Health, the right hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton) pledged the future security of services at the hospital, particularly the A&E services. The present Minister was given a copy of that pledge in a letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor).

Over the years, however, doubts have been raised about the future of A&E services at the hospital. When we questioned the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears), on the strength of that pledge in a debate on Solihull, she said:

"I am not in a position to say that the position"—

the pledge—

"will never change".—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 20 March 2002; Vol. 382, c. 130WH.]

I know that my constituents and those of my hon. Friend will be listening closely to the Minister to discover whether that pledge is now worthless.

Doubts were raised about the need for a 24-hour service on such a scale. Ambulances were asked to take emergency cases straight to the sister hospital, the bigger Birmingham Heartlands hospital, because there was no longer an emergency surgeon on duty at Solihull. Solihull was undergoing a downgrading by stealth, and the manoeuvre became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The local hospital trust argued that figures for A&E treatment in Solihull were too low to justify keeping it open, and organised A&E services, including the ambulance service, to make it true.

When local people started to get wind of that, it caused dismay. Dismay has turned into anger, and the issue has become one of the hottest in my constituency. On 25 March, protesters from five other areas of the country that are similarly threatened—Gosport, Penzance, Kidderminster, Canterbury and Crawley—marched on Downing street to deliver a letter to the Prime Minister, to which as yet there has been no response. However, the Secretary of State for Health, who received the same letter, did respond. Someone from his Department replied saying that it is a local matter and that it must be addressed with the consent of local opinion.

The question is: what is local opinion? Local people, the potential patients, have made their views entirely clear. It is something that people feel passionately about; to them it is a life or death issue. It can also make the difference between keeping or losing a parliamentary seat, as the Government know only too well from their experience in Wyre Forest. It is not something that the Government can afford to ignore. The Government's response suggests that they do not have a national policy.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Is not another interpretation that the Government have a policy of rationalisation, but they are not prepared to admit it and are implementing it by stealth?

Mrs. Spelman: My hon. Friend comes to the heart of the matter. It is the tension caused by the hidden and unpopular policy that we want to bring out today.

I do not want to dwell for too long on Solihull hospital, because the debate is about the national strategy. However, before I move on to that, and with the memory of the Potters Bar train crash in mind, I shall make one further point. Such an emergency could happen in Solihull. There has recently been a huge increase in the area's daytime population, in part because of the new and popular Touchwood centre, which attracts 60,000 shoppers every day from outlying areas. Solihull is also at the confluence of the M42, M40, M5, M45 and the M69, and near Birmingham international airport and the national exhibition centre. One does not want to be a harbinger of doom, but it is as well to be aware of such salient facts when considering decisions about accident and emergency services at our hospital.

My job is to represent my constituents, who have said loud and clear that they want Solihull accident and emergency department kept open 24 hours a day and properly staffed, so that it can deal with any emergency. The local hospital trust may have genuine reasons for believing that that would not be a good idea and that it could not justify restoring the department to full strength on clinical grounds. It may also have genuine reasons for thinking that such an approach would not be in local residents' best interests and that it would not be safe or practical. If that is so, it has not succeeded in making its case.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): The hon. Lady will know that I share her concerns about the hospital. In the interests of accuracy, however, will she confirm that the accident and emergency unit at Solihull has never taken all cases? Paediatric cases, for example, have never gone there since the outset.

Mrs. Spelman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, when the hospital opened in 1994, the local

[Mrs. Spelman]

population collected sufficient charitable moneys for a paediatric ward. At the outset, a full range of services was supplied, but they have been withdrawn over time. Nothing is more shattering for our constituents than seeing the charitable money that they raised for a paediatric ward put to no use.

This issue will not quietly go away. The Government are committing themselves to extra cash for the NHS.

Mr. John Taylor (Solihull): My hon. Friend has come to the matter of resources. Most of the recent Budget was smoke and mirrors, but one thing was clear: heavy Government receipts in the form of increased national insurance contributions from our constituencies will be targeted at national health service provision. Given the opening position at Solihull—including the charitable contributions to it—and the enormous amount that is now being raised through national insurance contributions, is it not clear that we should resource 24-hour accident and emergency provision at the hospital, which services our constituencies?

Mrs. Spelman: My hon. Friend comes to the same conclusion as I: extra money is being raised specifically for health, and constituents want additional resources to be spent on keeping accident and emergency units open 24 hours a day. That is the message that they want the Government to get loud and clear from this debate. If it is not feasible to fund such a service, the Government must properly explain why, and make the experience of going to Solihull's sister hospital at Heartlands more pleasant and convincing.

I must, however, move on to the wider issue of accident and emergency strategy as it affects the country generally. In their emergency care report, which was updated in April, the Government produced a plan called "Reforming Emergency Care: First Steps to a New Approach". At this stage in their term in office, however, such an approach is a little tentative. People want improvements that they can see now, but the report reads a little like a wish list, with targets such as:

"By the year 2004 no-one to wait for more than 4 hours in an A&E department before their case is dealt with".

I picked that example almost at random, but the paucity of the ambition is striking. Anyone who has had the misfortune to use a typical accident and emergency facility in a large hospital knows what an unpleasant experience it can be, yet the goal is to reduce a patient's wait to four hours in two years' time. Surely another model for dealing with accident and emergency admissions should be studied and taken on board.

In a previous debate, which was specifically about Solihull hospital, I brought to the Minister's attention the findings of a working group of the Royal College of Physicians. The group's radical proposals reversed current thinking, and advocated that accident and emergency facilities be no more than 10 minutes away from the patients that they serve. I commended that report for consideration by the Government some while ago.

The Government also refuse to believe that any system in any other country is worth studying and learning from. Their report notes that the NHS is second to none in responding to major emergencies, and I have applauded that fact. To be fair, however, the report also admits to failures in the system. Under a general heading, it deals with patients having to wait too long from care to treatment at each stage of the emergency care system. It starts with the time that it takes to get an appointment with a general practitioner, and goes through to inadequacies in the system that compound delays, including the notorious bed-blocking scandals with which we have become familiar.

The report offers various solutions to those problems, but no radical approaches. The main recommendations are for more money to be allocated, but within the same system. I am passionately committed to the ideals of the NHS, but that does not mean that better practice elsewhere cannot be incorporated into the service. The Wanless report found that accident and emergency departments in Germany, for example, see patients in a couple of minutes—we can dream on.

The report claims that things have improved and that, for example, nearly 80 per cent. of all accident and emergency patients spend four hours or less in A&E units. I checked on Heartlands hospital, to which our constituents are now sent, but the latest figures tell a different story. Some 74 per cent. of patients are seen within four hours, which leaves 26 per cent. waiting for longer, and I have heard of waits of up to eight hours.

Those figures are backed up by the Audit Commission's report on A&E waits, which was published in October 2001. In 1996—an important reference year—89 per cent. of patients were admitted within four hours, but the figure had fallen to 76 per cent. by 2000. The percentage of patients seen by a doctor within an hour was 73 per cent. in 1996, but 53.5 per cent. in 2000. So, despite the Government having been in power for five years, the situation has got worse.

The anecdotal evidence is also far from happy. Ambulances must often queue outside Heartlands before even an initial admission. Once there, patients find that the conditions are crowded and impersonal, which is not conducive to helping people who are in pain and distress. Ambulance crews are, however, subject to a local protocol. A letter that I have just received from the West Midlands ambulance service states that, in respect of

"'999' emergency calls, Solihull Hospital will ONLY receive 'Adult Medical' patients and 'Maternity' cases, and that ALL 'Paediatric' cases and 'Adult trauma' patients are taken to Heartlands Hospital".

That will continue unless, of course, those responsible are confronted by people power.

A local councillor has told me that ambulance drivers are increasingly meeting fierce opposition when trying to take patients to Heartlands. One ambulance crew was on its way to admit an elderly woman who was having her cataracts removed at Heartlands—that, in itself, was a strange decision—but she demanded to be taken to Solihull. Eventually the ambulance men allowed her to contact her consultant, who agreed with her request to have the operation in Solihull hospital, and that is where she was taken.

I secured this debate partly because certain questions have still not been answered.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): My hon. Friend is delivering a powerful oration, and the pattern that she

describes is, sadly, repeated elsewhere. There is pressure on ambulance crews to take people not only from Canterbury, but from a range of settlements in east Kent, to the Kent and Canterbury hospital, where the number of beds has been reduced. Crews face pressure when they try to take people to other hospitals, which are being expanded.

Mrs. Spelman: My hon. Friend gives another example of downgrading by stealth. We want to bring that issue into the open today so that it can be properly debated.

In a written question, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the right hon. Member for Barrow and Furness was asked how many nurses are employed in accident and emergency departments in England. His response was:

"It is not possible to separately identify nurses employed in accident and emergency (A&E) departments."—[*Official Report*, 10 April 2002; Vol. 383, c. 490W.]

The emergency care report says that the number of nurses working in accident and emergency will increase by 600 by 2003. That seems a little delphic in the circumstances. Asked about both ambulance response times and the proportion of patients seen by a doctor within an hour of arrival at accident and emergency in the last six years, the answer was the same:

"The information requested is not collected centrally."

That all seems a bit haphazard. For the Government to have an effective national accident and emergency strategy, the figures must be collected centrally. Otherwise, how do the Government have any idea whether targets are being met?

There is also the matter of what constitutes an accident and emergency department. In some local hospitals—such as Solihull—it is proposed that accident and emergency departments should be run by specialised nurses who are able to treat minor accidents and emergencies. However, that is not the public's perception of an accident and emergency service. Clinically, doctors would argue, that might be the way ahead; but that is where the public and specialist medical opinion seem to part company.

In preparing for the debate, I consulted the independent organisations that represent accident and emergency specialists. They took a pragmatic approach. They told me that having an all-singing, all-dancing accident and emergency department in every town was what the public wanted—they are aware of the demand. However, it is not clinically safe, given the number of available doctors, staffing restrictions and the Government's strategic direction. As an analogy, Ian Anderson, who is president of the Faculty of Emergency Medicine, said that keeping an under-staffed, under-qualified accident and emergency department open would be like a shopkeeper using all the staff to serve customers in the front of a shop and no one to replenish the stock behind the scenes. It is difficult to get away from the fact that there is a constraint because of the lack of adequately qualified doctors. However, the Government have been in power for five years and the matter could have been tackled at a much earlier date.

The jury is still out in Solihull—there is a formal consultation process to go through—but strength of opinion is running high. We must listen to expert independent opinion in order properly to inform the debate. However, as politicians, we must also listen carefully to the wishes expressed by our constituents. Ultimately, they fund this public service provision.

Given that we are considering plans for the future of a service that is of vital importance to my constituents and to those of other hon. Members—many of whom will speak in the debate—the Government's report and some of the debate in Parliament can seem far removed from reality. The bottom line is that unless the people who actually use the facilities are happy with them, they are not working and all the wish-lists, reports and vague promises made by the Government will cut no ice.

Councillor Don Blake, chairman of the health service monitoring sub-committee in my constituency, is waiting for answers to the following four questions. Why, unlike coronary heart disease, services for older people, mental health and so on, is there no national service framework for emergency care? How do the changes at Solihull hospital fit in with the wider plans for accident and emergency provision within the Birmingham and black country strategic health authority? How will the proposed changes affect accessibility to accident and emergency in our part of the west midlands? How do ideas about accident and emergency fit in with plans for the long-term development of Solihull hospital on the principle of one hospital on two sites?

If those questions are not answered satisfactorily, people will increasingly take power into their own hands by protesting or forming action groups or, like my constituent, by blind refusal to adhere to protocols that seem to ignore patients' wishes.

9.49 am

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): This is a timely debate, because thinking about accident and emergency units is changing. The old thinking was that every accident and emergency unit should be part of a major hospital where every specialty was available because, for example, a child might be brought in who needed paediatric care or specialist treatment such as vascular surgery might be required. If every specialty is offered, it is not just a matter of having one consultant; three or four must be available in order to provide 24-hour cover.

There was also a strong feeling among the royal colleges that there could be no joint-site working. The consultants had to be working at one hospital in order to get accreditation. Doctors and nurses could not be accredited if they were working in smaller hospitals with no leading consultants available to advise them. For all those reasons, the old certainty was that an accident and emergency unit could only be part of a district general hospital. Increasingly, across the whole of the country, accident and emergency units have been closing and specialisation has been focused on the larger district general hospitals.

That model—very large district general hospitals with accident and emergency units—has proved to have significant disadvantages. The first is that not every patient who is taken by ambulance to the accident and emergency unit at a large hospital some miles away needs to go there. A significant proportion of those who are taken on the blue light into the large, distant, district hospital prove not to require its care. The problem then

[Mr. Peter Viggers]

is what to do with such patients. Either they have to be sent back to local hospitals, or they have to be admitted and it is difficult to discharge them because—for reasons known to medical science but not to non-specialists—district general hospitals and local hospitals have different cultures and it can be difficult for a district general hospital to discharge patients to the local hospitals.

Secondly, because of the Government policy of tightening regulations on nursing homes, fewer nursing home beds are available, so suitable patients cannot be discharged from district general hospitals back into the community or to local care centres.

Medical and technical advances now enable diagnosis to be made at a distance; telemedicine has advanced considerably. In my constituency, the Royal Hospital Haslar treats patients around the world through telemedicine. The armed forces cannot have leading specialists available in every area served by their personnel. Telemedicine allows specialists to advise on patients in Cyprus, Bosnia or Sierra Leone. Such advances also make it possible to treat patients in local hospitals rather than taking them all the way to a district general hospital. There can be considerable advantages in taking a patient quickly into a local hospital. In medicine, the priority is often not to have long-term highly specialised care, but to stabilise the patient, particularly in a cardiac case. Once the patient is stable, he or she can be moved in comfort to a larger hospital where specialist care can be administered.

The final reason why the old model of large accident and emergency units attached to district general hospitals has proved to be disadvantageous is the one that has been spelled out so well by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). People do not want it. They want their medical care to be provided as locally as possible, because an extremely important part of medical care and well-being is the opportunity for family and friends to visit. People do not want to run the risk of lying in the back of an ambulance that has to make its way through busy traffic to a district general hospital some miles away. They want medical care to be provided locally.

Therefore, plenty of thought is being given to a new model. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears), is kind enough to nod at that. The word "reconfiguration" prevailed during a meeting of residents from Gosport who came to see her. The reconfiguration of our medical care is being given much thought, to see whether further medical care can be provided locally and through telemedicine and split-site working. The idea of specialists working in more than one hospital was thought to be unpopular. Certainly, the Royal College of Surgeons was opposed to it at one point, but increasingly specialists are aware that good medical care can be provided through split-site working, with some provision made in one hospital and other specialist experience provided in another. Reconfiguration can lead to improvements in medicine.

I shall apply those general arguments to my local case. On 10 December 1998, a date never to be forgotten, the Government announced their proposal to close the Royal Hospital Haslar in my constituency. It is and has been the only Ministry of Defence hospital, but a committee in the Ministry of Defence that included no one with any medical skills decided to close it. To put it mildly, there was disagreement locally. We formed the Haslar task force and the "Save Haslar" campaign, which I have chaired since its creation. We thought that our rally and march would attract only a few hundred people, or perhaps a thousand or two, but 22,000 came to demonstrate their concern about the retention of Haslar hospital. It is thought by the House of Commons Library to be the largest demonstration ever in support of a hospital.

The official plan for Haslar—hon. Members should suspend their disbelief—is to increase the number of out-patients from 55,000 a year to 60,000. A new accident treatment centre is now available there for suitable patients, and the hospital has recently been nominated as the new diagnostic and treatment centre for south Hampshire. That will involve some of the best operating facilities in the United Kingdom. The official plan says that all those advances and improvements will happen and that Haslar will close in 2007. It beggars belief to suggest that the closure of such superb facilities makes sense, but that is the official policy.

We are working in the right direction. The accident treatment centre is a good step. The diagnostic and treatment centre will be an extremely valuable facility to reduce waiting lists for cold surgery, and the increased use of Haslar for out-patients is fine. We agree with all those steps, but we do not agree that the hospital should close in 2007, when the nearby Queen Alexandra hospital at Cosham is rebuilt under private finance initiatives.

We hope and believe that plenty of support will be given to the retention of Haslar and the continued use of its site and outstanding facilities, including the operating theatres and telemedicine equipment. We want to encourage the use of the accident treatment centre and expand the range of emergency medical conditions that can be referred to it. Also, we want a fundamental review of the plan to close Haslar after 2007. It makes no sense, and we want to give Haslar the certainty and confidence that it needs for the longer term by confirmation that the hospital will remain after 2007.

I have not yet referred to defence medical services. There is no doubt that Defence Costs Study 15, which reduced the number of hospitals in the defence medical services from four to one, dealt a blow to the service and a blow to the morale of those who work in it. However, that was nothing compared with the decision to close Haslar. In the key specialties of general surgery, orthopaedic surgery, anaesthetics and general medicine, there are now gaps in the establishment as high as 75 per cent. In other words, in some of those key areas, there are only a quarter of the required number of specialists. There is no doubt that if the armed forces were deployed in strength, their capabilities would be restricted by the inability to provide adequate medical back-up. That is extremely serious from a defence point of view, so I hope that, for that reason, as well as for the support of the local civilian population, the decision to close Haslar will be reviewed.

10 am

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on securing the debate.

I very much agree with the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) about the need for earlier assessment of patients and greater or more flexible use of available resources. It strikes me that that will be one of the major shifts in medicine in future. When the hon. Member for Meriden was telling us about the origins of Solihull hospital, I reflected that, had we known what medical provision would be available, we might have looked differently at how we configured all our services, although that is not a criticism of what was done when Solihull hospital was built.

I shall give one simple example. In my constituency in south Birmingham, we are examining proposals for a new medical centre at Green Bank, combining several GP practices. If it is successful, it will provide several localised services for people in Hall Green and, I suspect, for some people in Solihull, including provision for minor day surgery. That will assist people who would previously have gone to hospital. In that context, any future plan for A&E provision should have a national element but should also take account of local considerations. I should be interested to know what the primary care trusts in the area are proposing, so that we can consider their proposals in the context of the overall provision of hospital and other medical services.

I share the concerns that have been expressed about Solihull hospital. I have been at pains to establish with the trust authorities that there are no plans to close the hospital. I am reassured on that front because I understand that about two thirds of the population of Meriden, Solihull and Hall Green currently use the hospital, and that is unlikely to change. There is tremendous scope for joint-site working, and I am not sure that the trust authorities have considered that as seriously as they might. With the advent of telemedicine, there is much greater scope to share key personnel, and I hope that that, too, will be carefully considered. However, I am aware that the trust claims to have advertised at least 11 times for senior house officers and is having some difficulty attracting staff. I would not want, in pursuit of any campaign to defend a local service, to ignore a reality such as that. The hon. Member for Meriden referred to issues of clinical safety. Much as I want to protect and defend local services, I would personally find it extremely difficult to take the risk of sending someone to a unit where the level of treatment could not be guaranteed.

Mr. John Taylor: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is perverse to expect recruitment of high-quality personnel to the accident and emergency facility at Solihull hospital when ambulance crews are under strict instructions to take patients to Heartlands hospital? It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If nobody goes there because ambulance crew are instructed not to take them, who will apply for a job there?

Mr. McCabe: It depends where we start with that issue. If the plan starts with a decision to downgrade a unit and to instruct ambulance crew not to take patients there, the hon. Gentleman is right. However, if there is already a shortage of key medical personnel and that gives rise to some level of clinical risk, and in individual cases judgments are made to take people elsewhere, that is a different matter. It will take some time to recruit the additional doctors and nurses that we need. In the meantime, my instinct is that the trust should consider making greater use of the existing personnel across the sites. We should make the best use of the facilities that we have.

Mrs. Spelman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am sure that he is aware that the previous management had an arrangement to rotate its doctors between the two sites and secured the agreement of the royal colleges for that to be acceptable for accreditation. With a change of management, that appears to be no longer possible. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the emergency surgeons were removed without any consultation with the public? That had a massive demoralising effect on the accident and emergency staff, who saw their department's remit being downgraded before their very eyes.

Mr. McCabe: I hope that I have made it abundantly clear that I think that there should be greater sharing of staff. That seems a perfectly reasonable way to proceed. However, we should also achieve a balance between the level of treatment and the skill of the personnel available. If I were making a judgment on behalf of an injured friend, that factor would weigh on my mind.

Mr. Heald: Is the hon. Gentleman really saying that recruitment difficulties are sufficient reason for downgrading or closing A&E departments? If so, that would make the situation difficult in areas such as my constituency in Hertfordshire. The area is very expensive and it is difficult to recruit, but we still need our A&E departments.

Mr. McCabe: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands me. I am saying that where there is a shortage of key personnel, the judgment must concern how we use the resources at our disposal. It would be ludicrous to argue that a facility should be kept open and available all the time if there is doubt about levels of clinical safety. That would be absurd and I cannot imagine any constituent signing up for it. My understanding is that people want good local services as close as possible to their immediate environment, but they want to balance that with the level of safety and treatment that they would reasonably expect. That is all that I am saying.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): The hon. Gentleman's point is important. My understanding is that he is suggesting that we should have a geographically two-tier NHS: in areas where it is relatively easy to recruit staff, we should have the kind of provision that we expect at the moment, and in areas such as that represented by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), we should pragmatically reduce the provision because we do not have the staff. That seems a rather bankrupt philosophy, to which I hope that he does not genuinely subscribe.

Mr. McCabe: The hon. Gentleman has either misunderstood me or is talking about a personal fantasy, because I am not saying that at all. In areas where there are staff shortages, we should maximise the use of the existing provision as flexibly as possible. On occasions, that may mean that establishments must share doctors. We all want acceptable minimum standards that apply throughout the country.

[Mr. McCabe]

The hon. Member for Meriden told us that Labour has been in power for five years, which no one is disputing. However, as Stephen Thornton, the former chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said, the health service experienced decades of underfunding before that. The question is whether the new investment proposals and the direction suggested by the Wanless report will provide the route to improving the long-term efficiency of our health service for everyone, or whether we should switch to an as yet unspecified alternative, which the hon. Member for Meriden flirts with but will not spell out. Until we know what that alternative may be, we have to wonder at the crocodile tears that the Opposition are spilling over the health service.

Mrs. Spelman: Would the hon. Gentleman accept that any party in opposition has the perfect opportunity to consider the statistics and the question of supply and demand and plan for the changes that it wants to make? It does not have to wait five years until it is in a position to implement changes.

Mr. McCabe: I make three obvious points in response. First, the hon. Lady's party has a history of trying to destroy the health service. Secondly, the Conservative spokesman on health has admitted that he has a stealth plan to wreck public confidence in the health service. Thirdly, it seems absurd for the Opposition to refer to alternatives if they are not prepared to disclose to the public, in the interests of allowing them to make choices about health, what those alternatives are and how much they will cost.

My final point for the Minister is that we need to strike a balance between what is locally viable and desirable and what resources can be used, set against a national framework for A&E. Will the Minister tell us how the Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection will work on that problem? Recently, there was a dispute about the long-term future of heart transplants at the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham, and at other hospitals. The resolution of that dispute came in setting standards to be monitored by the Commission for Health Improvement, so that services could be provided on the basis that treatment would be safe and reliable. Some similar guide to the operation of A&E treatment centres and units would be useful.

10.13 am

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest): I thank the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) for securing the debate and for referring to a national strategy. We must consider the national outlook for A&E provision before we relate it back to our own areas.

My presence in the House is entirely due to the importance that local people put on A&E services. People are prepared to travel for high-powered elective or emergency treatment, but not for bread and butter emergencies. If they live in or move to an area with local emergency services, they do not expect them to be taken away.

As the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) said, recognition is coming for local people's priorities. The first glimpse of that recognition came with the Scottish review of acute services in 1998, which states that

"the critical mass needed to achieve the benefits which might flow from this increased volume of activity can come through managed clinical networks rather than the centralisation or concentration of services."

As recently as May last year, the Northern Ireland acute services review tackled the question of A&E. The report suggested that there should be three grades of A&E. Of course, we cannot all have the top grade—the all-singing all-dancing provision for major head injuries and major chest and cardiac surgery. The second grade is represented by the sort of A&E department that commonly exists at the moment, which does not deal with the major procedures. The third grade is lower, but is more than a minor injuries unit because a doctor is always present. In Northern Ireland, they have begun to consider making some sensible alterations.

After last year's general election, the Royal College of Physicians realised that there must be a rethink and, along with the Nuffield Trust, began to consider a model that would keep emergency services local in the first instance. A lead article in the *BMJ* from 4 August 2001 sums up the situation when it states:

"The first advantage of such a system"—

that is, emergencies going locally first—

"would be that patients with emergencies would reach hospital within 10 rather than 30 minutes. Links with primary care would be better. Those who didn't need admission could be quickly discharged home, which seems to be logistically impossible to achieve in one day with the current arrangements. Some patients need never go to the central hospital. Those who did would not need to be assessed again, and transfer could be faster because fewer transfers would be needed overall."

We were tremendously helped by the admission from Sir George Alberti, the president of the Royal College of Physicians, that medicine could exist without surgery. That made a huge difference, as most emergency services are medical.

The greatest step forward, however, is contained in the Darzi report from County Durham. Professor Ara Darzi is part of the NHS Modernisation Agency, so he speaks with authority. He takes into account local and staffing issues and what it is and not possible to achieve.

Country Durham and Darlington have three acute hospitals between them: in Durham in the north, Bishop Auckland in the middle and Darlington in the south. The Bishop Auckland hospital is the smallest, is 12 miles from Darlington and 13 miles from Durham, and serves a population of less than 40,000. Clearly, it would not be possible to run all services at Bishop Auckland, but Ara Darzi's suggested model includes a doctor-led A&E service and most of medicine, along with a diagnostic and treatment centre, which is a modern idea that has much to commend it as it separates much elective surgery from the emergency work that blocks beds. Such a model might be applied to many hospitals that are under threat.

Mr. Brazier: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that he is basically talking about an A&E with everything except major trauma facilities?

Dr. Taylor: The details of the facilities in each area would be decided according to local opinion and decisions. I shall return to that later, as it is the most important point of all. As I read it, the Darzi model would not be exactly the same in other places, but it gives a flavour of what is possible with medical staffing and local desires. It is incredibly important.

Something has to be done politically, as my presence in the House shows. Far more importantly, something has to be done for the patient. The three A&Es in Worcestershire have been reduced to two, and I have received many letters that suggest that that change is not working. I could talk for many hours about trolley and ambulance waits, staff stress and ambulance distances, but I will not. However, I will give one fact. Before the downgrading of facilities in Kidderminster, the monthly mileage of the Wyre Forest ambulance service was 8,000 miles, but is now 24,000 miles. Change must take place, and it could be made on the Darzi model.

I shall end with some pleas to the Minister and her colleagues, the first of which is that they consider the Darzi model.

Mr. John Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the Darzi model, based on the views of that expert gentleman. Did he say that the hospital in Bishop Auckland served a mere 40,000 people? Did I hear him correctly?

Dr. Richard Taylor: That is the population of the town, but the hospital serves a large rural area, which makes the population that it covers much greater. We would see from a map that Durham, Bishop Auckland and Darlington are on a north-south line. The people in the country to the west will not be that much further from Durham to the north than Darlington in the south. The Darzi model must be considered as a blueprint for a national strategy.

I was grateful to the hon. Member for Meriden for mentioning the Secretary of State's response. On the Floor of the House, he told me that local matters must be decided by local opinion. I ask that that be the case, without pressure from the Department of Health and its Ministers. Makers of local opinion—that must include citizens as well as members of the professions—should be given freedom.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Given the democratic deficit in local decision making on the health service, does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is some merit in still being able to refer significant changes such as hospital closures to the Secretary of State, because it means that someone in an elected position takes responsibility for the result of policy or the general financial picture? That is perhaps the only merit of referring such decisions. I say yes to local decision making, but we have to make it more accountable if we are to dispense with the taking of responsibility by politicians elected at a national level.

Dr. Taylor: I could not agree more that there must be local accountability. That is why I am desperately sad that it seems that community health councils, which have some democratically elected members, will disappear. I believe that the Government are sincere about trying to involve local people in decision making. I remind the Minister that she wrote in a letter last September that

> "The views of patients and citizens should be not only valued but listened to and acted upon as well."

If my pleas are heard, crises will be avoided, and in Worcestershire, the devastation of hospital services forced by the now abolished health authority could be undone and repaired.

David Taylor (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I should tell the House that I intend to call the Liberal Democrat health spokesman at 10.30 am. I call Dr. Murrison.

10.24 am

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this timely debate. The tragic events of last Friday have highlighted the importance that we place on front-line services and there is no doubt that casualty departments are at the forefront of the national health service. I pay tribute to the dedicated professionals of Barnet general hospital.

The six months that I spent as a senior house officer in the accident and emergency service were the most exhausting months of my career, but they were some of the most fulfilling. I am sure that other hon. Members here today who are medically qualified would share those sentiments. My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) raised the subject of telemedicine at the Royal Hospital Haslar and I remember offering medical advice to patients many thousands of miles away during my time as a casualty officer in that hospital. I agree with absolutely everything that my hon. Friend said.

I know that the Royal United hospital at Bath that serves many of my constituents has recently been taxing the minds of Ministers. However, if we set aside end-of-year deficits, suspensions and fiddled waiting lists, we are left with a hospital that provides a remarkable service to my constituents in Wiltshire. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the hospital's casualty department.

The Minister is a keen admirer of community health councils, so she will be delighted to note that our debate coincides with a meeting of the RUH standing group of the Bath and district community health council. As luck would have it, the council is debating as we speak the hospital's accident and emergency department, and particularly the council's recent survey of patients and carers attending the casualty department. The survey gave people the opportunity to comment on a raft of issues, with 35 detailed questions on issues such as travel and car parking, A&E waiting times, and the support given to patients and carers on discharge. I regret that our debate and that meeting are simultaneous, as it prevents me from conveying the council's findings, which I know will be illuminating.

While we can, we should draw upon our community health councils because, if the Minister has her way—I hope that she will not—they will shortly fall silent. Today's CHC agenda is a treasure-trove of useful activity. We learn for example that the council will participate in the nationwide casualty watch exercise on 20 May. There is a detailed critique of the plans for a

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new casualty dept in Bath; and the CHC asks several questions. It asks about the drop-off car parking facilities for the unit; we should remember that the hospital serves a vast rural area, so it is extremely important for those of my constituents who have to use the hospital. It wants to know whether the toilet facilities are adequate, and particularly about access for disabled people. It also asks whether the bereavement suite is fit for the task and whether its relationship to the mortuary is sympathetic. Those are down-to-earth questions, which planners forget and neglect—particularly planners of casualty departments—but community health councils give a powerful voice to local people on such important matters.

The council has been advised that it may not be possible to change the plans on which it has commented [illegible] causing undue delay or expense. What a shame that is, because it is a useful catalogue of concerns from an organisation with its ear to the ground. It is a shame that those comments were not used to inform the decision-making process at an earlier stage. The NHS machinery appears to be running down our community health councils already. That is lamentable in the extreme, but what a fantastic demonstration it is of the value of community health councils. I know that all Conservative Members will join me in condemning the Government's plans for closing community health councils and for proving completely recalcitrant to the wise words of Conservative Members, during the Committee stage of the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Bill, that CHCs should be reformed, not abolished.

Last year, I attended a major accident on the A36 in my constituency, in which four people lost their lives. I saw at first hand the superlative quality of our emergency personnel. The weak link is a system that obliges ambulances in certain parts of the country to stack up outside casualty departments, waiting to discharge patients, like aircraft at Heathrow, or to circle district general hospitals like planes on a holding pattern. Is anything more likely to demoralise all the health care professionals involved? Despite the best efforts of our health care professionals, the NHS front-of-house is in crisis. It is no wonder that community health councils feel obliged to take a special interest and that the Government are hell-bent on silencing them.

10.30 am

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): As the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) said, we are all grateful to the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) for giving us the opportunity to debate some of the wider issues beyond individual hospitals. We heard an interesting debate between the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe), who made some valid points, as well as some contentious ones, and other hon. Members.

I remember meeting some of the staff at Solihull hospital and noting their concern, and that of local people, about its downgrading. Indeed, this weekend, I visited West Cornwall hospital in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Andrew George), who cannot be with us today, which drew my attention to the fact that threats to the provision of local services occur in rural areas as much, if not more than, in urban and suburban areas. I know that the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) has been active on the issue of Haslar hospital, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) and the hon. Member for Portsmouth, North (Syd Rapson), so many campaigns are cross-party. I know of the work done by the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) in relation to the Kent and Canterbury hospital, which I have also visited. It is remarkable that many of those hospitals are not found in the constituencies of Labour Members. Indeed, Bishop Auckland general hospital, which is due to be reprieved from threat because of its size, is in the middle of a Labour constituency. It is questionable whether that is a coincidence.

As the hon. Member for Meriden said, much stealth and shifting the blame is involved in the closure of hospitals. We touched on that issue in our discussion about whether decisions are truly local. If decisions are to be made locally, they must be democratically accountable. Governments, who generally seek to centralise praise and decentralise blame, like proposals to be led by local managers, who can be, and all too often are, demonised, although the buck should stop with the politicians who make policy decisions. In relation to the health service, that means Westminster politicians, including those who make the financial decisions. It need not be that way, but it is. Until we have an accountable tier of politicians helping to run the health service on a regional and local level, politicians at Westminster will rightly continue to debate such issues and the Minister and her colleagues will be held responsible.

Hospitals are being closed by stealth, bit by bit. First, one part of the service is lost, and that is deemed to make another part of the service unsustainable. If we are to have an open approach, we must ask the Government, through their proxies—the local managers who come up with the proposals—to set out a clear plan, which can be debated, at the outset. We know that many closures are financially driven and hidden behind allegations about the need to provide a safer service. The issues at stake can be directly financial, as they were in Worcestershire, where closure was required to fund a private finance initiative, or financial by proxy—a shortage of staff may well be related to the inability of successive Governments to fund the necessary consultant expansion.

Financial decisions are hidden behind issues related to the working time directive and junior doctors' hours. I used to work in that field as both an expert on a national basis and an employee on a regional one. There was no problem with junior doctors' hours that could not be solved by the adequate provision of a consultant-led service, with the training and the creation of new posts that go with that.

Those who make the point that patient safety is the key issue must provide evidence. Our approaches must be evidence-based. It is not just a question of the provision of adequate back-up and specialties leading to a safer service. There is also the issue of travel time for casualties going to hospitals. If all small units are to be closed, we have to balance the alleged safety gains of that measure against the worries about increased transit time for people who are not yet stabilised.

It is not sufficient for decisions on patient safety to be handed down from on high without adequate debate and scrutiny. Such scrutiny needs to be much more explicit. Reports produced by the royal colleges are informed by expert opinion, but have baggage attached to do with the working patterns of consultants. They need to be debated. They should be published, and the basis on which they are formed should be scrutinised. We need elected politicians to take responsibility, preferably locally.

We must remember that safety has many aspects. It was not a lack of access to surgery that caused the disasters in Bristol, but too much being done by specialists beyond their competence and with insufficient regard to the suitability of patients for particular procedures. That is one of the best examples of a failure of patient safety. It arose not from inadequate medical cover, but from too much medical interference.

When we consider the staffing problems that underlie some of the stresses placed on smaller hospitals, we must recognise that we are dealing with the legacy of underfunding, which lasted until at least 1999. Medical staffing levels were determined by a decision taken not by the previous Conservative Government, but by the last but one. The failure to invest in medical schools and medical student numbers in the early 1980s and the failure of successive Governments to expand the consultant grade—

Mrs. Spelman: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, perversely, there is a wave of redundancies in our medical colleges, at precisely the moment at which the Government claim that they want to increase the number of students?

Dr. Harris: We need now to be at the point at which the Government claim we will be after five years of expansion of medical schools. That expansion will produce the junior doctors needed to staff the departments, but a shortage of junior doctors is only partly due to a shortage of newly qualified people. There is also a shortage of consultants to provide the training opportunities upon which responsible expansion of junior doctors' posts is based.

It is no good creating new senior house officer posts and sucking people in from South Africa or Australia if no adequate training is to be provided. That is why the provision of adequate medical staffing begins and ends with expanding the provision of consultants. I have said that again and again, but until very recently there has been a complete failure to increase the number of consultants.

I entirely agree that small hospitals can be supported in the provision of senior house officers by rotation through larger hospitals. It happens in Banbury in my constituency, with rotation from the Radcliffe infirmary, and it happens in Solihull. It should be a question not for local hospital managers but for the postgraduate deans charged with ensuring adequate training. The neutering of those deans by service-driven reforms to medical work force planning—introduced by the previous Government and added to by this one—has damaged flexibility.

Dr. Murrison: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Harris: I do not have much time. I come finally to accident and emergency departments being treated as scapegoats in relation to waiting times. If those are anybody's responsibility, they are not that of accident and emergency departments. They see patients and treat them, but then cannot move them to other parts of the hospital because of a lack of capacity due to under-bedding or delayed discharges.

What we see in accident and emergency departments is a fiddling of the figures and delays in starting and premature stopping of the clock when it comes to the time between decision to admit and finding a bed. Because 75 per cent. of people have to be seen within four hours, minor cases are seen quickly while the more complex ones are seen later. That is a terrible distortion of clinical priorities. The hon. Member for Meriden spoke of the Government's inability to specify how many accident and emergency nurses there are. That was a case of adverb substitution—those figures are not "not collected centrally", they are "not collected deliberately". We now see noun substitution as well. Such data can only be provided at disproportionate embarrassment to the politicians, not "disproportionate cost". Changes might have to happen, but I advise the Government to sort out the capacity problems in the larger hospitals before they start closing the smaller ones.

10.40 am

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): I start by echoing the point made by a number of hon. Members—including my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) whom I congratulate on having secured the debate—that we should thank the staff in the accident and emergency departments of hospitals, particularly Barnet, who did such a wonderful job following the Potters Bar crash.

In opening the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden pointed out that the accident and emergency department in Solihull hospital had been downgraded by stealth through the instruction to ambulance crews to take patients to another hospital and by the removal, without notice, of a surgeon. The effect, over time, was to damage the ability of Solihull to deliver accident and emergency services. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) intervened and said that the same thing was happening to the Kent and Canterbury hospital: patients were being diverted away from it, against their wishes, by ambulance.

Mr. Brazier: The loss of 90 beds due to the closure of the satellite geriatric hospital at Nunnery Fields resulted in queues in our accident and emergency unit that made the national press again and again. The vicious circle described by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) is happening. When they are told that there is no capacity, the morale of staff, particularly nursing staff, is affected and they become overloaded. The rotten plan put forward by the local health authority is then fulfilled.

Mr. Heald: My hon. Friend reflects the sort of comments that were made in the report on east Kent by

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the Commission for Health Improvement, which quoted one member of staff who did not know how long patients had been in his accident and emergency department, or what day it was, because of the sheer stress of numbers and the chaos in the department. The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) said that the same was happening in west Cornwall. My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) then told us about the Royal Hospital Haslar, a famous defence hospital, which had also been downgraded. He explained that the old thinking that the large accident and emergency department is best had led to the change in his local hospital, and pointed out some of the problems caused by that thinking—beds blocked and modern methods ignored.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) shared the concerns about Solihull hospital and agreed that people want good local services. The hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) told us that his hospital—as we know—had seen services downgraded, and he spoke of the latest thinking and of the County Durham report. My hon. Friend the Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) paid tribute to the work of community health councils in standing up for patients.

What is the Government's policy on rationalisation of accident and emergency departments? It cannot be coincidence that across the country—we have heard about many constituencies today, and many others are relevant—A&E departments and the supporting specialties seem to be in the process of reconfiguration by stealth. The Government document entitled "Reforming Emergency Care—Practical Steps" refers to access to emergency care being simplified and the extension of streaming of patients. However, it does not mention closing down A&E departments and developing minor-injuries units instead, or merging medium-sized units, but that is what is happening.

The argument for such measures, locally and in medical circles, is that rationalisation improves standards. Hospitals in which more than 50,000 patients use the A&E will apparently tend to have a full, 24-hour supporting service. It is said that they are more cost-effective, their doctor training is better and rostering and the quality of outcomes can be improved.

Do the Government want the rationalisation that is taking place? What guidance have they given on the subject? How has it been disseminated? What is the evidence for it?

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Everything that the hon. Gentleman says rings true with what has happened over many years, rather than in only the past five years. He referred to the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) and the difficulties with the defence medical services establishment. The Princess Alexandra military hospital at Wroughton closed in my constituency under the Conservative Government, despite huge passion and support for it. The same pressure that the hon. Member for Gosport is bringing to bear was exerted on the Conservatives when they were in control.

Can the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) offer the Government any lessons that he may have learned from that time, or suggest any changes in policy that he may wish that there had been? The issues have been the same for many years.

Mr. Heald: The Government are in the position to conduct all the research in the world and tell us what the evidence is. The hon. Lady is right to say that A&E departments have been closed before, but the process seems to be gathering pace. Even in my county, Hertfordshire, a consultation exercise on reconfiguration is taking place, and there is rightly much local unhappiness at the thought that hospitals that are much at the heart of people's security—how people feel about what would happen if they were ill—might be in danger of closing or losing their A&E departments.

Is there any evidence of improved outcomes following the closure or mergers of A&E departments? If so, will the Minister publish it so that we can all consider it? It is often said that such measures are cost-effective. What evidence suggests that there is a release of resources as a result of them? If there is such evidence, will she publish it so that we can have an informed debate on the issue?

Is the Minister taken by the accounts that we have heard today of new thinking? The hon. Member for Wyre Forest described the experience in Durham, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport gave an example about combining diagnostic and treatment services with a form of accident and emergency in his local hospital. What is the Government's policy? It would be wrong for them simply to shuffle the blame on to local health managers, and say, "Oh well, they are just doing what seems right locally." There must be a plan for the whole country, or at least a network provided by the A&E departments. If so, the Government must have a policy on it.

The state of accident and emergency departments has declined rapidly under this Government. When he spoke to the National Association of Health Authorities and Trusts in 1996, the Prime Minister said that we would see an end to trolley waits and the causes of trolley waits. Since then, however, the number of patients seen within an hour has declined from 75 per cent. to 50 per cent., and the number admitted within four hours has fallen from 90 per cent. to 75 per cent.

The Audit Commission report described a host of organisational and managerial problems; and we have also heard evidence from nurses, including from the senior nurse who addressed the recent Royal College of Nursing conference. He spoke of grieving relatives being kept away from untended corpses that had been

"dotted about in various offices and cubby holes".

He also spoke of people waiting for hour upon hour, and about the recent protest at Liverpool, where people had been waiting for 40 hours. What does the Minister say about the appalling decline in emergency services?

10.51 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): First, I join others in paying tribute to all the emergency services, which responded magnificently to last week's rail crash. That is the case in every major emergency. I am sure that the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) knows that if such a terrible

event were to happen in her community, the emergency services would again respond magnificently, and I confirm that there is a major contingency plan for her area. The hon. Lady put forward the possibility of an incident in her area, and explained that the growth of shopping and tourism mean that a large number of people are there during the day. I can give her the strong reassurance that the emergency services are prepared and able to cope with matters excellently for local people.

The debate has been passionate on both sides. That delights me, because it shows how much local services, particularly emergency services, are valued. The fact that so many hon. Members attended today, contributed to the debate and made their views clear gladdens my heart. I was quite surprised, however, to be criticised by the hon. Member for Meriden for humility; our document "Reforming Emergency Care: First Steps to a New Approach" was a deliberate attempt to deal with a complex matter. We do not have a magic wand, and the position cannot be resolved overnight.

As many hon. Members said, the pressures on accident and emergency departments have existed for many years—and many of them suffered also under previous Governments. However, the debate should not be about accident and emergency departments only, but about the whole system of care. Many hon. Members highlighted the fact that it is also about primary care, access to general practitioners, social services, the overall capacity of hospitals and the effective and proper discharge of their duty—and the fact that if one part of the service is not working properly the effects are inevitably felt most acutely in A&E departments. Hon. Members have made it clear that the problems in overstretched A&E departments are sometimes the result of pressures that are not under their control but which they are unfortunately left to deal with and involve a complex set of interlinked and interrelated matters.

The contribution of the hon. Member for Meriden was in stark contrast to the more thoughtful speech by the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers). I had the opportunity, with the hon. Gentleman, of discussing with local councillors and members of the local community their real concerns. We talked about the way in which emergency services are changing, and whether it will be possible to provide more services closer to home. However, we recognised that they will not always include full a trauma service with a complete range of critical care back-up, because it is not realistic that it should be available within 10 minutes for everyone in the country. I hope that Opposition Members will be prepared to engage in a realistic and mature dialogue with their communities about that. Yes; we want to provide as many services as we can as close as possible to people's homes, but that aim will always be tempered by issues of clinical safety, organisation, resources and training, and by the need to ensure that the royal colleges can accredit such circumstances. The picture is complex; it is not simply a matter of having a full range of accident and emergency services within 10 minutes of where every single person in the country lives.

Mr. John Taylor: Respectfully, I need no lectures on how to keep in touch with my community, having been born there and having had a continuous mandate from the people of Solihull for 31 years. I should, however, draw the Minister's attention to the perversity of justifying the downgrading of accident and emergency provisions on the grounds of lack of throughput, when throughput has been intentionally diminished by instructions to ambulance crews.

Ms Blears: The hon. Gentleman knows that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) said, a variety of services has been available at Solihull and Birmingham Heartlands over the years. There have been different protocol referrals, according to the needs of the patients who were being transported and referred. That links with the issue raised by the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor). If we are to explore different kinds of accident and emergency treatment and provision, it is crucial that we get the protocols right, so that the right patients go to the right place for the right treatment by the right members of staff. That will ensure that people do not end up being processed through one place before being transferred somewhere else, which would create difficult delays for patients.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Ms Blears: I want to respond to the other points that hon. Members have raised, and I have four minutes to do so, so I want to press on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green made an important point about ensuring that there is a local dimension to such issues. A wider range of facilities is beginning to appear. There are not only accident and emergency departments, but nurse-led minor injury care centres and one-stop primary care centres, and walk-in centres are being developed. All those are about providing different elements of emergency care. We must challenge ourselves to think more imaginatively and more creatively about the provision of emergency care. We should think not only about the A&E department, but about the whole system, and it is crucial to ensure that it is interlinked.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Will the Minister respond to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) about providing information? When provision at St. Albans was merged with that at Hemel Hempstead—against strong opposition from locals and myself—we were told that the move was necessary to improve health outcomes. Since then, evidence of such improvements has not been forthcoming. We have asked that Ministers carry out a nationwide study of mergers to clarify whether they have produced better health outcomes, before further mergers, including the possible closure of half or three quarters of the accident and emergency units in Hertfordshire, are carried forward. Will the Minister promise to provide that information, and if not, why not?

Ms Blears: What is important is that we are talking about what local people can decide to do for themselves. The hon. Member for Meriden will know that there were about eight options for various configurations of emergency services in her area. No decision has been taken on which options will go out for public

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consultation, but it is crucial that the detailed weighing-up of what is best for the local community and what combination of services will properly provide for local people is done at the local level, with the primary care trusts in the lead. It is crucial that we bring together clinicians, local patients and all those who make up the neighbourhood. It is not simply a case of the Government coming up with a national template—a top-down solution—that will act as a blueprint for everyone. Local communities must be involved.

Mr. Heald: On a point of order, Mr. Taylor. Is it in order for the Minister to misrepresent the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley)? He asked whether she would publish the evidence on whether mergers and reconfigurations make a difference.

David Taylor (in the Chair): That is a matter for debate, not a point of order.

Ms Blears: Thank you, Mr. Taylor. In the minute that I have left, I should commend the emergency care strategy to hon. Members. It is complex, and refers to streaming, extra investment and reform. It is key.

I challenge Opposition Members to be more creative and more imaginative in their approach to the issue, and I urge them to read the strategy. It has the full support of the British Association for Accident and Emergency Medicine, which looks forward to implementing it with the Government. The strategy was formulated with local people, so local communities have had a chance to ensure that it can work.

Opposition Members should not take such a simplistic view of emergency care. It is a complex issue and all the services are interrelated, but the arrangements can work. As usual, Opposition Members are being harbingers of doom and gloom, and feel that nothing can ever improve. I can promise that things will improve, however, provided that the strategy is properly implemented.

Farming

11 am

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): As you well know, Mr. Taylor, there is no doubt that farming is facing serious difficulties at the moment: farm incomes have been very low for the past five years, the commodity price cycle is depressed, and the pound is very strong against the euro. To compound all that, there have been great difficulties, first, with BSE and, last year, with foot and mouth disease. The memory of the pyres and the pain of foot and mouth disease may well have brought people to the point where they are beginning to look for change in the farming industry.

I believe that a new consensus for change in the funding of farming is emerging. That mood of change is strengthened by a desire to reform the common agricultural policy. I am not entirely sure whether the entry of candidate countries such as Hungary and Poland will bring about major change. One school of thought suggests that that will cement the status quo, but there is an argument that the accession of those new member countries will at least provoke debate. The mid-term review, which will take place shortly, gives us another opportunity for discussion.

I simply wish to tell the Minister and other colleagues that CAP reform is long overdue. It is no good just to wish for reform; the Government must be a key player—an active partner—in those debates. The Government, who want to be at the centre of Europe, have an opportunity to produce and influence change, but at the end of the day the £3 billion spent on the CAP could be spent more effectively.

The Curry report is another driver for change. It is important to recognise the fact that that report, "Farming and Food: a sustainable future", did not just magically appear; there was a manifesto commitment at the last general election to create such a policy commission. What is important is not the change itself, but the scope, scale and timetable for change.

The CAP will not be reformed overnight. Some voices have argued that we should follow the New Zealand example and get rid of subsidies overnight. That is a false view—it is unachievable for a member of the European Union—but there is a feeling among the public at large, the consumers of food, that we ought to scale down the food subsidy support that we give. However, we can embark on a process that has already begun—the process of switching funding from food production subsidies to payments for environmental gain and benefit. That process is not new; stewardship encapsulates it in a sense.

Of course the English rural development regulations allow us to transfer money—as they say in the trade—from pillar 1 to pillar 2. At the moment, that is funded by modulation at a rate of 4.5 per cent. The Curry report acknowledges that and argues that we must do much more. The Government have taken the Curry report seriously. They have broadly welcomed it, and the Prime Minister hosted a summit at Downing street not long ago. There will be further reaction to the report after regional discussions in September.

Some important initiatives have already been taken—for example, on the need to have benchmarks, to set up demonstration farms and to shorten the food chain.

Lying behind the Curry report is an understanding that it is not just farming that brings wealth and investment to rural areas. The big lesson from the foot and mouth outbreak, when the countryside was closed, is that small businesses—pubs, bed and breakfasts and tourist attractions—faced very real problems. One of the important roles of farming and landowning is to develop a countryside and landscape that people are keen to visit. The notion of farmers and landholders as stewards of a changing countryside is very important.

However, there has not been much progress on the important recommendation in the Curry report to the effect that we need to continue to move away from subsidising crop production to payments for environmental gain and benefits. There are real problems with doing that, but I want the Minister today and the Government in the next few weeks and months to provide some clear signposts and milestones against which to measure change. We now have an opportunity—it may not come very often—to take forward that consensus for change.

In my own county, Nottinghamshire, farmers know that change is inevitable, and they are beginning to plan and influence change. My friend John Clarke, who is the chairman of the Nottinghamshire branch of the National Farmers Union and who farms at the White Post in Farnsfield, has convened a series of meetings involving farmers from north Nottinghamshire and, significantly, the East Midlands development agency to try to take some of the Curry theory and put it into practice in Nottinghamshire.

I notice that large business farmers in Nottinghamshire—people such as Tony Strawson, for example, who farms at Featherstone farm—have entered into stewardship in a big way. I noticed, too, when I was talking to him the other day, that he recycles the water and debris produced by washing his carrots and beet back on to his fields. He is also involved in short-term rotation coppicing. Just down the road, Richard Thomas, a large potato producer, has moved into stewardship and is moving quickly into organic production.

The central issue remains to be resolved: how can we achieve the Curry recommendation to have a broad and shallow environmental scheme? Curry suggests the only approach now available—the only show in town—which is to modulate not at 4.5 per cent., but at 20 per cent. by 2006–07. The difficult issue for the Minister and the Government is how to fund that change. Modulation has to be match funded and the price tag on that proposal is £500 million over three years. The key issue is how that £500 million lever for change can be matched against the Government's other spending commitments and priorities. I mention that as we move quickly into the current spending review.

I believe that the Curry report is welcomed not just by most elements of the farming and landowning community, but by the lobby groups and interests groups. It is significant that this week the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Woodland Trust and 15 other organisations have launched a postcard campaign called "Invest in Our Countryside Now", in which they argue strongly that this opportunity to transfer funding into environmental gain and benefits is the way forward.

Sir Don himself is anxious that his report is not cherry picked, but seen as a whole. The Country Landowners Association is strongly in favour of moves towards payments for environmental gain and benefits.

In that context, the position of the NFU is interesting. When the report was launched, the NFU was a staunch opponent of modulation. However, if we read the small print and look at what NFU members are saying in the south-west, for example, we see that there is a growing awareness that this kind of approach may have real possibilities. My challenge to the Minister is that, given this opportunity, it is important that we set out signposts and mileposts. The mileposts that I would like us to set for the next financial year, 2003–04, would be to move to modulation at 10 per cent. That would be a big step change. I estimate—perhaps the Minister will correct me—that that would cost about an extra £150 million. If we are serious about wanting change, and I believe we are, spending of that kind would provide a significant indicator that that is the route the Government want to take.

What is important for farmers and landowners at the moment is to have real understanding and real knowledge about the way forward. People cannot live with uncertainty. They want to know the direction of travel. If the modulation proposals and the move towards a broad and shallow scheme are not taken forward, there will be real despair and disillusionment in the countryside. We must not let this consensus overwhelm us, however, as there are clear difficulties with this kind of approach that need to be overcome. Our commitment to the philosophy underlying Curry should not underestimate some of the practical difficulties of implementing such an approach.

First, if we are to move towards payment for environmental gain, we need to be able to measure success. A very real issue is how we define public goods, which this kind of approach entails. Different organisations will have different opinions of the public goods that they want delivered. The RSPB has a firm view of the way forward, as does the Woodland Trust. Their priorities may be complementary, but there might be concerns within the access lobby—in the Ramblers Association, for example, of which I am a member—that a desire for payments for greater access could put conservation in difficulty. We overcame those difficulties in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and we can overcome those difficulties again. The issue is how we measure the output from this kind of approach and how we put a value on the environmental good, whether it is a plant, wildlife, hedgerows, access or new walls. Of course, for a payment of £150 million, one would need to be able to demonstrate clear outcomes.

Secondly, experience of agri-environment schemes shows that they can be complicated and have a heavy administrative cost. Any broad and shallow scheme of the kind that Curry has recommended should, in relative terms, be fairly simple. It needs to have easily defined goals, and the farmers and landowners involved in it need to have some degree of self-assessment. There may be a case for a whole farm approach towards environmental gain.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The hon. Gentleman is opening this debate and taking it forward in a thoughtful and useful way. My constituency

[Mr. Patrick McLoughlin]

contains a large proportion of the Peak District national park, which he knows well, and it therefore attracts a huge number of visitors to the Peak district. Some farmers say to me that they do not want farming to be seen as a museum, and that agriculture is very much an industry. Although I fully accept that new arrangements need to be introduced, we should be careful not to make them over-complicated. My slight worry about some of the hon. Gentleman's suggestions is that they might be a little over-prescriptive in telling farmers how to farm. I hope that he can address that in the rest of his remarks.

Paddy Tipping: I visit the hon. Gentleman's constituency frequently, tramp the footpaths and look at the farming practices there. When I take my children up into the countryside to look down over the surrounding areas, they say to me, "Isn't it marvellous, Dad, it's never changed", but the countryside is always changing. It is man-made—we create it. It is how we handle and manage that change that is important. The lesson of the last year, during which I have not been able to go to the Peak district, was clear: the tourists and visitors to the countryside provide the real wealth. The other side of the coin is that farmers and landowners have a real role to play in creating a countryside that people want to visit.

I take the hon. Gentleman's point: it is a persistent complaint, as I have just acknowledged, that some of the agri-environment schemes can be very bureaucratic and over-prescriptive. I do not want us to fall into a trap—we have an elaborate system of CAP payments, through integrated administration and control system payments and the rest, and we must be careful not to move into a green system of payments that is similarly difficult and similarly over-complex. The reason that I argue for 10 per cent. modulation in 2003–04 is that that would give us a chance to experiment. We should not set these initiatives in stone; we should be relaxed about change. As I said, the countryside is always changing, and it will continue to change.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that with greater bureaucracy there must be a responsibility on Government to set up the right mechanisms to ensure independent arbitration or the intervention of an ombudsman when there is a problem? It seems that, all too often, when the Department makes a decision, it is right, whatever the circumstances, and the farmer is wrong. We have all had that experience with IACS, but it is becoming increasingly clear that that also applies to the sort of schemes to which he refers.

Paddy Tipping: I, too, have heard those concerns, and on several occasions I have taken up concerns about payments, late payments and wrong payments. My experience is rather different—I have found the Department willing to look at issues. It is a year since the creation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and although much remains to be done in that new organisation, significant changes are taking place, which we need to encourage further.

I want to make a third point about the difficulties of this kind of approach. A broad and shallow scheme must be overlaid by other schemes. The environment has different hierarchies; in a sense, there is a pyramid of things that we need to protect. For example, if we want to protect limestone pavements or the dales, or if we want to protect ancient forest, as the Woodland Trust does, or, if we want to create new heathland in Sherwood forest in Nottinghamshire, such initiatives will cost more than the broad and shallow scheme. A big challenge for Government is to explore the urban fringes, where cars are dumped and abandoned and where antisocial behaviour occurs. We need to look imaginatively at how, using funding mechanisms, we can create informal places that people can visit. I therefore welcome the review of agri-environment schemes currently taking place. I hope that they will become simpler, but they need to mesh strongly with the broad and shallow scheme set out by Curry.

The final practical difficulty is the urgent need to demonstrate the consequences of the approach set out by Curry, which switches from payments for subsidies to payments for the environment. The Curry report was produced in the early part of the year. Farmers and landowners are looking for a message, one of which could well be: what is the consequence of taking that approach? Will farmers in the west country, for example, stand to gain more than large arable farmers in the eastern part of the country? We urgently need a model for the approach. The difficulty for the Minister is that our thinking is at an early stage, but it will be important for academics and the Government's resources to propose a series of ideas—examples—of what might happen if we proceed with Curry.

I began by saying that farming faces severe difficulties. The severity of the problem has opened up a real debate about the way forward for agriculture. There is an opportunity to change things and, after five very bad years, a determination to find a better way forward. The emerging consensus is that it is right to switch from subsidies on production to a system that makes direct payments for environmental benefits. Such opportunities do not arise often. There is a danger that unless the Department and the Government show leadership now and make the switch, farmers and landowners will face genuine despair. The programme is challenging, but I strongly believe that we should take that challenge and make the changes that I advocate.

11.22 am

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) on securing the debate. In particular, I appreciate the thoughtful way in which he introduced it. He, at least two other Members in the Chamber and, indeed, you, Mr. Taylor, are members of the Select Committee on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which is exploring the issues raised. That attention needs to be paid to the future funding of farming is beyond doubt. If there had been any doubt about that, the impact of the foot and mouth crisis and the outbreak of classical swine fever in East Anglia illustrated in a truly appallingly vivid way to urban and suburban areas just what happens when the rural economy collapses. It certainly surprised some people in high places who thought that rural Britain was a minority pastime.

An article published in *The Sunday Times* on 28 August 2001 pointed out that the average family farm income has fallen in five years from £80,000 annually to

£8,000, and that farmers and farm workers are leaving the industry at the rate of 450 a week. As the chairman of the National Farmers Union put it to the Select Committee last week, that is like closing down Vauxhall Motors twice a year for two years.

The same article asked: who needs farmers? It said:

"In a global economy where anything can be imported from anywhere, chicken from Brazil, pork from Poland, beans from Kenya, production will always gravitate to where it is cheapest. And cheapest is rarely going to mean British. So why shouldn't food follow industries that have gone the same way, steel and coal for example?"

The article continued:

"There is a superficially attractive argument in favour of letting farming die. We won't starve. Raw materials can be brought abroad and we can still earn huge profits from processing them."

It is to challenge such assumptions that I welcome the chance to participate briefly in the debate.

It is obviously nonsense to suppose that if Britain stopped farming, food would handily come into the country in raw material form, leaving our processing intact. From Thailand would come not chicken, but chicken McNuggets, chicken Kiev and all the rest of it; from Eastern Europe would come not milk powder, but various desserts and milk shakes. Leaving aside the human and animal implications for health of such an import policy—although in passing I point out that most experts believe that the foot and mouth epidemic and classical swine fever outbreaks originated in imported infected food—it is clear that if the British farmer goes down, with him go millions of jobs in food processing, packaging, labelling and haulage. That sector of the national economy amounts to 14 per cent. of the total. Only the foolish would suggest that that can be jettisoned without national harm.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): Is the right hon. Lady aware that in the past three years there has not been a single prosecution in respect of meat imports? Does not that suggest that there must be something wrong with the Customs system that monitors meat coming into England?

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Gentleman—indeed, anyone interested in such matters—will know that that subject has been raised a number of times in the House. Back Benchers have exerted great pressure on the Government to clarify what they are doing in the face of our anxieties. Perhaps the Minister will address that in his response.

I support what the hon. Member for Sherwood said about the importance of the countryside for rural tourism and the part it plays in the national economic effort. Some 80 per cent. of our land is farmed. Rural tourism accounts for 6 per cent. of the national economic effort. We have to ask who would come to view a rural wasteland, yet that is what we may come to see as land is abandoned or farmed in ever larger parcels, and as farmers, who are more and more financially squeezed, cut out the care of hedges, headlands and drainage—in short, when they no longer care for the rural environment because they cannot afford to do so.

Will the Minister comment on the de facto restructuring in the industry? Anecdotally, and in my county, huge farm holdings, amounting to many thousands of acres, are being broken up, returned to tenancies or given over to contractors or to share farming. I know that it is difficult to collect statistics on that, but such practices will have an impact on the environment. Some of the land that is being broken up will be well farmed, but some will not. Indeed, in my county, the contractor who has undertaken to farm thousands of acres is also under severe financial pressure.

It is beyond debate that farming is essential economically and environmentally. However, one of the fascinating features about the debate in this country is that the public want to have it both ways. They want cheap food; one has only to map the price wars between rival supermarket chains to see that. As we heard in the Select Committee, although the supermarkets and other lobby groups claim that people are deeply interested in how food is produced—whether it is imported, organic or whatever—I see scant evidence of that in my weekly shopping. In any case, what explanation is there for the shocking fact that five years ago 4 to 5 per cent. of all chicken consumed in Britain was imported, and today that percentage is 40 per cent. and rising? How does our determination to have cheap food square with the other demands that we are told we make for high standards of landscape and environmental management?

There is certainly no shortage of literature devoted to the matter. When the Select Committee interviewed representatives from the Countryside Agency, we were interested to learn that no fewer than 62 organisations are devoting their attention to the problems of the rural economy. To those we must add a plethora of other bodies that will emanate from the proposed regional assemblies. Let us hope that their advice will be more welcome to the agriculture industry than the example given by the chairman of the East of England development agency who, at the Norfolk NFU annual meeting in March this year, pointed out that the agency's principal help to the sector over the past year had been a project to market pickled herring. I am sure, Mr. Taylor, that you can imagine how well that went down.

I also hope that the enormous amounts paid out by the agency will be better used in future than the resources it devotes to publicising the excellent publication that is before me. It gives 10 case studies of farmers coping with their difficulties and was produced in my constituency. When I rang up the offshoot of the agency to tell it how excellent I thought the publication was, I also asked how the agency was distributing it, but it did not have the least idea and did not have a database of farmers.

David Taylor (in the Chair): Order. May I ask the right hon. Lady to refer to the title of the document so that the record will be clear?

Mrs. Shephard: Certainly, Mr. Taylor. It is called "Managing the Future", and I am happy to hand it in with my notes.

As we are debating the future funding of farming, it is worth looking at the current situation. I hope that when the Select Committee produces its report it will focus on the product—that is to say, on food, other crops and the public good. That would be a welcome change because our experience in the Committee has been that too much debate is devoted to structures and systems.

[Mrs. Shephard]

There needs to be a drastic simplification of the bodies, grant aiding and otherwise, concerned with farming. Both the Country Landowners Association and the NFU advocate a simplification, not to say a great reduction, in regulation for farmers. Greater clarity in planning law is needed if farmers are to be encouraged to diversify, and in the absence of other agencies and organisations that are able to do so, DEFRA should examine the economic and environmental impact of the current restructuring, no matter how difficult that is. There is a lot of talk about the food chain. Farmers producing our food should be closer to the food chain. It is difficult for mixed farmers, who have to see to everything, to engage in discussions on the price of wheat when that is not under their control.

These observations are minor and circumstantial. It is of more strategic interest to the industry that farmers know what view the Government take of their interests. What do Ministers think will be the future of the CAP? What influence can they have on its development and future shape? What can they practically achieve in the face of strongly nationalistic attitudes to agriculture in some EU member states, not to mention the current attitudes in the United States?

Do Ministers think that farming has a global future? If so, how will they ensure that the regional assemblies, where they exist—and if they exist—will give proper weight to rural issues, because their forerunners, the regional development agencies, certainly have not done so? What is to be done about food imports and labelling? Should farming move to a market-oriented system, and if so how soon?

Farming, in its creation of our rural landscape and its production of high-quality, healthy food, has served this country well. It is for this generation of Ministers and this Government to demonstrate that they value the contribution that farming has made to the well-being of Britain. The ball is in their court.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

David Taylor (in the Chair): Order. There are seven Members standing, and I intend to call the first of the Front-Bench speakers at 12 o'clock, so if hon. Members could confine their remarks to five minutes or so, the great majority of them will be called.

11.32 am

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am grateful to be called in this important debate. Sometimes it is helpful to think about how we came to be where we are, and although I do not propose to go back to biblical times, some reflection on past centuries will not be unhelpful.

All of us who represent rural constituencies will have spoken to old boys whose grandfathers came to East Anglia in the 1930s, when land was effectively being given away. One could lease land rent-free for three or five years, just so that the landowner could have it farmed. In the '20s and '30s agriculture was in an absolutely appalling state. It was essentially rescued by the second world war—occasionally, good comes out of bad. We appreciate how important it was at that time to have our own agriculture and not to rely on the idea, which the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) read from a newspaper, that we can buy what we like from anywhere in the world. That did not seem to be the case in 1942. As a consequence of that we came to certain conclusions.

The Labour Government after the war enacted the regime of subsidy and support which has been carried on in essence to the common agricultural policy. Probably most of us have heard the story of the East Anglian farmer who in 1949 applied to join his local Conservative club. The secretary said, "You have to be a Conservative." The farmer replied that he had always been a Conservative, and when the secretary asked, "So why haven't you joined?", he said, "Well, it's only since the blessed socialists have been in that I can afford the membership fee." The moral of that story is alleged to be that the condition of farming substantially improved, as indeed it did, from the second world war onwards.

There are now other trends in the world that will affect support and subsidy in any event. The World Trade Organisation has certain views about what it perceives to be uncompetitive practices, and by moving a certain amount of support into environmental schemes, one may at least elude or evade too much of its investigation. My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), with whose comments I substantially agree, apprised us of the difficulties of too rapid a move in that direction.

We must be aware that environmental subsidy and support is a fine thing, but we need to ensure that the overwhelming majority of it goes to support the continuation of farming and is not frittered away on the fringes and—in saying this I do not in any way denigrate cake shops—on things that are not integral to the rural economy. We appreciate the value that farming puts back into the community. It is common to quote the figure of £3 billion—I believe that it was higher than that at one stage—that is spent in support of farming in this country.

I do not like to use phrases such as "added value" because they are inherently meaningless, but there cannot be much doubt that the boost that tourism—just to name one industry—receives from farming is immense. If there were no farms in lakeland and elsewhere in this country, the land would be different and tourism would be that much poorer. It is almost impossible to calculate the immense value that farming adds to other industries. We need to ensure, therefore, that in any movement towards environmental support, the money goes into farming.

I can contemplate nothing worse at this time, when farming has been laid low by a series of worldwide economic problems and inherent internal disasters such as foot and mouth, BSE and classical swine fever, than saying that there may be some merit in the New Zealand model. In my judgment, for this country there is no merit at all in the New Zealand model; we are not comparing like with like. That model could not be continued in this country.

There is a limit to what we can do with environmental support. The Curry report attempts to overcome some of the difficulties by using the phrase "broad and shallow". If I have a criticism of the Curry report it is that it has slipped into using the jargonese that so

bedevils all government practice, particularly for farming. I first thought that "broad" and "shallow" were two different choices, but they are probably the same choice. As I understand the proposal, put simply, it is for a basic initial environmental payment to all farmers based on acreage. That is the lowest level of environmental support that would be given, but additional payments could be made if there were specific schemes, such as the present stewardship scheme.

The problem with the stewardship scheme is that it is almost as hard to get into as it is to get into Parliament. I believe that only 14 per cent. of farmers are members of the scheme. Its administration is by its nature very costly, so I am not certain that it always delivers rapidly the exact results that we want. We have all been to farms in our own divisions and seen the remarkable conservation that takes place. It happens not because there is a conscious attempt to conserve, but because farming has always been done that way.

I recently went to a very small farm on the edge of my division where there are splendid mixed oak and small-leaf lime woods. I asked the farmer whether he got any financial support to keep the woods in that condition, and he said, "No, they've always been there. We don't cut them down or plough them up. We keep them." I told him that he could go into preservation and he said that he was thinking of doing so. We should reward farmers who have, for generations, preserved the most attractive aspects of the countryside, rather than paying those who have been less conservation-minded in the past to introduce new schemes.

I shall not delay the Chamber for too long, but I saw a particular danger in the remark of the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk about breaking up large farms and using contractors. "Contractor" reveals nothing about the qualities of the man himself; he has no interest whatsoever in conservation in the area that he is contracted to farm. He is paid to carry out a particular function; he may be sorry if he ploughs up a rare plant or destroys the nest of a ground-nesting bird, but his position is entirely different from that of the resident or tenant farmer. We need to devise a scheme, perhaps based on the Curry report—a good light for the future—which ensures that money going into agriculture goes to the farm. That would enable farming to remain a vital industry in this country and, at the same time, ensure that we gain benefits from genuine conservation and environmental improvement.

Set-aside initially meant leaving fields fallow in mediaeval times, but many such fields are an abomination today and serve no useful conservation purpose. The set-aside scheme should be based on Curry's recommendations, which would need quite a lot of money. However, subsidies would not be taken away but redirected to where they are needed. All farmers should be eligible, not just those who farm in picturesque locations.

11.41 am

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon): Farming incomes in Wales are derived mainly from milk, beef and sheep, which comprise 87 per cent. of the gross output of Welsh agriculture, and are clearly under pressure. Farmers in Wales seek to diversify, but as we saw in the foot and mouth crisis, diversifying into tourism can be of limited value. Farming incomes are crucial to the rural economy, so their decline is a disaster, not only for farmers but for agricultural communities as a whole. Those incomes are low, whatever certain newspapers and hon. Members say. The National Assembly for Wales' forecast for net farm incomes in 2001–02 in Wales is £5,300, not more than £8,000 as quoted earlier; that is £5,300 for working hard all hours.

Wales experiences out-migration, made worse in many rural areas by its crushing effect on the vitality of the Welsh language. We must foster and develop new and traditional agricultural skills, but young people, the carriers of those skills for future generations, are leaving the country in their thousands, pulled away by the lure of the city and pushed away by the low returns from persevering with farming that they see everywhere. They are also pushed away by the growth in the size of holdings and the resulting difficulty in getting started.

I want to raise an issue that is not always prominent in discussions of the future funding of farming—the lessons to be learned from farming in developing countries. Yesterday, I had the inspiring experience of attending the launch of the Christian Aid campaign, "Listen to Africa"; please forgive the obvious plug, Mr. Taylor, but this is Christian Aid week. Christian Aid has produced a document called "Listen to Africa" which I commend to all hon. Members. I shall quote a few points from a section engagingly headed "The Blair plan for tackling poverty", which states that the Prime Minister

"called for more open markets in Europe and North America to help tackle poverty by allowing in more products from poor countries such as Ghana. He also criticised farming subsidies paid by rich nations to their own farmers. These subsidies total £230 billion annually—more than the GDP of the whole of the African continent . . . In March 2002, Christian Aid put the Prime Minister's theories to the test, during a fact-finding trip".

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Americans are introducing a Bill to give an extra £123 billion to just under 2 million American farmers in the next 10 years?

Hywel Williams: The hon. Gentleman makes a telling point, to which I shall return later.

As I was saying, Christian Aid put the Prime Minister's theories to the test. Its report states:

"The clear and overwhelming message from those working to combat poverty in the north—and from poor people themselves—is that access to markets in rich countries alone will not help."

Christian Aid says that the benefits of globalisation are dubious, which must strike a chord with farmers and consumers in Wales and the United Kingdom, and perhaps also with the Minister, in his heart of hearts. The picture is not simple. Developing countries can benefit from certain types of trade. Ghana, for example, benefits from trade in pineapples and organic bananas, but I suspect that there are few banana or pineapple plantations on the wind and rain-swept uplands of my constituency in Eryri. Christian Aid estimates that the more open markets in the rich world would benefit the 49 poorest countries to the tune of only £1.5 billion. I therefore plead for less piety from people pushing the panacea of open trade.

[Hywel Williams]

In response to the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. Liddell-Grainger), I shall quote the Christian Aid report, which states:

"35 to 40 per cent. of Ghana's imported rice comes from the USA. If the new US Farm Bill is passed, the USA will pay US$171 billion agricultural subsidies to its farmers."

Rice farmers alone could benefit from more than $8 billion, a sum greater than Ghana's gross domestic product. Farmers struggling to survive in Wales and the UK, including hill farmers and dairy men whose incomes have tumbled disastrously, have much in common with people in other countries threatened by globalisation. The villain of the piece is not to be found in the developing world, where people are prevented from subsidising their agricultural production, but elsewhere where people can afford to ignore the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

In conclusion, there is no need to be too pessimistic. Farmers are enterprising and adaptable, but Welsh agriculture is subsidy-dependent as a result of our geography, climate and topography. The National Assembly for Wales estimates that for every 1 per cent. reduction in direct farm subsidy, farm incomes are reduced by 1.5 per cent. I am grateful to the Farmers Union of Wales for drawing that fact to my attention. Insufficient consideration has been given to the effects of cuts in general farm subsidy on farm incomes in the build-up to the CAP mid-term review. The Minister should realise that the modulation framework adopted by the UK is clearly detrimental to the future of the family farm structure in Wales.

11.47 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I have taken careful note of your remarks, Mr. Taylor, and shall try to speak for about five minutes to give other Members an opportunity to contribute. I shall therefore make only two points.

I shall start by looking, like other hon. Members, at the background to the current crisis, the extent of which is suggested by the fact that the income of British agriculture is some £2 billion below break-even point. The crisis has three obvious causes: the value of the pound; overproduction across the developed world, resulting in low prices for the past three or four years; and, in our own case, although we are not unique, the number of animal disease breakdowns and their implied costs.

I shall address the reform of the common agricultural policy and an issue that the Select Committee on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs tried to tease out last week. If we are going to subsidise the industry, we need to consider what we mean by public policy, which is the key to understanding what may make this industry different from others. If it is different, we need to identify what we need to support and what we do not.

I shall make some provocative remarks about the CAP. While the Curry report is interesting, it is minimalist. It only identifies where we are and outlines the need to inch along to make changes, subject to our membership of the CAP, our obligations to the WTO and so on. The CAP doubtless served a purpose and had three aims: to increase production to ensure food security; to support farm incomes; and to provide affordable and accessible food for the population of western Europe. Only the third of those aims can remotely be seen as being achieved. There are those of us who believe that because food poverty remains a problem in western Europe, as it does in the rest of the world, even the third aim has not been fully achieved. In recent times the other two aims of the CAP have resulted in unmitigated disaster. There has been massive over-production, which is unnecessary and undesirable, and farm incomes have been at rock bottom. One wonders how anyone could design such a scheme, whose aims are mutually incompatible. Clearly, we must get away from the current design.

Subsidies to support production have five undesirable consequences. First, they give the wrong market signals. There is much evidence to suggest that because of the way in which the food chain has operated, subsidies give farmers the wrong message and make it easy for the all-powerful supermarkets to get what they want.

Secondly, the subsidy regime is anti-co-operative. There is little evidence in farming of the co-operation that exists in other parts of the economy. I know that co-operatives are stronger in other parts of Europe—as a Co-operative Member, I will always stress that. We need to understand that the co-operative system has not worked in this country, and I attribute that largely to the operation of the subsidy regime.

Thirdly, subsidies are often paid to the wrong people. They go to some of the richest farmers in this country, who could endure market strictures, and to people who farm as a hobby. I do not intend to be pejorative. It is a myth that we have fewer farmers, if we define farmers according to the definition currently used by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but there are people who come on to the land and receive subsidy without adding to the food chain. They may have a bit of land and a few animals, but it is wrong that they should receive subsidies, while people who desperately need help to remain in farming do not receive sufficient support.

The fourth undesirable outcome of the subsidy regime is fraud. I shall be careful what I say, in view of my recent remarks. However, no one can pretend that the CAP has not led to excessive fraud. Fifthly, as the hon. Members for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams) and for Bridgwater (Mr. Liddell-Grainger) pointed out, the subsidy regime gives the Americans all the justification that they need for offering billions of dollars to support their farmers. They say, "It's all very well being lectured by the Europeans, but they are worse than we are." That is unacceptable.

We should identify those whom we need to support in the countryside, why we need to support them and how we will do it. I am not against environmental payments, but we should not see that as the only answer. Other speakers have made that point clearly. We should support certain types of farmers, whether Welsh hill farmers or tenant farmers. I have a long history of speaking in this place on behalf of tenant farmers. If those are the people whom we need to support, let us support them and let us be open about it. Let us give them a decent standard of living so that they can farm properly.

There are other farmers who can access the market satisfactorily, and they should be encouraged to do so and to build co-operative relationships with the processors and with other producers so that they can take on the supermarkets. That is much more radical than Curry's conclusions. We need to reform the CAP. We should give our partners in Europe an ultimatum: either we reform the CAP or we repatriate much of the money going into that basket. Finally, our public policy in regard to agriculture needs to be much more sensible and much more creative than it is.

11.54 am

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon): If the Government truly intend to move on in their relations with the farming community, they need to regain some of the confidence that they have lost among that community. On reflection, I believe—and this view is almost universally shared in the west country—that it was a mistake on the part of the Secretary of State to dismiss rather haughtily the findings of Professor Mercer's investigation of the foot and mouth outbreak in Devon. There are lessons to be learned by all those involved in farming and tourism. That was a missed opportunity.

The mistrust is further exacerbated by the recent extraordinary idea contained in the statutory instrument on animal health, which many of us see as giving the Government increased powers to enter property and slaughter animals without their owner's consent. No doubt the Minister will deal with that in his concluding remarks.

No discussion of farming and the funding of farming can take place without reference to enlargement and the common agricultural policy. We seem to be moving towards a consensus that we need to deal with that sooner rather than later. There is much of interest in the Curry report, particularly its talk of modulation. However, there are two aspects of farming in this country that need to be considered: how existing farms are to survive, and how they are to prosper in the future.

Talk of second pillars and agri-environment schemes is appropriate in some areas, and I concede that such schemes have a large role to play, but environmentally sensitive areas and the countryside stewardship schemes apply to only a limited number of farmers. Currently, only 14 per cent. of farmers in England are involved in such schemes.

For the dairy farmers of Devon the immediate problem is nothing to do with agri-enhancing schemes of one sort or another; it is simply farmgate prices. Many milk farms are going out of business each week. The price of milk is at an almost historic low—farmers are getting about 15p per litre, but that is a premium price. By the time they have given a further halfpenny per litre towards a milk scan and another halfpenny towards a cell count, many farmers are receiving 13p per litre. Under planned reforms of the European export market, the price of milk in shops will be slashed and even smaller farms will be forced out of business. That is supported by the Government's own findings.

I turn to the livestock industry in my part of the world and its future. In reply to a question from me in March this year about the impact of the regulations governing animal movements on the viability of livestock markets, the Minister conceded:

"Livestock markets have an important role to play in the marketing of farm animals between the various stages of production and some are developing a broadened range of services to farmers."

The Minister continued:

"We will be considering carefully the recommendations from the Policy Commission on future developments in livestock marketing."—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2002; Vol. 381, c. 480W.]

The problem with the biosecurity regime is that it means, certainly to one of the markets in my part of the world, doubling the number of staff, mainly to keep records of names, addresses and registration numbers of buyers attending, plus a man on the gate to wash the wheels and another on the wash-out. That is at least five extra staff.

There is a further problem, which I ask the Minister to address. While the livestock markets were closed because of foot and mouth, many farmers made alternative arrangements with slaughterhouses throughout the country. We can criticise the supermarkets for the price that they are paying the farmers for milk, but will the Minister also look into the relationship between the slaughterhouses and the supermarkets? Tesco now controls many of the slaughterhouses. It is unwise for farming to be so dependent on the supermarkets. Indeed, the relationship between farming and supermarkets warrants careful investigation. I hope that the Minister will address that in his concluding remarks.

The west country looks the way it does because it has been intensively farmed over the years. That is why people come and spend their holidays with us, and why we have twice as many tourists in the south-west as in Scotland and Wales. Any debate on the future of farming should take those factors into account. We should have spent a little more time this morning discussing how the industry can recover its confidence, not least its confidence in the Government, and how a level playing field can be created, especially in respect of imports.

In conclusion, diversification is to be encouraged, but it must always be an add-on, not a replacement for farming.

11.59 am

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater): I shall highlight one specific point for the Minister's attention, as I do not have much time.

The Exmoor Trust was launched on the back of foot and mouth disease, and has raised £84,000 from the people of Exmoor to be spent on farming. As a keen ornithologist, the Minister is well aware of the problem in Exmoor: the lack of resources put into such areas from the centre. National parks have been mentioned; Exmoor is a national park and it needs resources. When local people are left having to raise money on their own, it is clear that there is something fundamentally wrong with the state of farming in this country. The money should come from the centre outwards.

The latest National Farmers Union figures for farming incomes show a decrease of one third in respect of cereal farmers, virtually no change for hill livestock

[Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger]

farmers and a slight increase in milk incomes, which is evident only because of the distortion caused by foot and mouth. Modulation can work only if we continue to support farmers. Otherwise there will be no farmers to support, as they will not be able to afford to work in farming.

12 noon

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) on securing this debate.

We are discussing the funding of farming, but we often seem to miss the idea that farming, like any other industry, is supposed to make the profits that are fundamental to the continued success of any business. Profits are vital not only in terms of paying wages and so on, but in two other very important ways: continuing a business and ensuring that it expands. If investment is to continue, a return must be gained on what has already been made, and if a business is to become more efficient and expand, further investment will be necessary.

My speech will concentrate on profitability. Although we talk an awful lot about grants, subsidies, diversification and so on, it is fundamentally the profitability of farming that will sustain it in the longer term. Members of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee will remember that Sir Don Curry came to the Committee to speak about his report. Under questioning, he agreed with me that there was sufficient profitability in the total food chain to provide everybody in the farming link with a decent and fair return on their investment and a reward for their labour. When he was pressed a little further, he accepted—I think that he was somewhat embarrassed to do so—that the links in that chain are very differently organised, so not every link is receiving its due profitability.

It is no great coincidence that we see tables demonstrating that farmgate prices have declined over 10 years while consumer prices for products on the shelves have risen in real terms, and that farm incomes have been decimated and supermarket profits have risen. We could consider every individual aspect of the situation, but those broad facts are correct, and they are not coincidental.

There has been talk of creating a food chain centre, and I hope that links and relative profitability in the food chain might be one of the things that such a centre would consider. To my mind, there is a distinct possibility that we shall put in public subsidy at the bottom end of the chain to support our farmers, merely to find that that funding transfers upwards through dividends to the shareholders of large supermarket operations. That cannot be a reason for us to try to support farmers; they need genuine profitability, and to be paid properly for the investment that they have made and rewarded for what they do.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): It is not only a question of the increased profitability of supermarkets; an increase in subsidy has a greater effect in raising land prices and tenants' rents.

Mr. Breed: That is partly true, although the tax system probably has an even greater effect on current land prices, especially through capital gains tax regulations.

I agree with all the previous speakers about the common agricultural policy, but the fact is that it is not within our gift to change it, and major changes are unlikely to be made in next year's mid-term review. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that, but we have seen in the past that such changes are unlikely to be made in that way. We must look for engines of change that are within the Government's gift, and think about what they can do now.

There may be two or three things that the Government can do. First, Sir Don Curry talked about modulation, which was the principal part of his engine for change. We would like the Government to give some indication that DEFRA will fight to ensure that in any comprehensive spending review, moneys will made available to support Sir Don Curry's proposals. If not, the whole modulation exercise will have no effect and make no change whatever.

Mr. Drew: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Breed: I have only five minutes, so I would like to continue.

Secondly, we have revisited the idea of an early retirement scheme on many occasions. The scheme can currently be introduced within the CAP. The Government have resolutely set their face against that proposal, but it is clear that for real change to occur, we need to allow some farmers to retire with dignity, to allow new blood and fresh ideas to come in.

Thirdly, we need to restore profitability to farming, which will encourage those who work in the sector. It is no good introducing an early retirement scheme and hoping that young people will come in and new money will be invested in an industry that has no real chance of achieving profitability in its own right, but is simply a means of attracting grants and subsidies, and perhaps a marginal increase in the value of land assets. Those proposals are within the Government's gift. They do not require radical overhaul of the CAP, and they can be implemented—but political will is required for that to happen.

One sector has not yet been considered in any great depth. We often talk about milk, beef, sheep and so on, but I want to talk about the egg industry. I must declare a constituency interest, as a very large egg producer is based in my area. Those in the industry have to take some very clear investment decisions, as it still faces considerable uncertainty about the future of conventional egg laying, especially in relation to the cages that will be permitted under current EU legislation until January 2012. Thereafter, the so-called enriched cages, containing a nest box, perch and so on, will be required.

It is vital that UK egg producers be given clear assurances about the availability of each production system, to allow timely investment decisions to be made. Such decisions cannot be made one year before the regulations take effect. Farming is a long-term business that needs clear guidance. The farm animal welfare regulations that will implement the EU directive will be introduced at some stage.

Mr. Bill Wiggin (Leominster): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Breed: I am sorry, but I really do not have much time if the Conservative spokesman, too, is to speak.

The costs for the egg industry will be heavy, at a time when it will find them extremely difficult to afford and even to plan for, especially as market access for third country eggs is set to increase as a result of Doha. The egg industry is important, but is not subsidised and has made enormous investments, not least in improving health following salmonella, including the introduction of the little lion displayed on its products and so on. The industry is still competing, but it needs a steer from Government on their proposals.

I recognise that the Minister will be short of time, but I should like to ask a few questions. If he cannot respond, may I implore him to write to me? I hope that he will be able to do so. First, will the Government clearly support the Curry report by seeking the cash that is needed from the Treasury in the comprehensive spending review? Will they reconsider the potential for introducing an early retirement scheme to provide an engine of change?

As for the egg industry, will the Minister give some categorical assurances that if the EU directive is to be implemented, it will be introduced without any amendment so that it is evenly applied throughout the whole EU? We must get away from thinking that we can do things better, and that we should try to lead Europe on such matters while at the same time sacrificing the industry that we are trying to support.

Will the Minister also ensure that there is proper consultation with the industry on the future of enriched cages? The industry needs to understand the Government's thinking on that issue, as big investment plans are being held in abeyance. If the industry cannot implement those plans in a timely fashion and get the money together, it too will be threatened by further imports, and we will see another part of UK agriculture begin to wither.

12 9 pm

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) on securing the debate and on the extremely thoughtful and constructive way in which he introduced it.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that British agriculture is at something of a turning point. Successive crises concerning animal disease and the severe and prolonged recession in all sectors have led many people in farming to wonder whether there is a future in farming enterprises—not only for them, but for their children and grandchildren. That is happening at a time when there are major international pressures on the United Kingdom to change the system of support that we have applied until now.

It is important to bear in mind the dire state of farming. According to evidence recently given to the Select Committee on Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs by the Institute of Agricultural Management, total income from farming in this country is now less than the combined value of arable and livestock direct payments. So whenever we debate in Parliament transferring money away from direct payments into environmental payment schemes or other alternatives, we are talking about transferring money away from businesses that in most cases do not have any financial cushion left to secure themselves against the risk of such changes resulting from Government policy.

It is vital to keep at the forefront of our minds the fact that farming is essentially a business, and that we should try to secure the conditions whereby it can again become profitable. I hope that the Minister will be able to assure us that the Government will accord the Curry report recommendations that propose ways of making farming not only sustainable but profitable the same degree of importance and urgency as the parts of the report that deal with changes to support schemes and a shift towards environmental payments.

International pressures have reinforced the domestic crisis in farming, causing people to reflect on the future. I should be interested to hear the Government's view on whether recent developments in the United States are likely to make a difference to the World Trade Organisation pressures on us. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. Liddell-Grainger) said, the proposed massive increase in subsidy for United States farmers would give them considerably more subsidy per head than farmers in the European Union. That must have an impact on the future of international negotiations.

I have a similar question about the scale of the impact of the forthcoming enlargement of the EU. As soon as applicant countries become full members they will become entitled to direct payments. Will the delay in effecting enlargement mean, as some have suggested, that there is more scope under the current budgetary ceilings than had been previously assumed for those payments to be made without bankrupting the whole common agricultural policy—at least not in the immediate term?

I shall now move on to the question at the centre both of the debate and of the Curry report—the proposal to switch from direct payments to farmers to a system based on environmental support. Do the Government think that modulation is the best method? The debate centres on that idea at the moment, but even in the period of less than a week for which I have held my current Front-Bench responsibilities, I have become aware of farmers who question it. They suggest that cross-compliance, which means making direct payments conditional upon environmental outcomes, might be a better way of approaching the subject.

Modulation is just a word—a piece of jargon—that could be applied in several different ways. Do the Government expect the Commission to propose a compulsory scheme of modulation throughout the European Union? If so, do they expect such a scheme to be based on the United Kingdom model of a flat-rate system or the French model, in which there is a different scale depending on the type of farm involved? That decision will have a considerable impact on certain agricultural sectors, especially the arable sector.

Although the Curry report is a good read and its proposals are stimulating, it has one serious flaw: it provides no detailed analysis of the costs of its recommendations either for farmers or for taxpayers. As regards farmers, Sir Don Curry told the Select Committee that there would be very few losers by his proposals, but he did not produce any sectoral analysis of how those proposals would affect different parts of agriculture.

Given that the Government have had four months to reflect on the Curry report, they should have been able to conduct that type of analysis themselves by now.

[Mr. David Lidington]

I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will shortly issue the detailed analysis that is essential if Parliament and the agricultural industry are to be able to make an informed assessment of proposals made by the Commission or the Department. An obvious question to ask is whether it is true that sectors such as pigs, poultry and horticulture, which do not receive direct payments, will be eligible for the proposed broad and shallow environmental payments scheme. If so, the money will be spread more thinly among the farmers from whom the direct payments will have been taken away.

There are similar questions about the impact of the modulation proposals on taxpayers. Curry suggested a total figure of about £0.5 billion, but he admitted in evidence to the Select Committee that that was a starting point—a ballpark figure—and that factors such as extra checks for imported meat would probably necessitate more Government expenditure on top of that. It is difficult to assess the impact of proposals for environmental payments without knowing whether the Government are prepared to provide the match funding that Sir Don Curry proposed. He argued that without that match funding, the shift to 10 per cent., or even 20 per cent., modulation would not be a practical option.

I referred in my opening remarks to the need for us all to remember the fundamental importance of seeing farms as businesses, and that we should see it as our duty to do whatever we can to restore British agriculture to profitability. That may necessitate positive action and initiatives by the Department. It also means that the Department must reflect, pause, hesitate and cease to impose additional costs on agriculture, especially at a time when farmers have no spare cash with which to meet those extra regulatory burdens. The implementation of the nitrates directive will impose enormous costs on British farmers. The Government are floating ideas about disease insurance, which the Curry report said was likely to be prohibitively expensive for agriculture unless controls on illegal imports—a clear responsibility of the Government—are stepped up considerably.

I hope that the Government will take seriously the Curry proposal that the Department should undertake an annual assessment of the regulatory burden that it is imposing on British agriculture. That exercise would be a salutary discipline, and I hope that it would be followed by swift action to reduce that regulatory burden and the costs for our farmers.

12.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) on securing the debate and on his thoughtful and comprehensive speech, which was appreciated by hon. Members from all parties. It dealt with serious and complex issues surrounding the future funding of farming in this country. I welcome the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) to his new responsibilities. If he is shadowing my portfolio, I expect to see him regularly at Adjournment debates and in Standing Committees on statutory instruments. I am sure that we shall exchange views regularly.

In the time available, I shall try to deal with some of the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Sherwood, for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) and for Stroud (Mr. Drew), the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), and the hon. Members for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams), for East Devon (Mr. Swire), for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), for Bridgwater (Mr. Liddell-Grainger) and for Aylesbury.

I concede that in this country, there is a consensus for change in the operation of the common agricultural policy. That encompasses farming, countryside, environmental and, indeed, political organisations. How do we achieve that change? The Food and Farming Commission report has been published, fulfilling a manifesto commitment. It was a good thoughtful report that identified many of the problems in the sector. The Government acknowledge that agriculture is suffering from undoubted difficulties, but many of them are not new. Structural problems have existed in the industry for many years, and we need to tackle them.

I was especially struck by a comment in the Curry report about the commission's identification of what it terms a "disengagement" of agriculture from the market and from consumers. There is a need to re-engage.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Morley: I am normally happy to give way, but I have only nine minutes to answer all the questions and my time is therefore limited. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman.

Part of re-engagement is the move away from production subsidies, which have distorted the market so greatly. My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood wanted a clear time scale. The milestones in our approach include several regional meetings; last week I attended the Epsom meeting for the south-east of England. Their purpose is to get some feedback from stakeholders about the Curry report. We are also working hard on preparing the shape of a broad and shallow scheme, and considering its operation.

The recommendations entail significant financial implications. The match costs of modulation alone are £275 million and we have to make the case for the resultant benefits for the industry and the wider community. The spending review 2002 does that. Through consultation and the spending review, we expect to be in a position to make announcements about the way forward by the autumn. That is the road map for dealing with the proposals.

We take the proposals seriously. They are important and we can get on with several of them straight away. For example, we have set up the organic action plan, and, as I said, work on the broad and shallow scheme is under way. The nature of modulation and the whole farm approach are being considered now.

I greatly appreciate the interest of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. Its involvement has been constructive and thoughtful. I have always had a high regard for it, both in opposition and in government. Its findings help shape and guide Government policy and thinking and I look forward to its reports on the matters that we are discussing.

I appreciate the points about total income from farming, but we need to be careful about the presentation of some of the statistics, and that includes current figures. According to our figures, total income from farming increased by 11 per cent. last year. We must be careful about interpretation. For example, the average subsidy for a livestock farm is approximately £30,000 a year, but after payment to the farmer and the family, it produces a net farm income of about £8,000. Such poor returns on that sort of subsidy clearly show that there is a problem with the system.

Large subsidies do not necessarily help the sector. In many ways, they distort the market and do not help farmers to get a return on their income. That applies to the milk sector among others. There are several reasons for low milk prices, but intervention sets a floor in the market that is not always helpful. There were predictions of a big drop in milk output after foot and mouth disease, but that did not happen. Production increased, and one of the problems with price is caused by supply and demand. That should even out, but I acknowledge the current pressures on the milk sector.

Let me deal with some of the questions about the shape of farming and change. There has been a long-term trend of consolidation into bigger agricultural units. Despite an overall decline in the number of farms, bigger farms have increased. It is difficult to measure some recent trends, but I shall give the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk my views. I believe that small farms are holding on and may even be increasing. That is partly because people with other forms of income are prepared to buy smallholdings. They do not therefore rely on a small farm for their total income.

Newcomers in the sector often have the freedom to innovate and show great enterprise. I have seen some good examples of that. For example, a person with a horticultural holding, which was not especially small, was voted horticulturist of the year. His background was not in farming but in the music industry. He decided that he wanted to go into farming and he has been innovative and successful.

There is a trend whereby medium-sized farms come together to co-operate and reduce their margins. That is all to the good because there is a need for greater co-operation, which we want to encourage. The Curry report acknowledged that. There is also growth in contract management, although it is difficult to specify its scale.

Hon. Members mentioned globalisation. There are pressures on our producers and their standards. Quality assurance schemes, marketing and consumer education have a strong role to play. Educating consumers about what they are paying for when they support British producers—such as animal welfare, countryside management and a range of attendant benefits—is valuable. We can do more about that, as the Curry report acknowledged.

The global market is a fact of life. It is constantly distorted, and I believe that the American announcement on subsidies is most unhelpful. It is an example of the Americans saying one thing and doing another about the free market and world trade. Those matters must be resolved in talks in the World Trade Organisation. Doha had a positive outcome because it paved the way for the sort of framework that we support.

As the hon. Member for Caernarfon said, there are international implications because subsidies in rich countries cause distortions in developing countries. The problem with the EU and other countries is that surpluses in the market depress not only our prices but those of the international market. That brings down world prices even further. It must stop, and most people recognise that.

The hon. Member for Bridgwater made a succinct intervention. I support the work of community groups, such as the Exmoor Trust, that come together. There is a range of possible support, not only from DEFRA but from the Countryside Agency and national parks. I hope that they will explore all the options.

I stress to the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall the fact that there are food chain initiatives, and I agree that the industry must engage more downstream. The laying hens directive will be tabled in full and unaltered. There is a need for discussion and engagement with the industry about, for example, enriched cages. However, the directive will be tabled unchanged. Any discussion about change will entail a full public consultation and the industry will have a chance to participate in it.

I hope that I have dealt with many of the main points. We have considered an important subject and we respect the work of the Curry commission, which points the way forward. There is much work to be done in the mid-term review of the CAP, and we are working on that and on the review of the agri-environment schemes. This is an exciting and challenging time for agriculture, and we intend to move forward through engaging with the industry and with other partners.

Crime (South Somerset)

12.30 pm

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): I am delighted to have an opportunity to raise an issue of the greatest importance to my constituents. I am glad that the Minister is present—as is my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), with whom I share the South Somerset district council boundary.

Although I am focusing on a restricted area, and only on crime, I expect we shall find that many of the issues that arise are common to areas well beyond not just South Somerset but Avon and Somerset. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome will speak about some of those issues, as well as the local issues.

My main reason for initiating the debate is the startling rise in the Somerset and South Somerset crime statistics that has taken place over the past year. In Avon and Somerset as a whole, crime has increased by more than 19 per cent. There have been even larger increases in particular categories: burglary from dwellings has risen by 22.5 per cent., robbery by some 63 per cent., and thefts from motor vehicles by 22.2 per cent.

The increase in crime has occurred not just in the traditional problem areas in Avon and Somerset such as Bristol, but in more rural parts such as the South Somerset district council area, the constituency of Yeovil and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome. Over the past year crime has risen by 29.6 per cent. in Chard—an astonishing figure—and by 33 to 34 per cent. in the sector covering Chard, in the west of my constituency. Those are dramatic increases, which must concern the Minister as well as all who live in that part of the country.

Much of the crime has fallen into economically related categories—for instance, car theft, burglary and robbery. There is also a significant amount of retail crime, and a strong feeling that the Government are not doing enough to deal with it in all parts of the country.

What can have happened over one year to bring about such dramatic increases? It is difficult to believe that criminals have become that much more effective, or the police that much more ineffective, during a single year. Senior local police officers to whom I have spoken in the past week tell me that there are two principal reasons for the increases in South Somerset and throughout Avon and Somerset. Their first and main worry is the increase in the amount of drugs entering the area and, indeed, the country—especially crack cocaine, which is arriving in large quantities from countries such as Jamaica. It is expensive and highly addictive, and seems to be increasing the amount of crime that is necessary to fund a habit in which more and more people are becoming involved.

The second problem must be of great concern to Ministers, and should be taken into account in the making of policy on crime. Over the past year there has been a shift to what local police describe as an ethical reporting approach, which means that more crime is now being recorded. That may be the reason for the apparent extraordinary increases in some economically related crimes such as vehicle interference and burglary from non-dwellings, which in the past might have been reported to police but not recorded as crime statistics.

That might, in a sense, make us feel more relaxed about the increase in crime. The police consider that about 10 per cent. of the 20 or 30 per cent. increase in parts of Avon and Somerset may be due to the changes in reporting practice. If the police are now able to present the full picture rather than the limited picture we saw before, however, we have reason to think about the crime levels and about what our response should be.

I want to say something about the concerns raised by the police, and how we should deal with them. The police say that drugs, particularly crack cocaine, are the most important issue for them. The Minister will have seen recent articles in national newspapers, including one that appeared in *The Mirror* about a week ago reporting the activities of the customs and immigration services in respect of flights from Jamaica. Recently two Air Jamaica planes were stopped and thoroughly searched as they arrived in the United Kingdom, and 27 of the 440 passengers were found to be carrying drugs. A large number were turned away because they had criminal records, or were travelling with false papers. The customs and immigration services are clearly overwhelmed by the sheer number of people who are trying to bring drugs into the country illegally, often for extremely large rewards.

The local police say that, although many of the drugs are coming into the London airports, they are rapidly spreading to areas such as Bristol, and thence to smaller market towns such as Yeovil, Chard and towns with even smaller populations. The police say that the Government should take tougher action, and give the customs and immigration services more resources.

Throughout Avon and Somerset, and probably throughout the country, we are doing far too little to give those who are involved in drugs-related crime, and who suffer from a serious addiction, a chance to overcome that addiction and return to non-offending behaviour, without relying on such substances as crack and heroin. There is a major addiction problem even in areas such as Yeovil and Chard, outside the main conurbations. I have recently talked to parents and young people with experience of the problem, who say that much more effort should be made to help people conquer their addictions so that we can stop them from offending for ever, rather than simply locking them up in prison at considerable cost.

The Minister will not be surprised when I say that another problem is that of police numbers and investment in the police. No doubt he will say that, as a result of the crime fighting fund, Avon and Somerset is gaining some 200 additional officers over a three-year period; but between 1997 and the beginning of 2001 there was no increase at all in the area, and only in the past six months or so have we seen an increase of 51—51 officers to serve an area containing 1.5 million people. That is one extra officer per 30,000 inhabitants, even if we assume that all the officers are available at any one time. Given that they probably have to spread themselves across five shifts, it is likely that in practice one extra officer per 150,000 inhabitants is available at any one time.

There has also been a dramatic reduction in the number of special constables—some 38 per cent., from 629 to 391, since 1997. No wonder the local police are struggling in terms of resources, and no wonder many of my constituents—and, no doubt, those of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome—feel that they cannot receive an adequate response, not just when they report crimes that can be dealt with over time rather than as emergencies but even when they report emergencies such as burglaries and violent crime in progress.

I welcome the new wardens, two of whom will come to Yeovil. I think they will help to deal with a fair amount of the lower-level crime and antisocial behaviour that take place in many parts of our constituencies. Nevertheless, we still need Government investment in more police numbers throughout the country. The Government should not rest on their laurels after their announcement of a 5,000 increase which, in practice, is not having the dramatic effect across the country for which the Minister may have hoped.

Since 11 September, many of our local police officers have had to be deployed at Bristol airport to deal with the potential terrorist threat. Police locally are concerned that that has taken out of circulation several officers who could have been deployed to bolster police numbers in areas such as Frome, Chard and other parts of South Somerset. The diversion of those resources means that the Government's extra allocation is not resulting in an increase in officer numbers in many parts of South Somerset. Can the Minister say—either today or in writing—whether it is possible to classify Bristol airport, and to discuss with the airport authority its contributing to policing costs, so that police resources can be released for areas such as Chard, Yeovil and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome, in which crime is increasing dramatically?

Before I finish, I want to mention two other issues of great importance, the first of which is sentencing policy. In Yeovil, a hugely disproportionate amount of crime is committed by a very small number of people, who are well known to the police. The introduction of the antisocial behaviour order has been immensely helpful in assisting the police in coming to terms with those individuals, and it has been used well in South Somerset and Somerset as a whole. However, those well-known individuals continue to commit many crimes, and they remain difficult to deal with—even through ASBOs—not least because of the problems associated with getting witnesses to make statements, given the serious intimidation that is often involved.

That draws attention to the need for the police to have the resources to carry out proactive work, so that they can gather the evidence necessary to take decisive action against the small number of people who commit a disproportionate amount of crime. If we can get 10 or 20 people who are well known to the police off the streets of towns such as Yeovil, we will contribute enormously to reducing actual crime and the fear of crime. As Yeovil's MP, I would therefore welcome any action that the Government can take to strengthen ASBOs, and I hope that they will continue to work closely with the police and local authorities to consider what further action can be taken.

A few weeks' ago in the other place, Lord Rooker seemed to step slightly out of line when he commented on the Home Office's frustration with the Chancellor's unwillingness to release funds—given pressures on the Home Office's budget, including police pensions—not just for policing, but for long-term projects to tackle the causes of crime. Nobody in my constituency believes that the fundamental and underlying problems of crime can be tackled solely through measures such as rehabilitation. Assistance must also be given to those who are most at risk of getting involved in the world of crime at a very early age, and I should like the Home Office and the Department for Education and Skills to co-operate in trying to address that problem.

12.43 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) not only on securing this debate, but on putting such a cogent and powerful case on his constituents' behalf. As was said, I represent the other part of South Somerset. I would love to be able to say that the problems that my hon. Friend described do not exist in Somerton and Frome, but that is undoubtedly not true. There has been a substantial increase in crime and the perception of crime in several small towns in my constituency—Somerton, Martock, Bruton, Wincanton—and across South Somerset. Empirically, the figures are undoubtedly less than for a large city, but as regular visits from my constituents have demonstrated, in rural areas such statistics often have a greater effect on perceived security. I have expressed those concerns to Chief Superintendent Shearer in Yeovil, and I am happy to say that he has arranged a meeting with my constituents in the near future.

My hon. Friend's key point concerns police numbers. I, too, congratulate the Government on their determination to increase numbers, but we should be absolutely clear about this. As former chairman, in 1996, of the Avon and Somerset police authority, I know that police numbers in Avon and Somerset have only just returned to their 1996 level. There has been no net increase. The problem for rural areas is that cities inevitably act as a magnet for resources, because they are where most crimes are committed. Chief constables have no choice in the matter—they must deploy constables to areas where crime levels are greatest. As a result, rural areas are denuded of police officers, and patrol activity, which is sometimes regarded as marginal but which I consider crucial, is reduced.

My plea to the Minister is to recognise that we still need extra police officers. I take a very old-fashioned view on this matter. I believe that extra police officers are an effective deterrent against crime; they certainly encourage a feeling of well-being among the population. We need extra resources—civilian support and equipment—to assist those officers, and a criminal justice system that complements the police force's efforts without distancing itself from the daily problems of our constituents. A current example of such distancing is the closure of local magistrates courts.

Has the Minister given further consideration to the case—for which I have argued with his predecessors for many years—for retained police officers in rural areas, which would assist in the recruitment of extra police officers? They are analogous to the retained firefighters

[Mr. David Heath]

who do such a good job in Somerset and elsewhere. The Home Office seemed to be considering the idea, but we have heard little about it lately. Is the Home Office still actively considering it?

12.47 pm

The Minister for Criminal Justice, Sentencing and Law Reform (Mr. Keith Bradley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) on securing this debate. Nothing is more important to all our communities than policing, crime levels and confidence in the criminal justice system in general. The hon. Gentleman expressed the concerns of his constituents extremely well, and I hope in the brief time available to address some of the issues raised by him and by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). If there are any points that I cannot consider properly today, I shall write to the hon. Member for Yeovil giving further explanation.

Modernising the criminal justice system, to ensure that the end-to-end process has the confidence of local communities and the public, is absolutely essential. We should not view parts of that system in isolation. The public, who are often the victims and witnesses of crime, have to understand the entire process—from detection, to court, to sentencing. They must be kept informed of that process and be supported through it, so that they can participate in it. That way, we can restore confidence in the criminal justice system and ensure that we bring more offenders to justice.

On sentencing, I agree with the hon. Member for Yeovil that a relatively small number of persistent offenders are responsible for the overwhelming amount of crime in our communities. The Government intend to target them and to bring them to justice. They have a disproportionate impact on our local communities, not only through crime itself, but through the fear of crime that they engender in local people. If we can bring more persistent offenders to justice, the impact on the number of offences committed will be dramatic.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's offer of clear support for antisocial behaviour orders, the more effective and efficient use of which the House is currently considering. I know from the experience of my own Manchester constituency that the well-practised implementation of an antisocial behaviour order by the various agencies involved can have a dramatic impact on a community. Its effects can range much wider than just the individual family involved or the street where it is targeted, and it can prove much more beneficial than many other current measures.

I take the point that we have to look more closely at how we can stop people getting into crime in the first place. Interventions at the earliest possible stage, with families and schools—and using our communities to support families and young people—are the way to bear down on that issue and that has to be a priority.

I turn to some of the specific points raised by the hon. Member for Yeovil. The first is the issue of Bristol airport and drugs. According to the chief inspector of North Somerset police, one sergeant and nine police officers were seconded to Bristol Airport Authority from September 2001. From 31 March 2002, that number was reduced to one sergeant and five police officers, who will stay until the end of June 2002 when their position will be reviewed.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, Bristol airport is a non-designated airport, so it is not obliged to pay for any policing arrangements but only for its own security. It is apparently reluctant to pay for policing, as it will have to pass on the costs to the airline industry. The Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and the Association of Chief Police Officers are currently in negotiations with UK airport authorities about policing. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will wish to link into those discussions to see what impact they will have on Bristol airport.

Mr. Laws: Can the Minister say a little more about the designation criteria? What prospects are there for a change in the designation of Bristol so that the policing costs fall on the airport and air travellers—with some reason, perhaps—rather than on the communities in Avon and Somerset?

Mr. Bradley: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the designation of airports is not in the direct remit of the Home Office. On the hon. Gentleman's behalf, I shall refer that query to the relevant Minister at the DTLR and ensure that he or she contacts him, so that the discussions on that issue may be progressed on behalf of his constituents.

I fully support the concerns expressed by the hon. Gentleman about the amount of trafficking in drugs through our airports. We have to be more diligent on that point, and as a Manchester MP I am well aware of the problem because of my local airport. However, I am told by officials at Customs and Excise that there is no intelligence to indicate that Bristol airport is a significant entry point for class A drugs into the UK. Several cash detections have been made in excess of £10,000. However, after investigation, none of those were found to be drug-related.

Mr. Laws: I should have clarified the point in my speech, but the local police do not suggest that drugs are coming directly into Bristol airport. They are coming into other major national airports and being moved to the south-west. In the article last week in *The Mirror* that recounted the story about two planes from Jamaica being prevented from entering the country, it was found that of 11 passengers carrying cocaine in their bodies—acting as "mules"—six had destinations in Bristol, even though they were caught in London.

Mr. Bradley: I understood the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, but I wished to give him some assurance that the information I have been given is that direct entry through Bristol airport is not the problem. I entirely accept that once drugs have been landed in this country they can be moved anywhere, including to his area. We need a more robust system in place to track those movements and to alleviate the problem.

Customs and Excise drug dogs are regularly deployed at Bristol airport to screen passengers and their baggage, and are supported by an anti-smuggling team who arrive unannounced and in sufficient numbers to conduct in-depth checks almost every day. I hope that the hon. Gentleman appreciates the level of security provided in that respect.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned crime levels in Avon and Somerset. I accept that numbers for particular offences have risen, but I hope that he will accept that overall levels of crime in Avon and Somerset have fallen by 13 per cent. since 1997. I accept that the area has seen an increase in street crime—robbery and muggings. In response, the Government have launched the street crime initiative to target particular problems in hotspot areas. Avon and Somerset is one of the 10 areas in which that initiative has been launched.

The initiative builds new measures on top of plans that were already in progress to ensure co-ordinated action across all parts of Government to bring street robbers to swift and effective justice. As the hon. Gentleman will know, street crime is a predominantly urban phenomenon and is concentrated in relatively small areas within force areas. While Avon and Somerset are part of the drive to tackle street crime, it should be noted that the levels of robbery and street crime in the area of Yeovil and South Somerset are relatively low.

Mr. Laws: While I appreciate that in the past two years crime has fallen in Avon and Somerset, my concern is that in the past year we have seen a dramatic rise of 20 per cent. in Avon and Somerset as a whole, and of 30 per cent. in many areas. Has the Minister carried out any analysis of that increase and does he share the view of the chief constable that it is because of the extraordinary increase in the incidence of crack cocaine across the south-west, as well as reporting changes?

Mr. Bradley: I am aware of the concern about drug-related crime in the area and the Government wish to ensure that young drug users get the help they need. The crucial aspect of the issue is the need to support young people so that they do not get into the drug culture and, subsequently, crime. Working closely with the substance misuse worker on the youth offending team, a new young people's service, "On the Level", provides specialist services for young people experiencing problems with their drug use.

Both hon. Gentleman raised the issue of police numbers. At the end of January this year, Avon and Somerset constabulary had 3,086 officers—92 more than in March 2001. Between March 2000, when numbers were at a low of 2,934, and January 2002, police strength increased by more than 5 per cent., or 152 more officers. Liberal Democrats regularly call for additional resources for more police officers on top of the money that the Government are already putting in through the crime fighting fund, but they also want more teachers and hospital workers. Let us see their sums and whether they add up.

I will write to the hon. Member for Yeovil on the other matters. We have had a brief but worthwhile debate, and I look forward to further debates on the issue in the future.

Gas Leaks (Newton Heath)

1 pm

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): There have been a number of gas leaks and gas explosions in the north-west, the most recent of which happened over the weekend in Nelson. Fortunately, there were no fatalities. I do not want to dwell on the possible causes; however, the fact that explosions happen causes massive concern in local communities.

In November last year there were two significant explosions in Manchester. One, in Tameside, the neighbouring borough to my constituency, led to fatalities. The other occurred in Newton Heath in my constituency. Although it caused massive damage to property, it fortunately inflicted only minor injuries on people.

A second gas leak occurred in Newton Heath some time later. I shall say more about that in a little while, but people in such a small community are bound to be worried that there is something systemically wrong with the provision of gas in urban communities when two gas leaks occur so close together, with one leading to an explosion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Heyes) will speak about events in his constituency, but I shall deal with the explosion in Newton Heath, and draw to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister a number of questions that go to the core of the matter. We need to determine whether the system is operated safely, whether existing procedures are adequate in the event of an emergency, and whether investigations of the causes of a leak are acceptable. The answers to such questions need to be in the public domain.

The Newton Heath explosion happened on a Saturday. Local people have told me that gas could be detected from early morning. Transco found out about the leak only much later in the day—I am not seeking to claim otherwise—but it is certain that the gas had been escaping for a considerable time. The gas build-up was a danger long before the explosion actually happened. If the explosion had happened earlier, instead of loss of property and minor injury there could have been a major human catastrophe, with deaths on a large scale. The area is densely populated, and an explosion big enough to destroy houses is surely big enough to destroy people. The scale of the leak is therefore a matter for concern. I do not know whether Transco can do more in terms of early detection, but there are questions that need to be addressed.

I want to place on record my appreciation of the role of the emergency services. The police and others acted quickly to move people out of the area once the extent of the leak became known. The various statutory services and the local authority ensured that the evacuees were housed overnight. One or two boundary problems aside, the population of the area were treated relatively well, given the extraordinary circumstances.

However, once it had been informed of the leak, Transco took some hours to begin the process of shutting the system down. The system had not been shut down even by the time the explosion took place. I am not competent or expert in these matters so I do not know whether that is in the nature of the system that we

[Mr. Tony Lloyd]

operate, but most people would hold the common-sense view that, once a leak is identified, the necessary safety valves should be turned off and the system closed down in a way that rendered it at least safer. When the gas that had escaped already had dispersed, the system would be safe.

Clearly, that is not what happened in the Newton Heath explosion. Is my hon. Friend the Minister satisfied that Transco had installed the necessary technology? Is the company able to close systems down as quickly as humanly possible?

I accept that, in some circumstances, the process cannot be immediate, but we need to know, beyond peradventure, that the system on that day was being closed down with all possible speed. As I said, it is not clear to me that it was.

The second matter that concerns me has to do with the inquiry that was held into the explosion. I contacted the Health and Safety Executive immediately after the explosion. I was told that the HSE did not play an active role in the leak investigation, but allowed Transco to carry that out.

We know that self-regulation can work in some areas, but we also know—to our cost—that it is not always helpful, especially when official regulators do not put pressure on those who regulate themselves to drive the case for safety hard and efficiently. We have seen that with the railways. Is my hon. Friend the Minister satisfied that it is right and proper that the HSE does not consider a life-threatening explosion such as occurred in my constituency sufficiently important to require that it move in and take over the investigation to guarantee public confidence in the results?

I have seen a copy of the official report. I am grateful to Transco and the HSE for making it available. However, it does not reach a definitive conclusion. As far as I understand it, it says that the pipe that fractured had suffered from corrosion over the years, and from road vibration. Those and other factors led to the pipe cracking, ultimately, with the result that gas escaped.

Worryingly, the report does not suggest that the leak was a one-off accident that occurred to a unique pipe in a unique set of circumstances. People need to be confident that Transco's stock of piping is not riddled with the faults that led to the leak and explosion in my constituency. Much of the piping network was laid at roughly the same time, using contemporary techniques and technology. Does my hon. Friend the Minister believe that a lot of the piping stock has become time-expired? If so, a genuine, broad-based risk exists. If not, we need expert and independent reassurance that we can sleep safely, and that the same problem will not arise again with pipes that lie under roads which carry heavy traffic.

To give the company credit, Transco has paid out small amounts in compensation for the inconvenience caused to people. Such people include those who lost the contents of their freezers when the electricity was shut down and they had to leave their houses. I understand that such compensation was paid out pretty much on the nod.

However, Transco has not yet responded to people whose homes were destroyed in the blast. I understand that it has not accepted responsibility for the explosion. That defies common sense. Mrs. Dennisor and Mrs. Charlesworth resided in homes that were destroyed. Six months on, they are entitled to feel that real progress should have been made with their predicament.

Finally, I wish to turn briefly to the second leak in Newton Heath, which occurred some months after the original explosion. Once again, my constituents were evacuated from their homes and taken to emergency centres. Again, the emergency services and the local authority responded well. Fortunately, there was no explosion as Transco was able to work on the leak and close the system down. Nothing untoward took place, but it is clear that the potential existed for a major gas leak causing major damage.

One of the rumours abroad is that the pipe was supposedly disused and that Transco's own records had it down as no longer carrying a gas supply. I cannot emphasise enough the sense of the bizarre and the human tragedy that could be caused if our urban and other areas contain pipes that are full of gas but are believed to be empty. Those pipes, by definition, would not undergo maintenance or routine repair because they presumably do not exist on the repair and maintenance record books. This is a matter of fundamental importance. If the rumour is wrong, can the official situation be put on the record independently? Can we know what really did take place?

Gas is a necessary part of our lives. No one wants to disinvent the supply system. What we want is a Transco that is commercially successful and technically competent. However, the supply of gas carries with it a price, and that price is made much higher if the technical system and its maintenance are such that we cannot sleep comfortably at night. We must be able to believe that we can sleep without gas explosions becoming a feature of our lives.

I do not know what the pattern of leaks and explosions is and how the recent events tie in with Transco's record over a longer period. Perhaps because my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne and I have recently been exposed—almost literally—to these problems, we have become sensitised. In any event, these important issues must be satisfactorily answered and put in the public domain. Without that, my constituents will continue to believe that they are in peril. I need answers—I need to be able to tell my constituents that they are not at risk and that they live in a safe environment. That has to be done in a way that is transparent and seen to be independent.

1.12 pm

Mr. David Heyes (Ashton-under-Lyne): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on securing a debate on this most important subject and for giving me the opportunity to make a brief contribution.

My hon. Friend's constituency and mine share a border. Many of his constituents in Clayton and Newton Heath have kinship and workplace connections with mine in Droylsden and Failsworth and other parts of my constituency. We share the same accident and emergency services—Greater Manchester fire, police and ambulance—and in the context of today's debate the same gas emergency services from Transco.

The terrible events that my hon. Friend referred to and which took place on 17 November in his constituency were preceded just a few days earlier by a horrific gas explosion and fire just a couple of miles away in my constituency. In that incident, about 300 residents were evacuated from their homes in Cavendish Mill after reporting a smell of gas. After a few hours, Transco engineers declared the building safe and allowed residents back in. Less than an hour later, a massive explosion occurred, as a result of which many residents were made homeless, several were injured and, tragically, one man lost his life.

In the knowledge of this incident, it is easy to understand the heightened sense of alarm and enormous loss of confidence in the gas emergency services felt by my hon. Friend's constituents and, indeed, by many others across Greater Manchester and throughout our region. The explosion in north Lancashire this week will have rekindled that sense of alarm among our constituents.

I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the Health and Safety Executive's investigations into these incidents. Indeed, I understand that the coroner will, this week, receive the final reports of the fire service and the Health and Safety Executive into the Ashton-under-Lyne case, so their findings should soon be in the public domain. However, it is clear that something went terribly wrong to produce the sequence of events that led to the tragedies in Newton Heath and Ashton back in November, and some very serious questions need to be answered.

The Health and Safety Executive says on its website of the gas supply pipes:

"Within 20 or 30 years, parts of the network could, conceivably, reach the end of their reliable mechanical life."

It goes on to say that if that point were reached, a rapid increase might occur in both the rate of failure and the number of incidents, some of which could well involve multiple fatalities. I am sure that many of my hon. Friend's constituents, like mine, feel that that point has been reached already.

The big question is what the regulatory authorities—Ofgem and the Health and Safety Executive—and Transco are doing to deal with the problems and to eliminate the risk. The track record of Transco in particular does not fill me with confidence about its willingness or ability to deal competently with the issue. Obviously, the answer is for substantial investment to go into the replacement of worn-out gas supply pipes and installations. The wrangle over the true cost of funding and the appropriate length of the replacement period goes on between the regulator and Transco but, ultimately, the integrity of the supply and the safety of the public is in the hands of the gas engineers and fitters who install and maintain the pipework.

Five years ago, Transco made 1,000 engineers redundant as part of a cost-saving programme. Now we hear from industry experts—Transco admits that this is true—that it is 1,000 engineers short of the number needed just to maintain the network. The recruitment and training of apprentices has been slashed. The leader of the General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union told the Public Administration Select Committee just a few months ago:

"We now have half of the skilled gas workers in this country going to retire in the next five years with no substantial plans for replacing them".

The time taken to repair gas leaks is on the increase, as my hon. Friend has mentioned. We hear that Transco does not have proper records of its supply system. Subcontractors carry out 60 per cent. of Transco's maintenance work, with serious questions being asked about the standard of some of that work. There are reports of skilled engineers working hours massively in excess of the legal limit just to keep up with the emergency call-out work. It has been claimed that they work 16 hours without a break at weekends and try to snatch a few minutes' sleep in their vans.

Investing in the skills of the work force requires a long-term view, but all the indicators are that Transco is preoccupied with short considerations, aimed at splitting its assets in preparation for yet more sell-offs and fragmentation in the industry and driven by the need to maximise shareholder value at the expense—potentially—of public safety.

One engineer was quoted in the press last year as saying:

"there's a Hatfield waiting to happen in the gas industry".

Another said:

"It takes a bang for people to sit up and listen".

Sadly, we have had our bangs in our part of Greater Manchester. My hon. Friend and I are listening to the concerns of our constituents. However, I am far from convinced that the industry regulators and the powers that be in Transco have really got the message and that we are not on the verge of a collapse of public confidence in the safety of the gas industry even greater than that witnessed in the railway industry.

1.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Dr. Alan Whitehead): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on securing this debate and raising a number of important points of concern. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Heyes) made a number of wider points about gas safety and the future of the gas industry in general. These deserve a clear response, although today my comments will relate specifically to the gas leaks and explosions referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central.

My hon. Friend spoke of the gas incident in his constituency at Crawford street on 17 November. I reaffirm the Government's commitment to ensuring that Transco implements its programme to replace all iron gas mains at risk—that is, within 30 m of property—including those in excess of 12 in in diameter. That programme was recently reviewed and has been accelerated in agreement with the Health and Safety Executive, which will regulate compliance. I hope that the comprehensive information about the incident on 17 November that the HSE and Transco have already made available to my hon. Friend and their offer to meet him has helped an understanding of the cause of the incident and the subsequent action taken by Transco.

My hon. Friend noted that Transco investigated the incident and reported back to the HSE but he is concerned about the adequacy of Transco's response to the gas leak and, indeed, its management of the subsequent evacuation. I reaffirm that the HSE is

[Dr. Alan Whitehead]

satisfied that Transco met its statutory obligations in those areas, although both my hon. Friends raised wider issues about the nature of those obligations.

I am content that, in this case, the HSE acted appropriately in not launching its own immediate investigation into the incident. Under current legislation, Transco has a duty to investigate such incidents and report back to the HSE. On being informed of the incident, Dr. Johnson—the head of the unit with overall responsibility within the HSE for gas pipeline safety—immediately contacted Transco and satisfied himself that it had already taken the action required under the emergency response arrangements: the emergency services were present; the situation was being brought under control; and, importantly, that no further people were at risk.

I also note the reference made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central to the gas leak on 23 March this year in his constituency at Weir Pumps Ltd., Ten Acres lane. I shall also address the issues relating to that incident.

The explosion at Crawford street occurred because of the fracture of a 15 in spun iron main. Mains of that type were introduced after the second world war to transport gas between holders and keep the network in balance—they are much larger than ordinary mains supply pipes. They make up less than 2 per cent. of the total iron mains population of about 116,000 km, and historically they have given rise to very few incidents. However, as there were three similar incidents in the Manchester area in a short space of time—my hon. Friend drew attention to that point—the HSE charged Transco with conducting research to determine the risk from such mains and the priority for their replacement.

Against that background, and in given the specific points that my hon. Friend made today on the incidents in question, I assure him that we view all gas escapes as potentially serious. Transco has risk assessment procedures in place to ensure that resources are targeted at urgent preventive work and to provide an efficient response when serious incidents occur, many of which cannot be foreseen. In this instance, however, the research has specifically charged Transco with examining pipes with a diameter of more than 12 in to determine whether they are of greater concern than the rest of the iron network.

It is important that I reaffirm for my hon. Friend the key details of the incidents, as advised to me by the HSE. The HSE established that Transco logged the first report of a gas escape at 19.42 hours. The HSE has investigated statements that gas escapes were reported earlier but has found no evidence that such a report was made to Transco before 7.42 pm. At that point, a Transco competent person was dispatched to deal with the report, which was classified as an uncontrolled escape. Consistent with the seriousness that Transco views such reports, that competent person arrived at Crawford street 12 minutes later. He then assisted the police with evacuating houses in Crawford street and Briscoe lane. He also called for a distribution team to attend, as he suspected a serious escape from the gas main running down Briscoe lane.

I am satisfied that, in relation to that incident, Transco met its obligations under the Gas Safety (Management) Regulations 1996 to attend an escape as soon as reasonably practicable and to stop it within 12 hours of the first report of the leak. Those actions are necessary to protect both the public and Transco workers.

My hon. Friend referred to the switching off of the gas main. It is certainly true that the police and Transco initially concentrated on the protection of the residents and the houses near the leak, evacuating about 100 people in the initial stages of the incident. Those actions undoubtedly prevented major injury, but I think Transco acknowledges that it could have started to depressurise the gas main more promptly after the escape was reported. As a result of the lessons learned on that occasion, its procedure has been changed.

Depressurising a main is far from simple, however. If the process is not properly managed, the whole connected gas network could be at risk. It took about seven hours to complete the process of reducing the pressure, so it is unlikely that the outcome would have been significantly affected if the reduction had been started earlier.

I shall move on to Transco's investigation of the incident and the HSE's responsibilities. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Gas Safety (Management) Regulations place a duty on Transco to carry out a thorough investigation of the circumstances of an incident and to send a full report to the HSE. The HSE's experience of such reports is that they are open and frank about the facts.

The HSE and I are satisfied that Transco acted promptly in initiating the investigation of the causes of the Crawford street incident and in establishing remedial action, including instructing Advantica Technology to undertake the necessary forensic work. I understand that my hon. Friend has received copies of both the Transco and Advantica reports for his information.

I am also satisfied that the HSE's initial response, on being informed of the Newton Heath incident, and its decision not to launch an immediate investigation were appropriate, taking into account the fact that Transco had taken all the necessary action and that the emergency services were in attendance. In those circumstances, the HSE's actions were consistent with its policy on the investigation of incidents.

The decision not to launch an immediate investigation was based on the duty placed on Transco by the Gas Safety (Management) Regulations to carry out a thorough investigation of the circumstances of the incident and to send a full report to the HSE. Arguably we might want to consider those arrangements, but they are the provisions under the current regulations.

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend suggests that we might want to examine those arrangements. I have no doubts regarding the competence of the consultants who carried out the investigations in relation to Newton Heath. However, the public in general and I in particular would feel much happier if we knew that those who commission such investigations are independent of the operator. The question that must be answered was put by my hon. Friend the Member for

Ashton-under-Lyne: is Transco making an adequate investment in safety, or is it putting commercial pressures ahead of the safe operation of the system? Only an independent regulator can give the public the reassurance that the balance is being properly maintained in the public interest.

Dr. Whitehead: That is an arguable point. The arrangements under the Gas Safety (Management) Regulations are that Transco carries out the investigation and makes a report to the HSE. The history of those arrangements shows that the investigations and the reports are thorough but, as my hon. Friend points out, independent investigation might reinforce public confidence in the process.

The HSE has assured me that it will continue to monitor Transco's implementation of the recommendations in the report on the Newton Heath incident. My hon. Friend may also want to know that two vacant inspector posts dealing with pipeline safety in the north of England have recently been filled through recruitment and transfer, thereby considerably increasing the total number of inspectors.

The HSE will be holding a meeting with Transco on 21 May when progress on the actions will be discussed. I have asked them to update my hon. Friend on the outcome of their meeting.

I cannot comment on the Cavendish Mill incident on 17 November because the HSE is still considering the issue of legal proceedings. An investigation is under way into the Weir Pumps incident on 23 March. I understand that that incident was the result of vandalism. When the report is received, the HSE will review it and consider whether further action is necessary.

I want to talk briefly about Transco's mains replacement programme. As hon. Members will know, the responsibility for maintaining and replacing pipes falls to Transco. Some of the pipes are extremely old, dating back to the Victorian era, but there is an accelerated programme—agreed with the HSE—to replace all iron gas mains located within 30 m of buildings. Within 30 years, 91,000 km of iron mains will be replaced—five years earlier than if the mains had continued to be replaced at the rate that has prevailed since 1977.

The detail is available for everyone to see. The HSE has made a proportionate response to managing the risks presented by iron gas mains. That sends out the message that we understand public concern and will continue to respond appropriately.

I have listened carefully to the points raised by my hon. Friend and recognise his understandable concern for the health and safety of his constituents. I reassure him that the HSE has carefully considered its obligations in respect of the Crawford street incident and has offered to meet him to discuss his concerns. I confirm that the offer remains open.

999 Service (Isle of Wight and Hampshire)

1.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): On 25 April, I took the Red Jet service from Southampton at 7.30 pm and reached home in Cowes at about five minutes to 8. Within minutes the following message appeared on my pager, "News flash on TV. All emergency services on Isle of Wight down because of communications breakdown. Don't know when back up. Just thought I'd let you know." The message was signed by my assiduous assistant who was visiting friends on the mainland. She had seen the reports on television.

My repeated attempts by BT landline and by mobile phone failed to establish communication with my assistant or with my agent, who had also contacted me by pager. Eventually, I turned on the television and saw the caption that advised, "If you need the emergency services, go to a police station." I went to the local police station in Cowes partly to find out exactly what was going on, but it was closed as it usually is in the evening. Indeed, most police stations on the island are closed in the evening, so I used the direct call facility outside the police station to contact the Winchester call centre of the Hampshire constabulary which, as the Minister will know, also covers the Isle of Wight.

The call centre explained to me that Netley, which is the location of the command and control centre, was down but that 999 calls to the police were being routed to the Dorset constabulary and then relayed back by radio to the control room at Netley. I then tried to telephone the local radio station, Isle of Wight Radio, as it is the normal source of information on the island. I tried by mobile, because the telephone box on the street outside the police station was not working, and I was surprised to discover that the problem did not affect the fire or ambulance services on the island. That was my first intimation that what appeared to be a 999 service problem was, in fact, a BT problem.

Although I am sure that the Minister is aware of this, I should explain that the police for the island and for Hampshire share a call centre at Winchester and a control room at Netley. The ambulance service in Hampshire has a control centre at Winchester and on the island at Newport. The fire service has a control centre at Eastleigh, with back-up at Winchester for the mainland. The centre for the island is at Newport. The Coastguard service, which is another important emergency service that I would not like to be omitted from the debate, has its control centre at Lee-on-the-Solent and it covers the island, Hampshire and other parts of the south coast.

I was eventually able to contact my assistant on the mainland by mobile phone and she reported to me that she had spent 35 minutes with the operators trying to establish what was wrong. After that, she called the operators at 9.40 pm and got through to Birmingham. She was then put on to Inverness and then passed to someone purporting to be a manager in the chairman's office who turned out to be a "technical coach"—whatever that might mean—in Birmingham who said that he had, "no up-to-date information". He added that BT had identified a fault in the transmission equipment and that the repair team was at the incident site and would be working around the clock to repair it.

[Mr. Andrew Turner]

He clearly did not know when the system would be back up and the information that he gave had been posted on his system at 6.30 pm, but we received it at 10.19 on the Thursday evening.

My assistant was told that there was no one in Southampton with whom she could communicate. However, at her request, a press officer later called her from Newark. He said that many people on the island were unaffected but, when he was asked why blanket advice to go to a police station if one wanted an emergency service had appeared on the television, he said, "Nobody at BT has said that the emergency service is unavailable." Asked if he was sure of that, he said, "As far as I am aware." He then said that people should try their BT phone and, if that is not working, they should try a mobile. When he was asked where the information to go to a police station had come from, he said possibly the police and emergency services. He said that he would call back with further information.

The press officer called back at about 11.5 pm to say, "There is a problem with the power supply to network installations in Southampton.", so he was asked why there was no back-up. He said, "There is a back-up system but it has not prevented the problems that you are experiencing." He said that sorting out exactly what had gone on would take "weeks rather than hours" and that the service is progressively being brought back up although the situation is not totally resolved." When asked how many people had been affected, he refused to give any answer other than "a lot". At five past midnight, he called to say that all customers were now back on service.

Three clear problems are apparent. First, there was no picture of the problem or of the causes of the problem available not only to me, my assistant or any other member of the public who might have called, but to the press or media locally. I put in a request to BT the following day, but I regret to say that there was no response until this debate appeared on the Order Paper. BT then asked me—I thank Tim O'Sullivan of BT for this—what I wanted to know.

The second problem is that BT did not take responsibility for notifying the public of the breakdown of the 999 service. In response to my request, it replied:

"The emergency services normally inform the public and media of loss of 999—we understand the Police did so on this occasion... Media messages to the public were being given after 20:00 on TV and radio. The BT Press Office was also dealing with media enquiries throughout the evening. The usual liaison with BT prior to any message going out was hampered by the communication problems... This subject will be part of our review of the incident with the emergency services locally."

The third part of the problem is that the back-up system did not work. BT said that

"it is not practical to provide duplicate or alternative facilities and the problem at Southampton is one such case. The strategy used here is to prevent failure as far as is reasonably possible, in this case by 3 methods that have until now been successful: provision of stand-by capacity, battery back-up and the use of alarms. Detailed investigation has shown that a number of crucial components failed at the same time. Although battery back-up did operate and protect against failure of these components for a period, the alarms that are designed to reveal such problems well before the batteries expire were also not operating. In this situation both resilience measures failed at the same time which is highly unusual and unexpected."

It was certainly unexpected.

My hon. Friends the Members for Havant (Mr. Willetts) and for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) have asked me to express their concerns about what happened. Parts of south Wiltshire were also affected, and my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) pointed out:

"South Wiltshire was blacked out . . . there were security implications because of the number and density of military establishments"

in that county. He added:

"Although they run a separate military communications system it is in constant interface with the BT network and when that crashes, there are consequences . . . Secondly, in exactly the area of Central Southern England in which BT failed its customers, there has been the biggest loss of their market share to NTL and other cable system offering telephone services—which with new technology were unaffected. It will be interesting to see how the market moves as a result of BT's failure."

My hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) told me that he was out that evening and that he was unable to use either his mobile phone or his BT landline at home.

There were three problems but, worse still, is the advice that was given. If one lives in rural west Wight—let us say at Brighstone—and one is told by the television not to make 999 calls, the natural next step is to drive to Yarmouth or to Ventnor police station, which are at least a quarter of an hour's drive away. Let us imagine what would happen if one needed an ambulance and one was told that one could not dial 999. The time taken to drive to Ventnor police station would mean that it would be difficult for an ambulance to deal with a life-threatening crisis such as a heart attack.

When I spoke to people at the BBC the following day—in fact, they volunteered to communicate with me as a result of something that I said on Radio Solent—they told me that all the telephone lines were down and that they were visited by a police officer from Southampton who said that there was an emergency on the island and in Hampshire and south Wiltshire and asked for advice to be broadcast from the Netley control centre, on radio and on television. I assume that that advice was broadcast.

As late as 1 May, the chairman of the Hampshire police authority was reported on South teletext as saying that

"questions need to be asked over BT's performance."

South teletext also says:

"A full explanation of the BT failure is yet to be received by the authority."

Assistant Chief Constable Ian Reed, who is responsible for the communications system at Netley, also reported dissatisfaction. I spoke to him earlier today, and he told me that the Hampshire constabulary had arranged separate wiring for the Netley command and control centre, so that messages were brought in and out on two independent systems. One of those systems goes through Oxford; the other through Gloucester, but it is clear that they were both subject to the same breakdown at a single point of failure. That is not acceptable. Hampshire constabulary and the

island's taxpayers have paid for what Assistant Chief Constable Reed calls resilience, but BT has not delivered that resilience.

We have to ask why the BT system failed. Why did the alarm and back-up systems fail? I understand that Assistant Chief Constable Reed has asked Oftel those questions and that it will conduct inquiries into the incident. We also have to ask what might have happened, or what might happen in future. It is very easy to portray the incident as a small millennium-style problem and to say that not many people were injured. Thankfully, not many people were injured, but it is our job to consider what might happen in future.

Assistant Chief Constable Reed is certainly concerned about the loss of radio, mobile and other telephone links and internal network computers through seven out of 11 components of the Southampton Bargate exchange. He says things were kept going simply because of the availability of VHF radio communications. BT intercepted 999 calls, where they could be made, and sent them to Dorchester, and Dorset constabulary relayed them back to Netley via VHF. He asks what would be the implications when the national airwave solution is introduced, because he tells me that that solution relies entirely on BT systems. I am sorry that I did not give the Minister notice of this question earlier, but will he carefully consider the implications of introducing the national airwave solution for the effectiveness of the police communications system?

I asked Assistant Chief Constable Reed what arrangements were made to deploy additional police officers. He said that they faced the same problems as everyone else, so they could not make telephone calls from Netley to bring in additional police. They had to visit police officers' homes by motorcycle to alert them of the need to report to Netley. Members of specialist firearms and public order teams had to go to Netley so that they could be deployed in an emergency, and I should like to record my gratitude to those policemen and women.

Assistant Chief Constable Reed assigned additional police officers who were on duty to the front desks of those police stations that were open, but he could not bring in additional police to patrol the streets because of the communications failure from which we all suffered. It was only by the greatest of good luck that people were able to establish telephone contact with Winchester because the Winchester 0845 number happened to be one of the four out of 11 components that did not fail at the Southampton Bargate exchange.

Several serious issues arise from all that, the first of which is the concentration of emergency services at Winchester. It is clearly dangerous if police, fire and ambulance services can all be accessed only through Winchester. That is not an island versus mainland point; clearly, the same problem could arise if they were all accessed via Newport. Secondly, I hope that the Minister will carefully consider the national airwaves solution.

I should like to record my appreciation of the work that the police and the other emergency services did on that occasion, but they were hampered by BT's lack of available information.

1.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Dr. Alan Whitehead): I must congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) on bringing this matter before the House. He mentioned several of his hon. Friends who are also concerned about the events of 25 April. I ought to include myself among that number, as I was making my way to my constituency on the evening of 25 April and repeatedly attempted to ring home and got what appeared to be an engaged signal. Indeed, when I arrived home, I undertook the same sort of information-gathering exercise as he did into how the incident happened and in what circumstances. Like him, I found the total breakdown of the telecommunications system, on which we increasingly rely, very frustrating. It was certainly very distressing for all those in Southampton and the wider area to feel that they were out of communication in the event of any emergency or for any other reason.

We are justifiably proud in this country of our 999 arrangements. The number is universally known and children are taught almost as soon as they walk or speak that that number will bring immediate assistance in an emergency. The telephone operating companies therefore pay particular attention to the resilience and robustness of their 999 services. There are special facilities in their networks and call centres to ensure that those calls are protected and given priority handling.

Conditions in the telephone operating companies' licences, which are regulated by Oftel, require them to take all reasonably practical steps to maintain to the greatest extent possible the integrity of public telephone systems and public services provided, paying particular regard to the needs of emergency organisations. That involves the protection of the physical and functional operation of such systems and related services against malfunctions or failure.

The BT network supports some 28 million lines throughout the United Kingdom and to maintain continuity various approaches are used to protect against problems with, for example, equipment failure, cable breaks or power breakdowns. Those protections include using alternative network routes; providing stand-by capacity; duplicating crucial components; alarms to give early warning of failures; overload protection; back-up facilities, such as electricity generators or batteries; active network monitoring; and using portable equipment.

The arrangements for handling 999 calls are agreed voluntarily between the emergency services and telephone operating companies within the 999 liaison committee forum, which is managed by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. The forum's membership includes representatives of all the telephone operating companies, including BT and Cable and Wireless, representatives of the emergency authorities and representatives from the appropriate Departments, including the Department of Health and the Home Office, as well as Oftel.

The committee has agreed a code of practice that sets out arrangements for dealing with 999 calls. The code is published on the DTLR website and is regularly reviewed and amended to reflect the changing needs of the public and the service providers. It recommends that

[Dr. Alan Whitehead]

emergency authorities have contingency arrangements to cover the receipt of emergency calls during conditions of serious breakdown in the public network or the emergency authorities' communication systems. Those arrangements should be tested periodically to ensure that staff are familiar with them.

BT undertakes to notify the affected emergency authorities as soon as possible after a failure is identified or anticipated. In 2000, BT issued guidance on the loss of access to its public 999 service to the emergency authorities. Despite the size and reach of the network, there are relatively few failures that affect 999. Such losses are monitored closely by Oftel, and substantial incidents are always subject to rigorous internal inquiries so that further resilience improvements can be made. During any such incident, BT informs those emergency authorities that cover the affected area and keeps in contact until the incident is resolved. It is worth noting that, because of the range of network routes used, it is very rare for the emergency services' control rooms to be affected. All that is, as it were, despite the events of Thursday 25 April.

On those specific events, as the hon. Gentleman recalled, a fault occurred in equipment at Southampton. BT has stressed that a highly unusual sequence of events occurred that resulted in a failure affecting a wide spread of people. The failure occurred in the power supply equipment for switches and network links that serve mainly the Southampton area, but also some other switches scattered throughout Hampshire, but not on the Isle of Wight.

Mr. Andrew Turner: That is a matter of some curiosity, as, clearly, I was on the Isle of Wight when I attempted to make the calls from my landline.

Dr. Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong point, and it is a matter of some curiosity for me. I shall speculate on that circumstance in a moment. I am giving a factual account of the technical nature of what happened to those switches and links.

A further point to consider is that, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, although battery back-up did operate and protect against failure for a period, there was then a failure of the alarms that are designed to reveal problems in the main supply before the batteries cut in. BT engineers were therefore unaware of how long the batteries were lasting and the time scale in which emergency action needed to be taken before those batteries expired, as they did.

I am assured that there is a regular testing regime, but that could not anticipate the equipment fault. Corrective action has been taken at Southampton, and an urgent review is being carried out within BT and with its suppliers to examine solutions that will ensure no further recurrence at any BT site. No subsections on the Isle of Wight were affected. Seventy-seven subsections across Hampshire and south Wiltshire lost services, and I understand that BT has written to apologise to, among other people, the MPs whose constituents were affected.

During the incident, the BT call centres that answer 999 calls quickly liaised with the emergency services and arranged to implement contingency plans. I understand that Hampshire and Isle of Wight police made immediate contact with radio stations in Southampton and across the area and guidance was broadcast on the radio and on television. Throughout the evening, BT did answer many 999 calls from the Hampshire area from both fixed and mobile phones, as, even though some customers in, for example, Winchester, were unable to make 999 calls, other Winchester customers could do so. Those who could make those calls were connected to the neighbouring emergency services in Dorset for the police and ambulance services, and in Berkshire for the fire service, and they could pass the information back to the responding local services. The hon. Gentleman has mentioned one way in which that was done using, for example, radio links. The Coastguard control centre on the Solent was unaffected, so there were no emergency arrangements as far as it was concerned.

I am assured by BT that the 999 service remained available to all Isle of Wight residents. During the period 6.30 pm to midnight on 25 April, 23 calls to 999 from the Isle of Wight were connected to the emergency services. Three calls were made to the fire service, nine were to the ambulance control rooms on the island and the remainder were to the police, initially to the Dorset police, but, from 9.15 pm, to a standby control room established in Basingstoke.

I understand from BT that the hon. Gentleman should have been able to make calls from his home in the Isle of Wight throughout the period as they would have been routed through the Portsmouth exchange. That is the curious circumstance that the hon. Gentleman mentions. It is possible that the breakdown could have had an indirect effect: because so many people were testing their phones at that time, all the available lines through that route may have been engaged. I believe that he is in contact with BT, and I shall be happy to pursue the matter further with BT if he does not get a satisfactory reply to what I agree is a curious set of circumstances.

However, some callers in Hampshire and south Wiltshire would not have had access to 999 on their BT lines and may only have been able to make local calls, although some will also have been able to use their mobile phones to call 999. The emergency services cover such circumstances with extra patrols, stationing vehicles at strategic points and advice through the media. BT assures me that it did everything it reasonably could to restore normal service as quickly as possible and to mitigate the impact on the emergency services, such as the police, with whom they liaised throughout the incident.

Hampshire and Isle of Wight police managed to keep every police station open until normal telephone operations were resumed. I am informed that that included the station at Cowes, but the hon. Gentleman mentioned specifically that he visited that police station and it was closed. I am happy, therefore, to investigate whether that circumstance was an aberration or whether there was wider non-coverage by police stations. BT engineers responded immediately and worked through the night to return the situation to normal, and 80 per cent. of customers had been restored to service by midnight. Almost all others were restored by 3.55 am at the latest.

When we consider the question of resilience and contingency arrangements, we must recognise that the failure of the telephone system on 25 April—in the hon. Gentleman's area and my area, unfortunately—was unprecedented. It revealed that, although contingency arrangements agreed with the 999 liaison committee were adequate, at least for more limited failures, there was a need to review them against what happened in Southampton and to examine what further changes needed to be made. Consideration will need to be given, first, to whether BT can help provide even more protection for the network links to its control rooms; and, secondly, to what other lessons can be learned regarding contingency plans for such failures, particularly with regard to communication with the public in these unusual circumstances. Among other problems, of course, one cannot use the phone to call people out to cover for contingencies or to alert people of contingencies in the first place.

Since the failure, BT has been in discussion with Hampshire and Isle of Wight police and the Association of Chief Police Officers about the changes that need to be made to BT's systems and to contingency arrangements to ensure that the public are protected against similar failures in the future. The solutions being examined will be judged by the improvements that can be offered, which include alarm strategy, changes in working practices and changes in component design.

BT will report to Oftel on the reasons for the failure on 25 April, on its impact on the 999 service and on the steps being taken to mitigate failure in the future. In turn, Oftel will be monitoring the action taken to ensure that BT meets its licence requirements. The main effect, on which the hon. Gentleman and I can agree, was to cause many members of the public great concern about their well-being in the event of an emergency in the areas affected by this catastrophic failure of telephone services. There is no evidence that there was any practical and irreversible adverse impact on the public. The contingency arrangements worked, although it is right to review them on the basis of the experience gained. BT has made it clear to me that it is concerned that this failure occurred, it apologises for the problems caused, and it is determined to prevent a recurrence. Clearly, that determination should include reviewing the procedures for publicising advice when such incidents take place. That is one of the matters under review.

I assure the House that all those involved in the 999 arrangements take their responsibilities very seriously and are acutely aware of the importance and value that the public place on an efficient and effective service that will guarantee a rapid response from the police, the fire service, the ambulance service or the coastguard when there is a serious threat to life or property.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the move to airwave for the police service. I cannot give him an immediate answer on that, but I shall write to him on the points that he raises.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 15 May 2002

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Clinical Negligence

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Ainger.]*

9.30 am

Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I am pleased to start this debate on a topical subject that is of great importance to our constituents and the national health service. I am glad to see the Minister in her place, and I hope that she will respond to some of my points. I am also glad to see the Opposition spokesmen: the hon. Members for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) and for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris).

It is necessary to put the debate into the context of the record extra Government investment that the Chancellor of the Exchequer recently announced. I should also mention reform and the Government's commitment to ensuring a modernised, responsive and patient-centred health service. I propose that reform should also apply to clinical negligence and the way in which the NHS deals with those instances, which are inevitable even in the best-run services, where the standard of care is less than we can usually expect from the medical profession. Those instances are sometimes referred to in the jargon, somewhat euphemistically, as adverse health care events or medical mishaps. Newspapers sometimes refer to them as medical gaffes. However, they all come under the rubric "clinical negligence", which is a broader term in common usage, rather than the narrower term "medical negligence". Our law provides a remedy for the injured party through the tort of negligence, where it can be established that a doctor, a member of a medical team or a paramedic has been negligent and in breach of duty, and where that negligence has caused injury.

It is important to refer to the scale of the problem. Clinical negligence has received much comment from the press who, with some members of the medical profession, would have us believe that the problem is out of control. In recent years, clinical negligence claims have increased substantially to worrying levels, but the statistics are not presented clearly. The Minister will have the figures to hand, but I will quote from "NHS (England) summarised accounts 2000–2001", which shows that the NHS in England—I shall come to Wales in a moment—faced accumulated claims for clinical negligence of no less than £4.4 billion as at 31 March 2001. On any view, that is a substantial figure.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Our paths have crossed on a number of occasions. I believe—the hon. Gentleman will correct me if I am wrong—that they crossed in the Committee considering the Access to Justice Bill. Does he agree that the huge growth in clinical negligence cases was foretold by some during the debate on the widening of conditional fee agreements?

Gareth Thomas: There are many reasons for the growth in clinical negligence claims. The Access to Justice Act 1999 is one reason; higher awards by the courts are another. However, I shall return to that important point later, because I want to deal with the accounting methods used by the NHS.

That figure of £4.4 billion represents accumulated claims. It is the provision that the Comptroller and Auditor General has said should apply for outstanding claims. It can be regarded as a misleading figure, because it does not represent what is paid year on year to finance clinical negligence awards. I know that the Minister will have the figures. For the year 1999–2000, for instance, the figure was £373 million. We must not over-dramatise the figures, but the position is serious.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman can help, but is it not right that when insurance companies make provisions they take account of the amounts that are likely to be paid to claimants? They make a risk analysis in relation to the overall claims that will end up being made, whereas I believe that the provision that the Comptroller and Auditor General makes is simply the value of the claims that have been made, which is a different valuation. Is that correct?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman puts his finger on an important point, which I hope the Minister will be able to answer. I am not sure what the provision represents. Is it the worst-case scenario or is it more in line with the system that operates in Wales? I speak as a Welsh Member, but these issues are common to both England and Wales.

The figures show that for the period up to 31 March 2001 the NHS in Wales provided for a total liability for clinical negligence of £126.7 million. The accounts describe that figure as representing claims

"where there was a probable chance of the claim being settled".

Can the Minister clarify whether the English figures represent provision in respect of all claims that have been made, or is there a risk assessment as to which claims are likely to be paid out?

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the National Audit Office's figures for April this year state fairly clearly that £4 billion is the worst-case scenario?

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. One of the purposes of the debate is to tease out these issues. We need to clarify the accounting basis.

I want to refer to the views of the lawyers. I express a peripheral interest as a lawyer, although I have not had any experience of clinical negligence cases, at least in the recent past. Lawyers involved in that specialist field of litigation take a dim view of what is sometimes said by those who represent the medical profession, and say that clinical negligence claims should not necessarily be seen as a sinister feature of the health service. They think that rather than foster a culture of cover-up, which has been suggested by some doctors, clinical negligence litigation has been a spur to higher standards, better clinical governance and more openness in the medical profession.

[Gareth Thomas]

I shall quote from Mr. Russell Levy, who is a partner in the specialist clinical negligence firm, Leigh, Day and Co. He takes exception to the way in which the National Audit Office expressed the figures on negligence. On 26 April, he wrote in *The Guardian*:

"One can't help but wonder whether the national audit office . . . is more interested in grabbing headlines than watching the public purse. Every year, it estimates the total cost of clinical negligence claims against the NHS using a method described by independent health economists, insurance experts and accountants in an article written in the British Medical Journal in June 2000 as 'a grossly misleading indicator of the impending cost of clinical negligence to the NHS'."

Mr. Burnett: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will address not only the level of damages, but the huge legal costs that often dwarf the damages provided to the claimant.

Gareth Thomas: I agree. There is a disproportion between the level of award and the costs that accompany awards, particularly for small claims. That is worthy of serious attention. Some interesting figures in the chief medical officer's report in 2000 suggested the scale of the problem. It indicated that no less than 10 per cent. of admissions to hospitals resulted in some adverse event. I suspect that some of those adverse events were minor, but some were serious. There were 850,000 incidents a year. Many claims are modest, but they clog up the system and take up a lot of time. They also cause considerable anxiety and heartache to patients who have suffered medical mishaps, however modest. Accidents happen even in the best-run systems.

The cost of additional hospital stays and treatments from adverse incidents must also be taken into account. In 2000, that was estimated at £2 billion. Can the Minister give an indication of the number of small claims as a percentage of the number of total claims? There is a crying need to speed up the process that deals with smaller claims.

Before I deal with worrying local examples, I should say that the rate of growth of clinical negligence has declined. That may be a reflection of the steps that the Government have taken to manage risk. I shall say more about that later because prevention will clearly always be better than damage limitation.

I know of two examples from my constituency experience, and I shall refer to them as an indication of the cost of medical mishaps not just in economic, but in human terms. I have a 57-year-old constituent who, a matter of weeks ago, received a settlement of just over £2 million for brain damage that she had sustained during childbirth no fewer than 15 years previously. The solicitor representing her, Mr. Alun Thomas—no relation—told me that it had been a titanic struggle. It took no fewer than four years for the health authority to admit liability, which it did suddenly after fighting tooth and nail.

There was then a protracted argument as to whether my constituent should remain in institutional care, which would have been cheaper for the health authority's insurers, or whether steps should be taken to ensure that she had an independent mode of living. The difference in the cost was no less than £1 million. A compromise was reached, but only after the family fought very hard with lawyers to secure a fair settlement. The costs involved were considerable. In the words of the family:

"What should have been a joyous family event"—

the birth of a child—

"was turned into a living nightmare made even worse by having to fight all the way for every penny of compensation."

Clearly, it should not take so long for such a case to be settled, but it is not unusual. I understand that the average time in which a clinical negligence case is disposed of is five years, but perhaps the Minister will give up-to-date figures.

My other constituency example relates to Mrs. Maureen Roberts. Her husband was suffering from lung cancer, which was misdiagnosed as arthritis. He was not given appropriate X-rays—he was given an X-ray of the front of his chest instead of the back and even then not for several months after it should have been taken. Mrs. Roberts had the tenacity to pursue a complaint through the internal NHS complaints system. She was unimpressed because it was slow, cumbersome, difficult to access and an obstacle course. She was put off at every corner and believes that if she had not been strong willed she would not have pursued an internal complaint. She told me that her main motive for making the complaint was not to obtain an apology—the Minister and other hon. Members in the Chamber will accept that that is the usual priority for patients who suffer low-level clinical negligence injuries—but to obtain an explanation that would prevent what happened to her husband happening to others. In her view, patients who go through the complaints system represent the tip of the iceberg because many people are put off.

The Minister was aware that I would be raising my concerns, which I am sure are shared by others, about the complaints system. I do not expect her to comment on those individual cases, but can she give an indication of the Government's thinking on the need to reform the complaints system? It is complex, riven with delay, not independent and seems to favour the medical establishment. My view, which the Minister may share, is that a more streamlined and effective complaints system, perhaps adopting what a recent National Audit Office report referred to as a package system, or a tribunal with the power to award modest compensation quickly, might deal with a large element of clinical negligence cases.

While dealing with the inadequacies of the complaints system, will the Minister explain how the Government propose to deal with an issue that is continually raised by people who have been involved in clinical negligence cases: the culture of the NHS and the medical profession? I know that I must talk carefully here because members of the medical profession are present.

Being on the wrong side of a clinical negligence case must cause extreme anxiety to hard-working professionals. It is surely in the interests not only of patients but of the medical profession that we undertake reform. Is there a clear policy on how medical professionals should respond in the case of an adverse incident, where something has gone wrong? Time and again, I hear people saying that nobody gave them an explanation or said sorry. I can understand why it is sometimes not appropriate to say sorry, but can we have

some clarity on that? I know that the Government are reviewing the complaints system and that others will have thoughts on the matter, but there seems to be an unwillingness to open up and a lack of candour on the part of medical professionals, which causes great anxiety to patients at large.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The hon. Gentleman is making a valid and important point. Not only is what he describes a natural human reaction, but it is the direct consequence of what has been called the culture of blame. It has been described as such by the Secretary of State for Health and, even more tellingly, by Professor Ian Kennedy in the Bristol inquiry report. He specifically said that it is the blame culture—the fact that the clinical negligence system is blame-oriented and fault-oriented—that gives doctors an incentive to cover up their errors and those of their colleagues. There is much to be gleaned from Kennedy's recommendations on that matter.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for drawing attention to what I believe is the fundamental issue. I must part company with him, because I do not share the views of Professor Ian Kennedy. I do not take the view that clinical negligence litigation should be scrapped and that it is itself responsible for an epidemic of secrecy and a cover-up culture. I would say the reverse. As I said earlier, clinical negligence litigation has opened up the medical profession and made it more responsive. It is very important that people who fall victim to negligence, which can happen in the best-organised systems and professions, should have redress.

With the greatest respect, I think that Professor Kennedy was wrong. That view is shared by the majority of lawyers involved in the case. I do not want this debate to degenerate into a battle royal between doctors and lawyers, but my objective view, coming to it with a fairly open mind, is that the learned professor was wrong.

Mr. Heald: Of course, the hon. Gentleman and I are both lawyers. Does he accept that one of the points made by the Royal College of General Practitioners in its response to our consultation document was that many doctors are so shocked and stressed by the experience of the complaints system and clinical negligence process that they retire through ill health? We all want doctors to be held to account when things go wrong, but does he agree that it is worth considering a more informal procedure that gets on with the process more quickly, so that the agony, for patients and the medical profession, is shorter and the formality of the process less frightening?

Gareth Thomas: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. It would be difficult for anyone to disagree that there must be a speeding up of the process, especially for smaller claims.

The Government are taking steps to deal with the problem. As I have said, there is greater emphasis on risk management, better clinical governance and prevention. I welcome the advent of the NHS Litigation Authority, which now administers the clinical negligence scheme for trusts. In Wales, the Welsh Risk Pool is a similar scheme. It is clear that through education, systems to prevent accidents happening in the first place and steps to promote best practice, we can learn a lot from mistakes and bring the figures for clinical negligence under control, which is what we all want.

The Government have said in their NHS 10-year plan that they want reform in relation to clinical negligence and the way in which such cases are dealt with.

Mr. Burnett: I believe that the hon. Gentleman said that the level of damages and claims in the United States was falling.

Gareth Thomas: I said that the level of growth in clinical negligence claims has declined. The figures are rising, but the rate of increase has declined. I did not refer to the United States. I think that the hon. Gentleman misheard me.

The NHS plan calls for reform and, in an important initiative, the Government set up the chief medical officer's committee on clinical negligence in July 2001. The committee has a broad brief, including consideration of a no-fault system of liability. It recently called for ideas, and many organisations have submitted representations.

I share the views of the Claimant Clinical Negligence Practitioners Group and the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers that there is no such thing as a no-fault system. Even in New Zealand, Finland and Sweden, where such a system has been established, it is necessary to prove causation. In any event, the schemes are very expensive and take money away from front-line services. They do not deal sufficiently with risk management, and eligibility criteria have constantly been cut, particularly in New Zealand. Therefore, I do not accept that a no-fault system is the answer, even for discrete categories of clinical negligence such as accidents during childbirth.

Reversing the burden of proof for causation would be a far-reaching reform of the law on clinical negligence. Those who are involved in the area know that proving breach of duty is difficult. The law provides for a very demanding test of the medical profession, but the test is qualified by the Bolam decision, which presupposes that it is a defence if the doctor adopted a course that a responsible body of opinion would have taken, even though it may not have been a majority view to do so. The decision has been discussed in various cases, but I do not want to deal with that. I want to discuss reversing the burden of proof.

Proving fault is one thing, but proving causation can be technically very difficult and can take up a lot of court time. It can result in many experts arguing for years about an issue and a mushrooming of costs that, in many cases, are already out of control.

Dr. Murrison: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify his point about Bolam? I hope that he is not suggesting that medical decision making should be based on a majority view.

Gareth Thomas: In relation to negligence cases, the medical profession is in a favoured position—I do not say that in a critical way—because the law has accepted that an element of judgment always needs to be

[Gareth Thomas]

exercised. There are circumstances in which one doctor may carry out a particular procedure in one way, and another doctor may undertake it in a different way, or go about the problem differently. The question of judgment is enshrined in the Bolam decision. Doctors can use that as a defence.

Reversing the burden of proof for causation would help. It would cut delay and mitigate some of the worst aspects of our adversarial system. On small claims, there is scope for a streamlined system, quick explanations, modest recompense given to patients quickly and an integrated complaints and compensation system. The Lord Chancellor's Department has recently issued a consultation paper on damages for future loss. Some of its proposals would help considerably, giving courts the power to order periodic payments and looking again at structured settlements, rather than putting all the emphasis on the need to arrive at a final, definitive lump sum. That might go some way towards relieving the burden on the NHS and mitigating some of the delay inherent in the present system.

Dr. Evan Harris: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is a strong case for guaranteeing NHS care for people with long-term disabilities as a result of clinical negligence, rather than awarding staged payments or, as we have at the moment, large lump sums for private purchase? A guarantee of NHS care, and the funding going into that care, will work both ways: it will provide the care that is needed as well as some financial compensation, and it will improve care generally in the health service.

Gareth Thomas: I think that there is scope for considering rehabilitation, and perhaps providing, effectively, an indemnity to those who suffer medical accidents, so that they will be looked after. Of course, there is an issue concerning the current legislation because, as the Minister will know, the measure of damages in clinical negligence cases assumes that the cost of future care will be obtained from the private sector. I do not advocate that that should be amended, but the hon. Gentleman's point is a good one.

Mr. Heald: Is it not necessary to take account of the fact that the NHS would have to provide those facilities, and there would be a cost? It would be necessary to decide whether it was better on balance for the NHS to provide those facilities at that cost rather than retain the present system, in which they are provided by the private sector. It may be quite a fine judgment in terms of cost.

Gareth Thomas: That is worthy of close attention and I take the point. It will be interesting to hear what the Minister says about that.

I take the view that clinical negligence litigation has begun to open up the medical profession. I believe that people need an effective means of redress. There are problems with the complexity and delays of the present system. We should go about reform. I know that the Government are committed not only to investment in the health service, but reform in all areas, including those of clinical negligence.

10.4 am

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): The hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Gareth Thomas) is to be congratulated on raising this issue for debate. He is also to be congratulated on styling it as "clinical" and not "medical" negligence because we are talking about negligence generally, not confining the debate to doctors. It has to be admitted, however, that most cases are brought against members of the medical profession.

I shall declare an interest: I am a doctor and, like all medical practitioners, am potentially on the receiving end of the sort of actions that are the subject of today's debate. I regret that claims for negligence against my medical colleagues are becoming more and more common. Indeed, I would probably rank myself in a minority in not having been subject to the threat, suggestion or realisation of such an action. It is important to understand that the overwhelming majority of practitioners do their level best for their patients. That did not come across particularly well during the hon. Gentleman's speech, although I am sure that he intended it to do so. It is important to pay tribute to the hard work of people across the board in the NHS.

Gareth Thomas: I have made the point consistently that, even in the best-run systems with the most committed and dedicated doctors and medical teams, accidents will happen. It should not necessarily be regarded as an indictment of doctors or the medical profession that accidents happen.

Dr. Murrison: I am grateful for that clarification because the point is important. Before we become too censorious, which is the general impression that I got from the hon. Gentleman, it is important to recognise that people working in the health service are doing their level best, often under adverse circumstances. It is also important to recognise that it is necessary to build a spirit of mutual trust between all sorts of practitioners and their patients. I recognise that he is a lawyer by profession, as indeed is my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), but the ways in which medical practitioners and lawyers operate are very different. Lawyers are very adversarial and deal with tort, which cuts across the general modus operandi of the national health service. It is important to recognise that a threat of legal action can result in a practitioner being pole-axed. Although I have not directly experienced that, I know colleagues who have. Having the sword of Damocles hanging over one's head is truly a devastating experience.

I take issue with the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that practice might be improved by the threat of action for clinical negligence. I suspect that that is not the case. I recall many occasions on which such a threat was a problem in terms of a person's ability to carry out their day-to-day work.

Mr. Burnett: As a doctor, will the hon. Gentleman explain, perhaps with one or two examples, the problem for the medical profession of practising what I gather is called defensive medicine, and the problems that that causes for patients?

Dr. Murrison: I am grateful for the intervention. As the hon. Gentleman will know, defensive medicine is a

blight on the way in which medicine is practised because it takes a practitioner's eye off the ball. Of course, one should focus on an individual patient's needs with one thing in mind—how to benefit them, not how to get off the hook in the event of a patient questioning in law what one is doing. One hidden cost of the culture of defensive medicine is the expense to the health service caused by practitioners doing every last test—it is perhaps the example that the hon. Gentleman seeks—to make sure that every last eventuality is covered. That involves a huge opportunity cost that has not been recognised in the NAO figures.

Gareth Thomas: I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but is that not an example of steps being taken to prevent accidents? Sometimes, it is very difficult to draw a distinction between what he describes as defensive medicine and reasonable precautions or preventive measures. In any case, does he not accept that the argument sometimes advanced that the use of defensive medicine is widespread is somewhat overstated? If one asks doctors to give examples of defensive medicine, they find it difficult to cite specific examples.

Dr. Murrison: I am grateful for that intervention. I think that I gave an example of defensive medicine: the number of tests that might be done unnecessarily and at great cost to the NHS. Such tests therefore involve an opportunity cost for patients.

It may be useful to reflect on the situation in the United States. Many of us have been quite surprised at the great wave of negligence litigation that has overtaken practice there. This country has not been engulfed in the same way. Indeed, there has been quite a long delay between events in the US and those in the UK with regard to negligence litigation. However, if we consider the way in which patients are treated in the US, and the huge welter of defensive medicine that pervades every aspect of medical care in that country, we can imagine the problems that may lie in store for the NHS.

Mr. Burnett: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one difference between the US legal system and ours is that the US has a contingent fee system? A lawyer acting for a plaintiff in the US will receive a percentage cut of the damages if the plaintiff is successful. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we introduced such a system in the UK—that is the way in which the pressure on the Lord Chancellor's Department is going—it would lead to an even greater growth in claims?

Dr. Murrison: The hon. Gentleman may have a good point. I am concerned about the advent of no win, no fee ways of operating for lawyers who specialise in this area. One must at least suspect that that has resulted in an increase in the number of medical negligence claims.

Many of us worry that the Chancellor's recently announced largesse will be consumed without much in the way of improved clinical outcomes. Part of that concern is derived from the belief that the mounting cost of negligence claims will swallow up an increasingly large amount of the NHS budget. The hon. Member for Clwyd, West referred to various figures that I believe are derived chiefly from the National Audit Office. I share his confusion at the way in which those figures have been represented, and like him I should appreciate clarification from the Minister.

The take-home message is that the level of claims in this country is increasing. The figure of £4.4 billion is a projected figure. I understand that it is predicated on claims that we expect in future. Some of those will be very large claims, because they relate to conditions such as cerebral palsy, and the eventual settlements that people receive in such cases are very expensive. Can the Minister shed any light on what the figure of £4.4 billion represents?

One telling figure from the NAO is that 65 per cent. of settlements below £50,000 had associated costs that exceeded the damages awarded. That is obviously a bean feast for lawyers, but I am not sure that it is terribly good for the NHS and I am absolutely sure that it is not good for practitioners or, ultimately, patients. There must be a better way.

We understand that, in 1999–2000, the NHS paid £400 million in clinical negligence costs. Again, I seek clarification, because that seems to tie in poorly with the NAO figures. Expenditure by medical defence organisations in respect of non-vicarious items is not included, so I suspect that the real figure for the whole arena is rather greater than that given by the NAO.

Patients will continue to lose out hugely from the tort-based system. I do not share the view of the hon. Member for Clwyd, West that it has, on balance, been beneficial and that it is the only way to proceed. There must be more imaginative solutions that do not involve a vast cost to the health service, to practitioners and, ultimately, to the national health system. Patients will lose out collectively through the opportunity cost of the projected £4.4 billion, which I believe relates to outstanding anticipated claims, and individually through the system, which is capricious, slow, bureaucratic and for some impossibly expensive.

A problem with the current system is that despite obvious harm, litigants may have difficulty pinpointing a specific act of negligence and if they cannot do so their action falls at the first fence. For the great majority of the remainder, the legal process is alien, drawn out and disagreeable. The system is increasingly tilted towards the assumption of monetary compensation, when an apology or explanation may be the desired way to achieve closure. An unhelpful compensation culture has been encouraged by ambulance-chasing law firms wishing to attract instruction in medical negligence cases. No win, no fee specialists use brazen television advertisements to suggest that if a person has suffered in any way someone must be to blame and there is a financial remedy to be had. Some outfits have even set up shop in the foyers of major hospitals. What kind of message does that send out?

The final report of the Bristol Royal Infirmary inquiry called for an overhaul of the way in which the NHS handles clinical negligence. Some of Kennedy's recommendations—those on open reporting, sentinel event reporting and governance, for example—are laudable and within the Government's power to grant. Others, such as a shift to an alternative funding system for compensation, will have to be sufficiently attractive to potential litigants and their legal advisers. However, Ministers cannot assume that changes would result in

[Dr. Murrison]

savings to the NHS in the longer term. No-fault compensation may be helpful to patients and practitioners but despite the view of organisations such as the British Medical Association it may open up a new cost ledger for the health service.

I broadly welcome the Department of Health's stated desire for better communication and attention to non-monetary remedies and I welcome its resolve to deal with the spiralling cost of claims. However, I want to know what assessment the Minister has made of the effects of the implementation of Lord Woolf's recommendations and of the impact of the NHS Litigation Authority.

10.17 am

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I shall be brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Gareth Thomas) on securing this important debate. He made some valuable and worthwhile points. I, too, declare an interest: I am a lawyer, although I have not practised for about four years. My specialisation was taxation, as will be apparent from the thrust of my remarks.

It is imperative to find a more sensible system of dealing with claims for clinical negligence; the existing system could be significantly improved. It is important to have the statistics, to see the level of damages and the huge amounts being paid out, involving not only plaintiffs but health authorities. The important National Audit Office document "Handling Clinical Negligence Claims in England", published on 3 May 2001, goes into detail about the costs and huge expenses. I want to tease out from the Minister how the Department of Health is working with the Lord Chancellor's Department to come up with a sensible scheme and to find a solution to an intractable problem. It is unacceptable that billions of pounds go annually not to successful plaintiffs—sometimes known as victims—but into the pockets of the legal profession for formulating and pursuing claims.

I presume that the Minister and the Lord Chancellor's Department are considering some form of early option: openness, discussion, apology and perhaps a scale of damages to be agreed between plaintiff and health authority. An early option system should never be mandatory, but it should be incumbent on the legal advisor to ensure that the benefits and disadvantages of not accepting early settlement are made clear to the plaintiff. The legal profession owes a duty both to the court and to the individuals whom it advises. The advisor should be under a duty to explain at an early stage the benefits and drawbacks of taking early a settled sum in a more formal, less adversarial procedure.

I hope that the Minister will set out the steps being taken to simplify the legal processes dealing with clinical negligence.

10.21 am

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I am conscious that there are two doctors present, which would normally lead to three opinions being proffered. Three lawyers are present, which would probably lead to three more expensive opinions. We have a Minister, which often leads to no opinion, and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who are always of a sensible opinion, correct and good value for money, being free—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. It might help the hon. Gentleman to know that I am an engineer.

Dr. Harris: As a scientist you dine with us, if I may speak for the members of the medical profession present.

I declare an interest as a General Medical Council registered doctor. I am also a member of the British Medical Association, which is lobbying for a change in policy. I sit on its medical ethics committee, although it has no remit in this area. I have never been sued for medical negligence, although many of my friends and family members who are doctors, have been. The threat of future action against them is unavoidably high on the agenda of members of the medical profession, as is the stress and time taken defending or settling existing actions.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Gareth Thomas) for bringing up the subject for debate and for his clear exposition of the issues. He was right to point out that those who use the complaints procedure are only the tip of the iceberg of the number who feel fit enough to make a complaint and who have the tenacity to complain about one aspect of their care. Such people are often happy with other aspects of their care and may be afraid that any complaint will be seen as a criticism of the hard work either of those against whom they are complaining, or of others.

Whatever changes are made to the complaints procedure, we need to make it easier for patients to complain and for them to be given support in doing so. The number of people who make claims for clinical negligence is a minority of those who could make claims. As the number of claims increases, the proportion of those that are well founded, which may be different from those that are settled as it can be easier to settle a case than to define it as well founded, may drop. However, that does not mean that people who are not currently applying would not qualify for compensation.

It is important to recognise that the medical profession, like other health care professions, has traditionally had a culture of believing that any complaint or question is an affront to its professionalism. That attitude is changing; it must change. If we want to have not only happier patients but correct management choices, decisions must be made jointly by the clinician, other health care professionals involved, the patient and, with the patient's permission, any friends or relatives whom they wish to involve.

We must deal with the broad policy issues. Whether one agrees with them or not, the Liberal Democrats have clearly defined policy positions. In both an admirable contribution and in his interventions, my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) asked how we could change the existing system in which complaints go to law; specific questions about a no-fault scheme for most claims; and what we could do about the escalating cost of settlements.

I understand that the Government are conducting a review, which is why I hinted that the Minister would probably express few opinions today, as she would not

want to pre-empt it. I suspect that we shall hear nothing specific, although even before the review it was difficult to get any specific views from the Government. Although they said that they supported the existing scheme, the fact that a review has been established and that, post-Kennedy, it has been asked specifically to examine no-fault schemes gives us hope that we may have an open review of the issues.

Our first suggestion is that, rather than give lump sums to people to pay for parcels of care from the private sector, we should find a way of providing a guarantee of adequate NHS care, particularly with the increased resources going to the NHS, which should enable new services to be set up. We could invest that money in accessible NHS provision—not just a national centre—so that people who have been affected, often tragically, by medical negligence, such as those with cerebral palsy, could benefit from care that was also open to other people.

The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) asked the fair question of whether setting up bespoke NHS provision in a local area was any cheaper than individually purchased private provision. That may be relevant in some cases, but in the context of expanding NHS provision, and because care is inadequate for people who do not receive large lump-sum compensation for damage, NHS provision would give us extra value for money. The care from an NHS scheme will be available to people who do not have the resources to purchase the care because they have not been able to get, or do not qualify for, compensation.

Mr. Heald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Harris: I shall in a moment. The case is predicated on the argument not simply that it would be cheaper to provide NHS care—the hon. Member for Clwyd, West made a fair point—but that one would get extra value for money in an expanding NHS, given the extra resources that the Government are putting in, to enable those who are unfortunate enough not to qualify for compensation to access free care on the NHS. I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Heald: I will leave it. Sorry.

Dr. Harris: I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman responded to that point because it is good for each party to put down its position in these matters.

Mr. Burnett: Will my hon. Friend confirm that any no-fault scheme advanced by our party will not oust the jurisdiction of the courts, or the right of plaintiffs to go to court if they so wish?

Dr. Harris: Of course. It is a human right to have access to justice. Indeed, our party has campaigned in this and the previous Parliament to ensure that that is as wide as possible. I was going to come to the no-fault compensation scheme. The key point is to make it attractive enough to dissuade people from recourse to a more expensive, more legally involved and much longer system of NHS care. I can read out Liberal Democrat policy on this at length, but it is well stated by Professor Kennedy in his report. Paragraph 86 states:

> "The culture of blame is a major barrier to the openness required if sentinel events are to be reported, lessons learned and safety improved. The system of clinical negligence"—

that is, the existing tort system—

> "is part of this culture of blame. It should be abolished."

Professor Kennedy could not be clearer. The hon. Member for Clwyd, West has been good enough to confirm that he disagrees with Professor Kennedy. It is worth while bearing in mind that even important reports such as that are not unchallengeable. I admire the hon. Gentleman for openly saying that he disagrees strongly with the independent view of a high-profile inquiry.

The Government have draped themselves in the Kennedy report in many areas where we support their policy. They must recognise that if they say that they back the report almost in its entirety and, indeed, take on board the remark about clinical negligence, people will have their expectations raised that they accept the report's conclusions.

The report continues that the system of clinical negligence

> "should be replaced by effective systems for identifying, analysing, learning from and preventing errors and other sentinel events. An expert group should consider alternatives to clinical negligence,"—

that has been set up—

> "including an alternative administrative system of compensating those who suffer harm arising from medical care."

Professor Kennedy repeats that in the recommendations on page 451, at paragraph 119. He sets out in some detail why he believes that the blame-based system will, with the best will in the world and despite the quality initiatives that have been introduced, still lead to an under-reporting and under-admission of significant adverse events, even where there has been negligence.

I should like to deal with a separate question: the quintuple jeopardy that faces the medical profession—other people may face one or two trials—which adds to the culture of fear and an unwillingness to own up to errors. If a doctor makes a mistake, he or she faces real trials and ordeals. The first is disciplinary action from his or her employer. Then there is the threat of criminal charges following a police investigation, as happened to a number of my former colleagues. That is extremely stressful and usually does not lead to the bringing of charges. Nevertheless, it means that the matter cannot be settled in other ways. There can be a coroner's inquest, which is a trial-like approach. General Medical Council action can be taken against the doctor. There can be a suit for clinical negligence. There can be trial by media. That is sometimes added to by being sacked on "Newsnight" by a Secretary of State for Health in less than full possession of the facts. It is a major concern that puts many people off going into medicine. The Government should give some thought to streamlining, if not reducing, these processes to prevent prolonged suspension of medical staff who are later cleared on all counts. We have time to touch on only some of the relevant matters in this debate.

I have one final point for the Minister, who has heard me say it before. We will not drive out errors and negligence from clinical practice unless we ensure that at the riskiest time for patients—out of hours—it is the most senior health care professionals, whether doctors or others, and not juniors who deliver care. Those

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delivering care must also be the most fresh, not the most tired. The proportion of claims in relation to maternity services points to the shortage of consultants in obstetrics at hand to deliver the out-of-hours care in obstetric emergencies that is required. I hope that the Minister will give urgent thought to the need to expand consultant numbers, particularly in high-risk specialties.

10.35 am

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Gareth Thomas) on securing the debate on this important subject. The Conservative party recently concluded a consultation exercise on clinical negligence, which was launched by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) in December. It is clear from the responses—I am not going to reveal the final outcome of our deliberations—that human rights, particularly the right of the patient to redress, have to be counterbalanced by fairness to practitioners. It is a difficult balancing exercise.

Great dissatisfaction exists about the current handling of clinical negligence. That is clear in the Woolf report of 1996, and Professor Kennedy's and the National Audit Office reports of 2001. Reforming the system is not easy. In a wide-ranging speech, the hon. Member for Clwyd, West raised many of the issues on which we consulted: reversing the burden of proof, although we have a different formula for achieving it; having a more streamlined system to deal with small claims; and using periodic payments as a better way of dealing with future loss for claimants. Some of the conclusions emerging from consultation will be of considerable interest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) made the important point that the majority of medical practitioners—indeed, almost all—do their best and work to a high standard. We should all pay tribute to that. Many claims are, in the event, not justified. On the latest figures from the NHS Litigation Authority's website, outstanding claims amount to £4.1 billion, yet 75 per cent. of publicly funded cases fail; there has been a sevenfold increase in settlements since 1995–96; and in 65 per cent. of settlements of less than £50,000, the legal costs exceed the damages recovered.

It is easy to conclude, and I agree, that lawyers are making a fine living out of all this and that something must be done about it. Much can be said for speeding up procedures and aiming for a more informal settlement process. However, it takes two to tango. I should be interested to know whether the Minister is satisfied that people dealing with such cases for the state have always had the ability to settle cases as promptly as they would have wished, had they had the resources available to respond quickly. Have they, as public servants, felt able to take the risk of settling a case as quickly as they should? Does anything need to be done, or is it being done, to change the culture on the NHS side as well as the claimant's side, and to settle cases promptly? A balance should be struck throughout.

The picture is not static. Does the Minister agree that, when valuing claims, it is necessary to take account of a point that has been made today and was made during our consultation by Professor Dingwall of Nottingham university? He said that

"the estimate of outstanding claims is not based on conventional insurance principles. When a commercial insurer receives a claim, this is not entered onto the books at its claimed value. The company makes a judgement about the likely probability of success and discounts the value of the claim by the value of that probability. This estimate may be revised . . . as the case develops and the evidence emerges. The NHS enters claims straight onto the books at the value asserted by the claimant."

Can the Minister tell us the real, discounted, risk-assessed value of outstanding claims? If she does not know, why not?

The NHS Litigation Authority is a relatively new body. It took on responsibility for pre-1995 cases only in April 2001. Although 1995 may seem a long time ago, there is a substantial body of cases. Can the Minister give any idea of what progress the NHS Litigation Authority has made as it has gradually taken on cases from an earlier period? Is it leading to a more efficient, more prompt settlement of cases? The authority also has an important role in risk management and tries to enforce best practice in health authorities. Can the Minister tell us how the authority is getting on with that?

The pre-action protocols that were introduced following the Woolf reforms are also relatively new. Many believe that they are leading to quicker settlements, but that was not the purpose of the reforms. Their purpose was to have a more expeditious and sensible course for cases to follow to reach a conclusion in court. Have the Woolf reforms resulted in more cases being settled more quickly? If the Minister does not know, will she commission research into that? The Medical Protection Society, which has a key role, wants to know what effect the pre-action protocol for clinical negligence claims has had. I also want to know.

Does the Minister agree that even if the value of claims outstanding is less than we believe, there is still a case for further reform? Many people who responded to our consultation, including the Consumers Association, InterMediation and not surprisingly, the Academy of Experts, the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Radiologists and many others, were enthusiastic about mediation or at least an independent, neutral evaluation to help parties at any early stage, before a case is started, to try to reach a settlement or to clarify ideas. Does the Minister believe that that has further mileage?

There was a great deal of support for a package of remedies. The NAO mentioned apologies, explanations, remedial treatment counselling, meetings with medical staff to find out what went wrong, how that can be prevented and other support mechanisms for patients. That package of measures may be as important as the money. Can the Minister tell us her view and what conclusions are emerging from the chief medical officer's call for ideas?

Can the Minister give us some idea of how she now evaluates the pilot undertaken into mediation? The Mulcahy pilot, which took place following a decision in 1995, took two years and suffered from a low number of cases being brought before the mediators. It was also very expensive. Does the Minister feel that, in terms of

policy structure and judicial thinking, the climate has now changed sufficiently for mediation to work better than it did in the Mulcahy pilot?

Does the Minister have any views on the ideas on which we consulted, such as having a tribunal system to deal with claims for less than a certain amount—we suggested £50,000? There seemed to be some support for that more informal procedure in our consultation. Does she agree that it may be necessary to consider changes in the law and to have a simpler and more readily understandable definition of what we mean by clinical negligence, perhaps using the model of unacceptable clinical practice?

We suggested that it should be possible to give compensation through the complaints system in far more cases, perhaps in those likely to be worth less than £10,000. Does the Minister support that idea? Does she agree with some of the ideas that we, the Lord Chancellor's Department and others have discussed on improving the damages regime? The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), in his very measured speech, talked about having a scale of damages for clinical negligence and about early resolution procedures, and said that the legal profession owed a duty in that area. Does the Minister feel that the present damages structure, which is widely known and laid down by the Court of Appeal, could usefully become a more formal tariff of damages? Again, we examined that in our paper.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) mentioned no-fault compensation. One understands the attraction of that, especially in terms of populist rhetoric, but many of those who replied to our consultation suggested that that would be a very expensive scheme, which would not necessarily mean that the people most wronged received the level of compensation that they should, and that it would put an artificial cap on the level of damages. What is the Minister's view on that?

We have had a very good debate. We have not yet reached all the conclusions that we want to, and the Minister may be in the same position. However, it would be helpful if she shared her emerging thinking with us.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Gareth Thomas) on securing this important debate on clinical negligence and on initiating such a thoughtful debate on an extremely complex subject.

We all know that the NHS treats hundreds of thousands of patients every day. As several hon. Members have made clear, with so many patients being treated, it is inevitable that clinical errors and mistakes will sometimes occur. When things go wrong, it is important to ensure, first, that there is a process for learning from those mistakes, for responding properly to them and for making all possible efforts to prevent such errors reoccurring and, secondly, that patients receive an appropriate and fair response transparently, clearly, quickly and effectively, and with the minimum trauma.

Under the current system, compensation for harm or injuries suffered as a result of clinical negligence is generally paid only where legal liability can be established. The underlying principles for establishing negligence are enshrined in common law. Compensation is payable where it can be shown that there has been a breach of the duty of care by act or omission, where there has been harm and where the harm was caused by the breach of duty. Each claim for compensation must be considered on its merits. Where agreement is not reached, the issues must be addressed through the civil justice system.

The Government's policy has been that NHS patients who have been harmed or injured as a result of clinical negligence should be able to obtain appropriate compensation. That is as true for NHS patients treated in the independent sector or overseas as for those treated in NHS hospitals.

Concerns have been raised in debates and in many of the reports to which hon. Members have referred about the current system of dealing with clinical negligence cases. Those concerns were highlighted recently in the NAO report entitled "Handling Clinical Negligence Claims in England" and in the response of the inquiry into events in Bristol. The NAO report highlighted the increasing number and cost of claims, the length of time it takes to settle them and the problems caused by the existing separation of the complaints and compensation systems in providing the remedies that claimants say they want.

Several hon. Members have asked questions about the costs and the way in which the figures are assessed. Hon. Members are right that the NAO summarised accounts of 2000–01 include a figure of £4.4 billion. That is not the NHS's annual expenditure on clinical negligence claims. It is the figure quoted in the NAO summarised accounts for the total provision to cover the possible cost of all existing claims that are likely to succeed, as well as potential clinical negligence claims. It bears no relation to the date of the incidents, nor is it linked to the amount spent in that year. In 1999–2000, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West and other hon. Members have said, the NHS spent £373 million on costs and damages in settling clinical negligence claims.

Hon. Members have asked about the accounting procedures used. Those procedures are clearly a matter for the NAO. However, I am happy to pursue with the NAO the rationale behind its use of the figures and to write to hon. Members on that.

Dr. Murrison: Just for clarity, are we to take it that the figure of £4.4 billion is based on the value of claims that the NHS has received? As we have heard, if they are settled in favour of the litigant, most of them will be settled for a figure lower than the claimed figure. Can we take it, therefore, that that is the absolute maximum and that the figure is likely to be a long way short of that? If so, by how much will it be short?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is right that not all claims are settled straight away. Some may be settled many years later, some at less than their estimated value, and some may not succeed at all. However, as I understand it, the figure is not for all claims ever entered against the NHS. It includes an estimate of those that are likely to succeed, and an estimate on the basis of events that have taken place where a claim may arise in

[Yvette Cooper]

future. However, I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman further after consulting the NAO on the rationale behind its accounting measures.

Mr. Heald: Why does the NHS Litigation Authority website today say

"we have potential liabilities for clinical negligence of £4.1 billion",

when the accounts to which the Minister is referring say £4.4 billion? Professor Dingwall says in his evidence to us that no analysis of risk management is involved: all the claims are included in the £4 billion figure.

Yvette Cooper: As I have said, I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman on the matter. The figure from the NAO's summarised accounts for the NHS for 2000–01 is £4.4 billion. That is the figure that I have used in the response.

Dr. Evan Harris: The Minister is right in her understanding of the figures. However, we should be worried not about the fact that £375 million—the last known expenditure on medical negligence—is somewhat less than the £4 billion-odd being provided for likely successful claims, but about the rate of increase of that expenditure, which seems to be increasing inexorably.

Yvette Cooper: There is a series of concerns. One relates to what is happening to the resources for clinical negligence; another relates to the response to patients; the third is the way in which the medical profession and the NHS are able to respond by providing clinical care and to learn from experience.

I am running short of time to respond to all hon. Members' points. Considerable work has already been done to try to speed up claims in the existing system, including work by the NHS Litigation Authority to require panel solicitors to examine every case for mediation suitability, and work to link clinical negligence claims with the wider quality agenda. Work is under way to change the culture and reduce adverse health care incidents following the report entitled, "An Organisation with a Memory", by the chief medical officer, which aims to promote a culture of openness and learning. That work established the national patient safety agency last summer, which runs a new national system for reporting, analysing and learning from adverse events and near misses involving NHS patients. It is important that we learn properly and prevent future adverse errors. Other improvements have been made in clinical governance and the role of the Commission for Health Improvement.

Hon. Members have concentrated on the issues of clinical negligence and work by the chief medical officer's committee. It was asked to consider a wide range of options for handling clinical negligence claims more effectively. It has not yet reported, and I do not want to pre-empt its analysis or conclusions. However, I shall set out some of the options that it is considering.

The most high-profile reform is no-fault compensation. Such a system exists in other countries, and its success has varied. Some of the advantages are that it can speed up the legal process and resolve cases to prevent the need to go to court where only liability in dispute. Some of the disadvantages are that disputes can still occur over the level of compensation, the system may still not deal with the need to receive an adequate explanation of the events leading to injury, and there may also be cost implications.

In light of the Bristol Royal Infirmary report and the work of the chief medical officer, we have asked the chief medical officer's committee to reconsider the merits of the no-fault compensation option. We have also asked it to consider the interface between the system for complaints and that for claims against the NHS. Those are separate processes, as several hon. Members have said, and a poorly handled complaint can result in a claim. The NAO has recommended a package-based approach for dealing with clinical negligence claims. The chief medical officer is considering whether a more flexible, responsive, patient-focused approach could provide a more tailored response to individual claims.

The issue of small claims is important and has been raised by several hon. Members. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West, small claims comprised about 20 per cent. of claims received in 2000–01. There were approximately 2,000 claims for less than £20,000, which remained a low proportion of the overall value of claims. The committee is looking at whether there is a fast-track way of responding to small claims, and at ways in which mediation and structured settlements could be better used.

The chief medical officer's report is drawing to its conclusion. We will need to publish proposals and consider the way forward, but I will ensure that the issues raised in this debate are fed into the process of deliberations. I think that many useful points have been raised.

Regional Government

11 am

Andrew George (St. Ives): I am delighted to have secured this debate and I am pleased that it has been fortuitously timed to coincide with the publication of the recent White Paper, on which I must congratulate the Government. The main theme of my contribution to the debate is taken from that paper, which is entitled "Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions". The theme that I want to draw out is whose region and whose choice is at stake. I want to look at what a region is and how to make it work, rather than looking particularly at the proposed functions. I notified the Minister of several questions that I would be raising.

First, and perhaps most appropriately of all, I warmly congratulate the Government on what they have achieved so far with devolution for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Greater London Assembly. All are significant achievements and although we may argue about the powers and the processes, they are achievements and a movement in the right direction. Those changes are very welcome to Liberal Democrats and many people in other parties.

It is easier to deliver devolution to places that self-evidently exist than to other places that may not. Although the White Paper was welcome, it was a long time in coming. There were many false dawns for the White Paper. I am pleased that it has come, although I am concerned that it may be a house built on sand because it skirts over any definition of what a region is and how it has arrived at its conclusions. The paper does not deal with what a region is. A region implies internal integrity and something more than an occasional shared interest because communities happen to be adjacent to each other. Are such areas regions or are they government zones, and should we not call them government zones rather than regions? Such government zones could be designed for bureaucratic convenience and administrative ease.

In the paper, I was looking for emphasis and the basis on which regional differences were demonstrated. Chapter 1 gave a rather charming emphasis on regional differences and one could easily come to the conclusion that regional identity may be created by a better innate understanding of bodily functions—as if health inequalities were a product of geography rather than pure economics. The fact is that where there are inequalities in health provision, heart disease or other problems, they are more likely to be a function of economics than geography. The economics of an area determine the health of people in that area. I consider the argument in the paper to be rather flimsy.

I remember asking zealous regionalists who were concerned about when, how and what functions would be devolved what we would do if the region did not actually exist. The question was met with stunned incomprehension. It was as if I had asked whether we could redefine the boundaries of God.

I acknowledge that the people of Yorkshire and the north-east are, arguably, lucky. The government zone for their area appears more or less to coincide with a region with its own recognisable identity—possibly more for some than for others. However, the government administrative zone for many areas is the equivalent of a Soviet-style construct for those who are happy to be dragooned into a soulless bureaucracy without a shred of identity.

A few general questions arise from the White Paper itself. It is full of references to regions and sub-regions. How does the Minister define them? What principles underlie the Government's policy towards devolution? For example, if the Government believe that decisions should be taken at the lowest possible level, how is that achieved by their approach? The White Paper chose some interesting examples of devolved or provincial structures of government in appendix E, but pretty well all of them point to asymmetric devolution—not just variable geometry but variable size and geography. Why include the appendix when the Government appear to have dismissed or ignored the lessons learned in many other countries? Have the Government abandoned asymmetric devolution for good?

For many people, it will be a shock that I have managed to speak for six minutes without mentioning Cornwall. It is because I am interested in the principle of devolution, as well as the potential effect on my own area, that I have concentrated on trying to find the principle in the White Paper. I must congratulate the Minister and the Government on achieving a headline in our local newspaper that I have been trying to achieve for some time: "Cornish home rule denied." I cannot count the number of times that I have tried to deal with the misapprehensions that arise when we talk about the modest devolution of certain powers. Some people think of border checkpoints and absurd nonsense about home rule. The Government have sent a clear message to the populace in Cornwall that that is not what we are talking about or ever have talked about. It is not what those in the Cornish Constitutional Convention have ever talked about. Therefore, I congratulate the Government on their achievement. Campaigners in Cornwall are interested in cutting Cornwall into the celebration of diversity, not cutting it off.

The Cornish campaign is an interesting one and a challenge to the Government. Arguably, it is the most popular such campaign. Fifty thousand or more people, from not only Cornwall but outside the area, have signed declaration sheets. A well-argued manifesto was published only a few months ago—the campaign is coherent as well as popular. It also provides Cornwall with an opportunity to build on the success of achieving objective 1 status, in which the Government played a significant part. The people of Cornwall played a significant part as well and Cornwall's poverty, overlooked for decades, was at last acknowledged. The statistical separation was made and Cornwall achieved objective 1 status.

We should learn lessons from the process, because we are given now the same arguments that we were given when we were arguing for the statistical split between Cornwall and the rest of the south-west region. We were told that that was an insular move, it could be offensive to our neighbours and it would give succour to nationalists. As we have found in the delivery of objective 1, although we need an administrative split, all those arguments have been proven to be entirely fallacious.

[Andrew George]

A lot of people, of course, look at the case of Cornwall, which is, after all, a small place with only 500,000 people, and argue that one cannot devolve government to a place of that size. Sometimes, the arguments are the usual tiresome prejudices of which small communities are often on the receiving end, but when one considers the alternatives it is the only serious option.

One of the main arguments thrown against the Cornwall case is that Cornwall is too small, but one has only to lift one's eyes above the insular and parochial horizon of the United Kingdom to the wider world and to provincial and regional government in other places. I have visited Canada, for example, and have met the Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, which has a population roughly the same size as that of Cornwall. Those provinces are relaxed about their capability to deliver government functions to their people. When they do not achieve the necessary economies of scale on, for example, clinical governance and other such matters, they simply establish strategic partnerships with their neighbours or other provinces.

I am assuming that we are talking about grown-up devolution rather than a bunch of juveniles being in control. Perhaps, there is something in the English psyche—perhaps it is just English men—that leads them to become obsessed with size. We need to challenge the cosy assumptions that we always need a certain size to deliver certain functions.

The "can of worms" argument is well worth exploring. It concerns questions such as where devolution would leave everyone else, what it would mean for other boundaries, whether it would make a mess and whether it would result in other places with smaller populations making absurd claims for regional status. We may want to take into account the fact that no places with small populations have made such claims. We need to accept—the Government have accepted this in bravely pursuing the devolution agenda—that devolution can be messy. To do it properly, one cannot do it tidily. In conversations that I have had with the Minister, he has recognised that.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): The hon. Gentleman may be interested in a quote from the Secretary of State for Wales, who reacted to the White Paper by saying:

"This is the right approach and it reflects the different historical, legal and political practices in every region of the UK."

Surely that quote supports the hon. Gentleman's case for Cornwall.

Andrew George: Absolutely. If we are looking for historical, cultural and other reasons to draw boundaries for regions, the hon. Gentleman is right.

On top of everything else, Cornwall has a distinct history and its own language and Celtic culture, which could provide the bedrock for what many people in Cornwall see as its economic salvation. Cornwall can trade on its distinctiveness and strong brand and use them for not only strategic, but economic, purposes. That case is cogently made in the manifesto and has been made by many other people. For me, however, the process through which we are going is equally important. It is equally important for people in the north-east to go through the process of achieving the devolution of power through debate, and the co-ordination of their campaign is strengthening.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that although communities are important, it is geography that formed them? It is a matter of geography where coal and the major rivers are, which was what formed the communities in the north-east of England. Those communities can be diverse—for example, there are differences between Tyneside and Teesside. However, we recognise that size is important. Some argue that the north-east is too small to have its own regional government. I come from that area, but have some sympathy with that idea. We would like Cumbria to be included and to expand the north-east for reasons of community, as Cumbria has more of a connection with the north-east than the north-west.

Andrew George: The hon. Gentleman makes the point well that the dynamics and geography in different parts of the country operate differently. Many people believe that strategic transport cannot be planned in too small a region anywhere. That assumes that the boundaries between regions are frontiers. I do not believe that they are, nor do the Government intend them to be. Much transport infrastructure—road and rail—goes through the government zone of the south-west. Cornwall may be concerned about the development of the Ilminster bypass over the border in Somerset, but it is equally concerned about the A303 further up the road across Salisbury plain and Hampshire. We cannot assume that boundaries are frontiers, whether we are talking about transport or other matters. There is therefore a need for dialogue and strategic partnerships. The argument about a unilateral declaration of independence and home rule is nonsense. It is deflecting all in the north-east and elsewhere from pursuing a proper agenda. That does not help us to propose sensible solutions to the problem.

I was trying to make a point about the process, which I would enjoy as I like challenging tiresome metropolitan prejudices about small, and especially rural, areas. It would drive many of us forward. It has the capacity to galvanise the local community, as it would help us to promote our own brand and distinctiveness. It would also give us the opportunity to tell people in the wider world what we are about and why the place is so special. It would build the self-confidence of a place that has lacked it for generations.

I am disappointed that many older councillors are not especially enthusiastic about the campaign for a Cornish assembly. However, young people in Cornwall are strongly in favour of it: a recent youth manifesto made it one of their top priorities. It is interesting that it

motivates young people. I wanted to ask the Minister several questions, but I do not want to detain the debate unnecessarily, as others wish to speak.

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne) *rose—*

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) *rose—*

Andrew George: I will give way to the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) and then to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner).

Ms Atherton: I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate. Will the hon. Gentleman give us his views on unitary status?.We should focus on that in Cornwall, as it is a prerequisite if we want to consider a Cornish assembly after we have a regional assembly in the wider south-west.

Andrew George: That is a cart and horse issue. I represent a constituency with a unitary authority on the Isles of Scilly and I appreciate the importance of configuring local government in a way that does not confuse people. The Government are right not to lay another tier of government on top of what already amounts to the confusion of parishes, districts and counties. We need a debate, and I am encouraged by the process that is beginning in Cornwall. We should make progress in a consensual way rather than take snatch decisions that we have to argue about and justify. It is important to get the regional structure right before proceeding to unitary structures below it.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): That poses an interesting question. Is the hon. Gentleman in favour of the retention of Cornwall as an entity in the form of a county council? Under the White Paper, Cornwall will go. In that case, does he view Cornwall as a unitary authority, or will it be carved up?

Andrew George: Questions of governance and administration are relevant. Local authorities largely administer Government policy. I am seeking to achieve the highest level of governance for the entity of Cornwall—and for the Isles of Scilly, if it wishes to share in aspects of its governance. My view and my confident prediction is that on the current level of popular support for a south-west regional assembly, Government policy will not succeed. The Government will have to revisit the issue of regional government in much of the south of England. I am pleased and optimistic about making progress in the north. I have demonstrated that the entity of Cornwall receives great popular support and that it makes sense to retain the highest possible governance of that region.

Mr. Andrew Turner: Time has passed since I wanted to intervene, but I am glad to hear the hon. Gentleman refer to the absence of support for a south-west regional assembly. There is certainly no support for a south-eastern one. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the enthusiasm of youth for a regional solution for Cornwall and the lack of such enthusiasm among older people. I do not know where the division arises: I suspect that youth ends two or three years older than the person who is speaking about the subject. Is it not customary for young people to be more enthusiastic about all sorts of political solutions and for older people, frankly, to be more grounded in realities?

Andrew George: That is an odd thesis. On another occasion, we could explore some of the underlying thinking and assumptions about youth and age in politics.

Last Thursday, we heard hyperbole from the Deputy Prime Minister, about trusting people and flexibility. My question to the Minister is this: how much trust are the Government prepared to place in people? If we have witnessed the largest and most popular demonstration of support for a regional assembly in Cornwall, with 50,000 people signing a declaration, how much trust will the Government place in that? If they are prepared to allow 27,000 people in Gibraltar to have a referendum to determine the constitutional outcome for that place, how much flexibility are they prepared to show in their approach to devolution?

In paragraph 6.5 of the White Paper, the Government say that, in the long term, they are prepared to revisit the issue of boundaries. What will trigger that? Will popular campaigns increase that chink of light and enable places such as Cornwall to revisit the issue?

The Deputy Prime Minister said

"by embracing diversity we can strengthen the United Kingdom".—[*Official Report*, 9 May 2002; Vol. 385, c. 278.]

I entirely agree, but does the Minister agree that diversity could be greatly embraced by giving regional powers to those small regions that have a strong and diverse identity and culture, rather than submerging them into a wider region? The White Paper claims that the Government want to

"encourage diversity of the English regions",

but what examples can the Minister give to show that any of their agencies or quangos have in any way encouraged greater diversity than might be possible if the regions were configured to reflect diversity? Paragraph 9.4 refers to "relevant factors" that would trigger a decision by the Government to hold a referendum. An explanation of those relevant factors would be helpful.

The White Paper constitutes a brave and honourable attempt to provide regional devolution. It is not for me to say, but I am told that people in the north-east, the north-west and Yorkshire are supportive. Given that support, I hope that it will succeed, but if the agenda of consequential devolution is based on envy and people saying, "Well, they've got devolution, so we want it, too," that will not be a sufficiently motivating factor. If there is a lack of support and enthusiasm for the idea throughout the rest of the country, what will the Government do? Will they, as the Minister and I have discussed, allow those government zones where there is a settled will on the issue to consider other boundaries and make proposals for regional government on the basis of boundaries that the Government do not currently recognise?

The Government must answer those questions. The challenge for them is to show that they have learned to let go a little, because a control-freak version of regional devolution is destined to fail. The Government's policy

[Andrew George]

of creating city mayors on their terms has made a monkey of them and it would be unwise not to learn the lessons from that.

11.28 am

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) on securing the debate. The lessons of devolution in Wales have a role to play and a real relevance in the debate that is taking place in England. The people of Wales regard the people of Cornwall very much as the western Welsh. Indeed, they sometimes feel that there but for the grace of history goes Wales, so I have great sympathy for the hon. Gentleman's arguments.

It is, of course, for the people of England to decide whether they want regional assemblies and, importantly, for the people in the regions to decide what the regions should be. However, there is no doubt that following devolution to Wales and Scotland, something must be done in England, and I believe that there are only two options. The first is an English Parliament, working alongside the Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Parliament. The second option is regional assemblies in England. The Government have introduced proposals for regional assemblies, and Wales and Plaid Cymru will follow the developments with a great deal of interest. I hope that we will be able to share our experiences with hon. Members in England.

The hon. Member for St. Ives made an important point that the choice must be made at that local level. It is vital for the Government to recognise and support any region that is a clearly distinct entity, has a strong historical identity and wants to move forward, in association with the Government, on regional devolution. I must confess that although I am not Cornish, I am one of the 50,000 who signed the declaration—the hon. Gentleman admitted that it included people from outside Cornwall. I received the publication about the Cornish Constitutional Convention and read it with interest. The fact that an area in England is so proactive in seeking regional devolution should dovetail with the Government's priorities and I hope that the Minister will listen to the hon. Gentleman's comments.

One of the lessons of the European experience of regional government is that we cannot and should not impose artificial areas. It was most recently tried in Italy, where Umberto Bossi of the Lega Nord tried to make out that northern Italy had a regional or independent status. He failed to convince even the Italian regions and I am afraid that the Government will fail to convince the people of England—whose decision it is—that artificial regions can deliver the benefits of devolution.

It is also interesting to note that regional government is happening within Wales. Having had national devolution, the Assembly has looked to devolve internally. For example, it has met in north Wales and established regional committees for north Wales and other regions. That is another interesting experience that could be brought to bear in England.

There can be no doubt that there will be huge benefits for regions in England if they accept regionalisation and regional assemblies. Interestingly, the Government deal for the English regions is in some respects better than what was on the table for Wales. Like the Scottish Parliament, regional assemblies will be able to raise tax, which the National Assembly for Wales cannot do. They will also be able to borrow, which the Assembly cannot do, although we would like to. The White Paper made it clear that borrowing and a tax-raising regime within a capping limit was important for local accountability and democracy. I agree and I hope that a similar process will come to Wales in good time.

How will the regional assemblies be funded? The Minister will know that whatever formula is used will surely have an impact on the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament. Will it be a Barnett-based funding formula? Barnett is totally discredited—even by Lord Barnett himself and by all independent economists—and the need now is for a truly needs-based formula to fund the regional assemblies in England and, as long as we have the present situation, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.

It is also interesting to note that regional assemblies are seen in England as a vehicle for delivering economic development. There is huge potential and I welcome the Government's move, but regional government does not deliver economic development if it is not allied to the right policies. Paragraph 4 on page 9 of the White Paper says clearly:

"A key task of government is to ensure that all regions share in the nation's wealth and prosperity."

Unfortunately, under the Wales Office and now the National Assembly for Wales, the Welsh share of gross domestic product has droped from 88 per cent. of the UK level to 80 per cent. Therefore, we want to watch the experience of areas such as the north-east of England with a great deal of caution. Simply setting up regional assemblies will not deliver economic development. Co-operation between them is needed to overcome regional disparities.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon): If, for example, the north-east voted in a referendum for a regional assembly but the south-west voted against, how should the funding be decided? The costs of the reorganisation for the north-east would be huge. The running costs for a regional assembly would be an additional burden on the taxpayer and the figures for other associated reorganisations would be high. Should the south-west be compensated for not going off on this hare-brained route or should it be penalised by not having equal money provided as compensation for staying with its shire status?

Mr. Thomas: I confess that I have not considered that matter. I would imagine that the key would lie in a truly needs-based formula that delivered to all regions of England their share of the nation's prosperity, whether or not they chose to have a regional assembly.

My final point is a key one. The White Paper accepts the words of the former hon. Member for Caerphilly, Ron Davies, who told the National Assembly for Wales that devolution was a process not an event. Paragraph 4.5 of the White Paper says clearly that there are likely to be further proposals for the decentralisation of responsibilities to assemblies as time goes on. I do not know whether that also applies to the National

Assembly for Wales, but I understand that this is a process in England. It is also a process in Wales. We will seek to work with the experience in England and hope to benefit from it. We also hope that we can bring our experience to enrich it too.

11.36 am

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) on securing the debate. It is significant that the two contributions that follow his speech should come from a Member from Wales and one from Scotland. It emphasises how regional government in England is of importance not just to people in England, but to those of us elsewhere in the UK who already enjoy the benefits of devolved government.

Regional government in England is a way of completing the devolution process and ensuring that it spreads to all parts of the UK. Any potential instability in the current devolution arrangements for the UK as a whole lies in the imbalance between the large and effectively unitary geographical entity of England, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have devolved assemblies. Regional government in England could rectify that and the one-sided relationship between England and the other nations of the United Kingdom.

I am pleased that the example of devolution in Scotland and Wales has encouraged movement towards devolution and regional government in England. It has been the experience in states where regional government started gradually that the regions that originally opposed devolution learned from the examples where it was granted and were anxious to follow those regions that had moved ahead faster. I think of Spain in particular.

Mr. Andrew Turner: I am surprised that a Member from Scotland or one from Wales can compare regional devolution in England with devolution to the nations of Scotland and Wales. Those are two entirely different concepts, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree. He refers to the imbalance between England and the nations of Scotland and Wales, and Northern Ireland, which I appreciate is neither a nation nor a region. In what way does he, as a Scottish Member, think that that imbalance works?

Mr. Lazarowicz: I agree that one cannot compare the nations of Scotland and Wales or the community in Northern Ireland with the English regions. The beauty of the Government's approach is that it recognises the differences between areas in England, and that devolution takes different forms in different parts of the UK. That is the way to move forward.

One cannot say that under devolution, one part of the UK benefits at the expense of another. There is potential instability where one large part of the UK has no regional government, while other parts have their own national assembly or parliament or regional government.

Andrew George: In the light of the question from the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner), does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the lessons to learn from the unfinished business of devolution in Wales and Scotland is that devolution is most successful in areas that have a strong sense of identity? Scotland and Wales are nations and there is no question where the boundaries should fall. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should build our regions on strong communities with strong identities?

Mr. Lazarowicz: That lesson can be drawn to an extent, but I will not be drawn down the same road as the hon. Gentleman. In making decisions on the most appropriate form of government structure, geographical realities and economic structure cannot be ignored. One must find the best arrangement to meet popular needs within an area, region or nation, and to reflect the economic, social and political realities. No solution will fit all. That is what is attractive about the Government's proposals.

I praise the Deputy Prime Minister for bringing forward, with other Ministers, radical proposals for regional government. I say that not as a loyal member of the Government's party wishing to praise the Deputy Prime Minister, but because he genuinely deserves praise from across the political spectrum for pressing the case for regional government. I pay tribute also to the hon. Member for St. Ives for welcoming the Government's proposals.

Devolution and regional government in Wales and Scotland are good not only as a democratic principle, but because they lead to improved government. One of the problems in our state is government over-centralisation. Moving away from that will benefit people throughout the UK.

Some in Scotland have suggested that we could lose from the establishment of a regional assembly in north-east England—that it could rival Scotland for the allocation of resources or the attraction of inward investment. That may be the case, but different regions will be rivals in some cases and partners in others. Clear economic interests unite Scotland and north-east England, for example, in food and transport, where regional governments and assemblies or national Parliaments and Governments could work together to provide a focus to address problems in a way that a centralised Government could not do effectively.

I issue one warning to the hon. Member for St. Ives and some of his hon. Friends in Cornwall. I do not want to interfere in the internal politics of another part of the United Kingdom, but I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider—

Mr. Swire: As the hon. Gentleman does not wish to interfere in other regions, or zones, of the United Kingdom, does that mean that when the Bill comes before the House he and his hon. Friends in Scotland will play no part in its deliberation?

Mr. Lazarowicz: It does not. I shall be happy to debate that point with the hon. Gentleman on another occasion if he so wishes, as we have no time to do so today.

I do not want to interfere in the internal political debate. I merely observe that almost 25 years ago, when the first referendums were held on whether there should be a Scottish Assembly, some took the position that they

[Mr. Lazarowicz]

were not against Scottish devolution or a Scottish assembly per se, but against the type of devolution on offer then. That was the argument advanced at the time by a former Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home. One reason why the result in that referendum was so close was that the various parties and interests in favour of some type of devolution fell out among themselves. Twenty-odd years later there was resounding support for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament precisely because the various interests and political and social groupings that wanted devolution, including the nationalist party, the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats, had the same agenda and worked together.

The hon. Member for St. Ives is in danger of losing the entire show and setting back the cause of any form of regional government in south-west England for a long time to come—which would be extremely unfortunate for those who want regional government in England as part of the wider UK settlement—because he is unhappy about the type of structure that the Government propose. I make that point not only in respect of the debate in the south-west of England, but because some elsewhere in England may want a form of regional government, but not with the boundary proposed, or not at this time.

Andrew George: As I recollect, the result of the original referendum in Scotland was gerrymandered. There was a clear "yes" vote; it was the interpretation that resulted in the referendum being lost. If the hon. Gentleman's advice is that we in Cornwall should ensure that the campaign is cross-party, I assure him that the Cornish Constitutional Convention is all-party; it has representatives of all parties and of none.

Mr. Lazarowicz: As a matter of historical fact, in the referendum in Scotland in the 1970s there was indeed a majority for a Scottish assembly, but a majority of only about 2 per cent. I was against the 40 per cent. rule, which meant that the majority in favour did not result in the introduction of a Scottish assembly. However, a proportion of 33 per cent. in favour and 31 per cent. against was not a resounding victory for the forces that supported devolution, compared with 75 per cent. in favour and 25 per cent. against 20 years later. That is what the hon. Gentleman should bear in mind.

The hon. Gentleman should concentrate his campaigning in support of the Government's proposals. He can suggest ways of representing what he considers to be the special Cornish interests in the south-west regional assembly, just as in Wales there are regional committees whose structures have been set up to take account of a particular interest or of different parts of Wales. I do not want to contribute further to the internal debate in Cornwall and other parts of England about what form of regional government to support. Again, however, I emphasise that those who support it should be wary of playing into the hands of those who are against any type of regional government whatsoever.

From the experience of Scotland, I can tell hon. Members that devolution works. It brings improved government to the people and provides an opportunity to focus on the real issues and concerns of the community, which cannot be addressed by an over-centralised form of government. However, there are lessons to be learned from the Scottish experience. One is to be careful of new buildings, a lesson which I hope is taken on board by those who bring forward proposals in England. Nevertheless, devolution is popular. Hon. Members from outside Scotland might not realise that from some of the one-sided press reports that sometimes appear in the UK media. All the opinion polls since devolution have shown that the number of people who support the Scottish Parliament is as high as ever. In the latest opinion poll, the number supporting a Scottish Parliament had increased by 4 per cent. since its establishment in 1999.

When I say that devolution and the Scottish Parliament are popular, I am not suggesting that Members of the Scottish Parliament are feted in the streets. That is not in the nature of the Edinburgh character. What is special about the Scottish Parliament is that, whatever its faults—it has made mistakes, like any democratic institution—it is seen as the Parliament of the people of Scotland, as our Parliament. It may do things that the people do not like but, at the end of the day, just as before 1707, if we do not like what the Members of Parliament do we can "aye peeble them wi' stanes", as was said then. We can certainly express our dissatisfaction, as well as our satisfaction, with that Parliament.

Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives on initiating the debate. I congratulate the Government on bringing forward proposals for regional government and urge them to implement them and put them before the people and regions of England at the earliest possible opportunity.

11.51 am

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): I, too, am pleased that the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) was able to secure the debate. As the first representative of a constituency that is incontrovertibly part of England to speak in the debate, may I say that I agree with him on several issues to which he referred? The first and most important is the sense of locality and community. I am by no means convinced that the Isle of Wight is part of the south-east of England. I am not convinced that the south-east of England exists as a geographical entity, other than in terms of lines drawn on maps by various Government bodies at various times and adopted subsequently, not least by our European masters, to ensure convenience for some of their purposes.

Were we to look at the regions in the south-east and along the south coast of England, it is extremely unlikely that we would unite Margate and Milton Keynes, yet that is what the Government propose in their White Paper. I find it astonishing that Bournemouth—which for centuries, until the intervention of Sir Edward Heath, was part of Hampshire—should be regarded as so detached from the New Forest, Southampton and the Isle of Wight as to form part of a different government region, and that it might in the future form part of a different sub-regional government.

Before there is any question of a referendum, the regions should be defined in consultation with local people, at least where there is any chance of the regional boundaries not being agreed and broadly accepted. I

speak as someone born in Coventry. Coventry knows pretty well where it is—in Warwickshire, in the west midlands, in the midlands of England. That is a matter of no dispute, but there is a good deal of dispute about whether Swindon, for instance, is part of the south-west, and certainly whether Swindon and the Scillies are part of the same region. Therefore, I ask the Minister, when he responds, to reflect carefully on whether we should break up existing bodies such as Southern Arts and Southern Tourism, amalgamating them with their counterparts in what is now defined by those bodies as the south-east, simply for the sake of having a regional ballot on a region that may not exist. That is a sure way to lose what the Government want.

The second point that concerns me is that, according to the White Paper, there will be a maximum of only 35 members on each regional assembly. I am not one to elect more politicians; I would not elect those 35 politicians, given the chance; but the Minister will stand no chance of obtaining support for a regional assembly from the people of the Isle of Wight if they believe that their representative will be shared with people in Portsmouth and Southampton, or Winchester, Basingstoke or Aldershot. That is a totally unsatisfactory arrangement. I am proud to represent the Isle of Wight and pleased that it is still a single constituency. I hope that it remains so for many years to come. I am sure that the people of the island would look for separate representation on any regional assembly that is set up. I should be surprised if people in other regions with their own identity did not feel the same.

The hon. Member for St. Ives, speaking of Cornwall's aspirations, says that the fact that no other areas have come forward with similar aspirations for their area to be a region strengthens the aspirations of the people of Cornwall. I in no way diminish the aspirations of the people of Cornwall when I say that others have come up with such aspirations. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats in my own constituency did so when they minted their own coins and when they imprint on their county council writing paper, amid the garland of ghastly stars, "A region of Europe". We are not a region of Europe; we are part of England. I have had run-ins in the past with the Liberals because they feel differently, although I do not expect to do so in the future, as they have learned their lesson.

The hon. Member for St. Ives said that the process of regionalisation galvanised local communities. He explained why when he said that local authorities are largely bodies that administer government policy. Because of the dissatisfaction with the role of local authorities as bodies that largely administer Government policy, an enthusiasm for regionalisation has emerged in some parts of the country. It is precisely because Governments have for too long been bodies for administering national policy, instead of representing the aspirations, desires, wishes, aims and ambitions of their local people—I accept that a Government whom I supported did that, but to nothing like the same extent as the current Government—that regionalisation becomes a possible option. People are seeking a form of self-governance, which I would hope they could achieve as successfully through Cornwall county council, Isle of Wight council or Dorset county council as through regionalisation or by throwing their lot in with Swindon, if they are in the Scillies, or with Woking and Winchester, if they are on the island.

There are two further matters on which I seek reassurance from the Minister in his reply. The first is that the strengthening of regional institutions such as development agencies, regional chambers and so on will not proceed regardless of the desires of local people. That is the implication of the White Paper, which seems to be saying, "All right, people can vote on an elected regional assembly, but we, the Government, will power ahead with our regional development agencies and our regional chambers, regardless of the fact that they do not represent regions to which people relate and that people may not have voted for, or may even have voted against, a regional elected assembly."

The second matter on which I seek reassurance is that Government funding will not discriminate against areas that choose not to elect a regional assembly. The costs of the regional assembly and reorganisation of local government that may be necessary should be met not by national taxpayers, whether in the United Kingdom or England, but from within the regions that vote for that form of upheaval and additional expense, as they would no doubt benefit from any claimed savings that may follow.

Will the Minister confirm that no unitary authority, however small—whether the Isle of Wight or the Scilly isles—will be abolished following the introduction of regional government?

Mr. Simon Thomas: The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that a similar debate took place in Wales on whether the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales would lead to a diminution of local government relevance and powers. A recent independent report concluded that the Assembly had strengthened local government in Wales.

Mr. Turner: I am pleased to hear that.

There are three players in the argument about regional and local powers. The third player is the individual. If regions or counties are sucking up power from the individual, that is a form of removal of individual power, albeit accreted to local government rather than the region, which I would not be so confident of supporting. I accept that there is an imbalance in the current arrangements. To a great extent, English people—perhaps not in the north, but elsewhere in the country—have learned to live with that. We do not envy Scotland its Parliament, although we are glad that the Scots are satisfied with it. We worry sometimes when Scottish Members of this House try to intervene in English affairs, but the solution to that imbalance is not to introduce regional assemblies that would balkanise England. England is a nation. If we are to solve the problem of the imbalance, let us do so by establishing in the House an English Grand Committee to which legislation that affects only England could be referred.

12.2 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) on securing the debate. He asked two questions which have not been answered, and I hope that the Minister will pay attention to them. The document does not say which region we are discussing and whose the choice will be.

[Mr. Adrian Sanders]

The unitary answer given by the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) would not devolve power, but centralise it, without adding power to a given area. It would merely centralise local government administration within the area. The unitary answer does not address the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) referred to a process, not an event. I hope that he is right and that the White Paper is part of a process and not the end of the line in the Government's thinking.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) referred to the potential instability arising from the imbalance that exists in the United Kingdom between a centralised English area of some 45 million or 50 million people and the devolved assemblies of the nations and other regions. That is an important point that everyone in England should consider.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) made an important point about the Government's proposal that regional assemblies should have a maximum of 35 members. He said that that is too small a number to represent fully the diversity of the regions.

Why is there a need to devolve power? It is necessary because the decision-making process in this country has become too centralised and many powers have been taken away from local areas, partly as a result of internal Government machinations to centralise power, and also because of the external influences of globalisation. The different needs of the many diverse communities throughout the country cannot be reflected in that central decision-making process.

The Liberal Democrats bring to the debate the clear philosophy of the "bottom-up" approach to government, or to put it more clearly, the "bubbling-up" theory of government, rather than the "top-down" approach. Liberal Democrat principles include accountability and democracy, and the "bottom-up" approach is about allowing a local community to determine its own needs and government, while passing up to the next tier matters with which it feels it cannot deal. The opportunity to conduct root-and-branch reform of decision making in the United Kingdom has been missed. In particular, the opportunity to rationalise tiers of government, rather than add to them, has been neglected.

Some hon. Members have mentioned quangos, and I should like to spend a little time discussing them. The quangos that exist in our society spend more than local government. They are unelected and their members, who take decisions on the appointed panels, receive payments. A recent parliamentary answer mentioned three types of quango that take decisions in our regions—health authorities, regional arts boards and regional development agencies. The cost of members' remuneration is more than £51 million for health authorities, nearly £23 million for regional arts boards and £1.3 million for regional development agencies. Any fear that regional assemblies would cost money would be knocked on the head if those three functions were put under the control of regional assemblies, which would pay for themselves over and over again.

Whitehall does not know best; local communities are better placed to meet local needs. Non-statutory bodies are often better able to deliver services than Whitehall, yet such voluntary bodies and charities often have to look to central Government, rather than to their region, for funding. The Government booklet on the funding of voluntary and community organisations by central Government lists bodies that are active in the regions and which take decisions on behalf of people to whom they are not accountable. The Arts Council, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, English Heritage, the English tourist board, Sport England, the Basic Skills Agency, the Equal Opportunities Commission, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, the Countryside Agency, English Nature, English Partnerships, the housing action trusts, the National Forest Company, the regional development agencies and the Rural Development Commission are a tiny proportion of the near-500 bodies that are spending taxpayers' money on behalf of people in the regions to whom they are not answerable.

The White Paper misses the point about regional government, and the opportunity has been missed to redefine government from the grass roots up and to take under democratic and accountable control those quangos that effectively are the democratic deficit at the heart of our unwritten constitution, which was once described as not being worth the paper that it was not written on.

Mr. Lazarowicz: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Sanders: I do not have enough time, as I know that the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) wants to speak.

The democratic deficit is reflected in the growth of quangos that take decisions for which they are not accountable in the regions. Regional assemblies should be created to put that right.

12.8 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) on securing the debate, which, as he said, fortuitously coincides with the publication of the White Paper. The debate has centred on the contents of that document. The White Paper is so accurate that the map on the front page, which purports to show England, includes the Scottish uplands, but I am sure that the Minister had nothing to do with that inaccuracy.

The document is ill thought out and confusing. It is more of a sop to the Deputy Prime Minister and the north-east region than anything else. The idea put forward by the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) that that is comparable to devolution in either Scotland or Wales is total nonsense. The power that will be given to regional assemblies is tiny in comparison with that given to either of those examples. The powers set out in the document will actually take power away from existing local councils. Public services will not improve because a new tier of regional politicians has been created. New talking shops

and extra regional red tape will not boost economic growth or help the vulnerable. The policy of the Conservative party is to get power closer to the people.

Mr. Lazarowicz: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Moss: I have only a few minutes left, so I shall not give way to anyone.

Genuine decentralisation should be to local government, not to regional quangos and bureaucrats. Conservatives want to save counties such as Cornwall, Durham and Kent. We oppose regional government because it will dilute political representation and it is based on arbitrary regional definitions. In his opening remarks, the hon. Member for St. Ives found it difficult to use the word "region" and instead used the expression "government zones". He has a valid point. The boundaries do not mark natural regions but are just arbitrary lines drawn on a map.

An interesting article by Christopher Booker in *The Sunday Telegraph* included a map that was drawn in 1971 by a Brussels official. The regions set out by the Government are nearly identical to those set out by that Brussels bureaucrat. I shall not go into the European dimension; the evidence is there for all to see, without it being necessary to draw the obvious conclusion.

Mr. Sanders: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Moss: No, I shall continue.

Labour's plans for regional government will mean less, not more, power for local communities. Labour has said that the formation of regional assemblies will require the abolition of the county councils. It flagged that up some time ago in its 1997 manifesto and again in its 2001 manifesto. We should not be surprised that part of the reorganisation will, in fact, destroy the county councils. I have done some quick calculations. If the counties and shire districts in eastern England, which I know fairly well, were replaced with sensibly sized unitaries, the number of elected members within the whole of eastern England would be reduced by about 38 per cent. That is a huge reduction in the number of representatives, at all levels of local government. The idea that the proposal will bring democracy and local councillors closer to the people is nonsense. There will be fewer representatives for the population of East Anglia and I believe that those figures and that analysis will be easily replicated for all the regions.

I picked up on an inaccuracy in the document. The Minister may care to comment on it today or write to me about it. A table on page 66, on the organisation of local government in the regions, states that the east of England has four unitary authorities out of a total of 54. However, the reference under the map on page 71 is to 20 unitary councils—a total inaccuracy in the space of a few pages. Is the number four or is it 20? I know for a fact that it is four, so why are the Minister and his Department putting 20 unitary councils down for the east of England?

We are also opposed to regional government because of the cost. Restructuring costs will be involved in reorganising the local authorities. The last reorganisation, which was of Humberside county council in, I believe, 1998, cost £53 million in one-off reorganisation administrative costs. If that is replicated throughout all 34 remaining councils in England, the total bill will approach about £2 billion.

We then have the running costs of the regional assemblies. By calculating the costs for the Greater London Authority and apportioning them on a pro rata population basis, the Local Government Association has come up with an annual cost of £300 million a year for administration alone for the eight regional government authorities.

There will also be costs associated with the government assembly buildings. The cost for the Scottish Parliament is huge—£300 million and rising. The Welsh Assembly building cost £50 million, and the Greater London Authority building will cost £120 million. If we take a reasonably low figure of £50 million for each of the regional authorities, that is another £400 million just to construct offices to house the assemblies.

On set-up costs, the White Paper blithely mentions that it will cost only £20 million to set up the north-east regional government, but £20 million is a huge amount of money and, replicated in eight regions, the total comes to £160 million. Huge costs will be involved and the Government have not yet told us how the scheme is to be funded. Perhaps the Minister will tell us, in the short time that he has to reply.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) mentioned the Barnett formula. There have been moves, certainly by the Deputy Prime Minister, to revisit the Barnett formula and perhaps money will be taken from Scotland and Wales to fund this scheme. That would not go down too well, I am sure, but it is a possibility. We have not heard a peep so far on how the Government are going to find the money and in what time scale. It is important that we learn the Government's intentions.

The White Paper suggests that going down the road of regional government will iron out regional disparities in wealth and income. There is no evidence to suggest that elected regional assemblies will provide a panacea for the problems of regional wealth and income differences. In fact, there is considerable evidence to suggest that regional assemblies will only increase regional disparities. While the present centralised system of government might not achieve economic equality across England, it is probable that the creation of regional assemblies, each pursuing its own agenda and competing with the others, will only add to existing regional inequalities.

What is the evidence from the rest of Europe, where there is regional government? It is not helpful. France and Germany possess a strong and clear structure of regional government but regional variations in income are just as great as in the United Kingdom. For example, average income in the Paris region is almost double that in the south and east of France. The economic argument that regional assemblies will act to lessen economic disparities between the regions and counter the north-south divide, as the White Paper purports, is deeply problematic.

The Government have not thought through their proposals on regional government. On the one hand, they are saying that it is a good idea, for all the reasons given in the White Paper, but on the other they are allowing local regions to decide for themselves. Coupled

[Mr. Moss]

with the referendums on regional government will be the requirement for fairly substantial reorganisation and restructuring at district and county level. It is unclear how the Government will approach that and, again, a huge cost will be involved. The paper talks about the Minister taking soundings. Can the Minister tell us what soundings he and his colleagues are preparing to take? How can taking soundings be measured, in any terms, as a democratic input into finding out what the regions want? That will happen long before the matter is put to the ballot.

On the referendum ballot, do the Government intend to couple both questions so that as people vote for regional government they vote for a structure of unitary authorities in the same box, or will they vote in preference for both? I think that the Minister is nodding to the former. However, the new boundaries for unitary authorities will be determined, we are told, by the boundary committees. What consultation will they undertake? The last time that we attempted such a scheme, it was incredibly difficult to achieve agreement and, as a result, only a small proportion of authorities went into unitary status. In East Anglia, there are only four unitary authorities among 54, so the costs there will be enormous.

What worries me, in terms of democratic accountability, is who will control the outcome of the boundary committees. How will they arrive at a consensus for reorganising and redistributing boundaries? That is an incredibly difficult task and I think that the Government have completely overlooked the fact that it will hold up the whole proceedings. We will have piecemeal development on an ad hoc basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) raised an important question. If some regions go ahead with assemblies, and every expectation is that the north-east wants to and will do so first, will they attract additional money? Will the Government make it more attractive to go down that road because additional grant moneys are available? The Government ought to come clean. If it is such a good idea, why are they not going down the road of making sure that it happens quickly instead of having a piecemeal and ad hoc arrangement that will lead to confusion and instability in local authorities? Already in the north-east, local district councils are saying that they cannot get people to reply to job adverts—people are not prepared to work for authorities that may disappear in the next three or four years. There is a distraction and hiatus in ensuring that the normal services provided at that level work effectively.

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Dr. Alan Whitehead): I regret that I have very little time to respond to several important points that were raised. I would like to join other hon. Members in thanking the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) for proposing the debate. It is a very good time to debate the topic.

The White Paper "Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions" has just been published. I note and appreciate the support that the hon. Member for St. Ives gave to that White Paper and many things in it. I believe that it sets out our policy clearly. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said that he believes that Britain cannot achieve its full potential unless all its regions share in success and drive that success. The proposals in our White Paper will give the regions of England new choices, new powers, and a new voice. That sums up the purpose of the White Paper.

The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) has opposed that proposal root and branch. Hon. Members will remember that during the last debate on the subject it was pointed out that regional chambers are now full of Conservatives taking part in the activities of those chambers. I recall that the Conservatives opposed the Scottish Parliament, in which they are now taking part. It is a similar situation in the National Assembly for Wales and the Greater London Assembly. I anticipate that when elected regional assemblies are up and running, there will be Conservatives present, taking full part in the proceedings.

In addition to that Canute-like opposition, the hon. Gentleman appeared to set his face against regional assemblies because he really wanted to ensure that community government was alive and well, and therefore he wanted to preserve counties, the well-known vanguards of community government throughout the country. He also opposed the whole idea of the White Paper because it would not produce a perfect outcome. That appears to be a rather strange method of opposition. Of course things will not be perfect. As hon. Members have said, the White Paper sets out a process, which will change further. The opportunity that the White Paper presents to the regions is to allow them to play a much greater role in their own strategic decision making—in how money is deployed and used in the regions. Although that is not a perfect endpoint, it is a great step forward in terms of how the regions can function best in their own interest.

The White Paper therefore sets out a series of measures to develop and extend regional policy in England and that should be welcomed throughout the whole country. Indeed, hon. Members have pointed out that it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The regions are in the best position to address their own particular needs. Those needs will be different and the assemblies may well work in different ways. The solution that is suggested in the White Paper is different from the solutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London. There are different circumstances and ideas for how the regions might move forward in England.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) talked about the way in which assemblies might be funded. Assemblies will have a strategic role, which is their purpose. A needs-based formula that resembles that for local government would therefore be inappropriate. The hon. Gentleman will have seen from the White Paper that essentially the money will be provided by a transfer of the funds that are already deployed in the regions, but at present they are deployed without democratic accountability. He will see on page 45 an exemplification of how that transfer of funds might work in a particular region, which was the point made by the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders). The cost of running the assemblies will largely come

from a transfer of money that is already being spent by people who are taking those decisions but are not doing so on an accountable basis.

As hon. Members pointed out, assemblies will have the opportunity to issue precepts and to borrow. The cost of running the assemblies will therefore be absorbed from within the total sum of money available and the savings from transferring officials from the Government offices of the regions to the regional assemblies. I confirm for the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) that there would be no intention of discriminating on funding against regions without an elected regional assembly. The distribution of funding in the regions would remain the same. The fundamental difference would be that an elected regional assembly would have the right to determine how the funding was being used in its region through a block grant.

The White Paper builds on the successes that have already been achieved and puts the regions at the heart of policies to create a more prosperous and inclusive society. It is relevant to all English regions. Regional chambers will have new responsibilities as regional planning bodies. They will help to integrate regional strategies and improve regional co-ordination. They will enhance accountability in the regions. They will work closely with Government offices and other Government-funded bodies in the region and will be given extra responsibilities to strengthen regional decision making.

Hon. Members asked how elected assemblies would be formed. Regional assemblies are all about choice. If there is popular demand in a region for an elected assembly and most voters are in favour, it will become a reality. If not, that will not happen. The Government are not imposing regional assemblies on the regions. As with many other important regional decisions, each region must decide. We are giving people the chance to make up their own mind and to help to decide their regional future. There is no secret timetable for referendums. A decision to hold a referendum would be based on the groundswell of interest in the region and the representations made. I agree with the hon. Member for St. Ives that that is a process. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight will see what the word "process" means if he reads paragraph 4.5 of the White Paper.

Those hon. Members who opposed the White Paper's proposals mentioned several times that they wanted to preserve counties. As hon. Members know, the Government do not have an agenda to abolish counties. The boundary committee would consider a process of local government in that region before any referendum was held. People will vote with their eyes open.

Mr. Moss: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Whitehead: No, I cannot give way.

I confirm to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight that no unitary authorities will be abolished. That is stated explicitly on page 66 of the White Paper. The boundary committee will be asked to propose a process of unitary government. A county could be the unitary government.

Andrew George: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Whitehead: I apologise, but I cannot give way as I have so little time to finish my comments.

The key question is what is a region? Under the Government's proposals, a region must create the democratic space for a function to take place and the strategic regional decision-making function is a clear level of governance that is necessary and helpful in this country.

The idea that regions simply represent historic communities and nothing else is not central to how we devolve power, accountability and decision making in England. That is the basis upon which the White Paper will proceed.

Barnsley Coalfield Rural Transport

12.30 pm

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): I am delighted to have secured a debate on this important subject. I am pleased, too, that the Minister for Transport will reply to the debate as last month he visited the project, which, as he knows, is based in my home town, Grimethorpe, and handed over the keys to a 16-seater and a 25-seater minibus, which are both wheelchair accessible and worth a total of £140,000.

The project is managed by the local rural coalfield transport partnership, which is chaired by my good friend Robin Bates. Before I speak about coalfield community transport, which I shall refer to as CCT, I want to remind the House of my constituency's background, as it is especially relevant to the debate.

Barnsley, East and Mexborough has the lowest gross domestic product per capita of any constituency in the UK, which is why it is part of the South Yorkshire objective 1 area. It has the highest level of disability, which is a direct legacy of the former mining industry; one in three households in the constituency has at least one disabled person. It has one of the lowest levels of car ownership of any constituency in the country.

The hinterland of the constituency comprises a pepperpot of scattered former mining communities, most of which have a population of between 2,000 and 6,000 and are located between Barnsley and Doncaster. In terms of transport infrastructure they are quite isolated. Serious economic and social problems arose after the collapse of the local mining industry in the early 1990s. No new work was available locally and people found it hard to get employment outside the area. There was a drive, especially by local youth projects, to enable young people to travel out of the area for personal development and recreation.

Since 1997, the Government have recognised the need to improve the transport infrastructure in places such as Barnsley and Doncaster. In Doncaster in the current year, a further £10 million is being made available to complete the important Doncaster north road bridge scheme, the total cost of which is about £46.5 million. This year, too, £2.9 million is being made available to complete the Denaby road crossing scheme adjacent to Mexborough, at a total cost of £9 million. Since 1997 in Barnsley, the Dearne towns link road, and phase 1 of the coalfields link road have been completed. In the current year, phases 2 and 3 of the coalfields link road will be completed and provisional funding for the Cudworth and West Green bypass and the Barnsley interchange has been agreed.

One of the major clarion calls of this Government has, rightly, been social inclusion and CCT is a classic example of what we are trying to achieve nationally in terms of public transport and social inclusion. CCT has its origins in a regeneration strategy that was drawn up for Grimethorpe in the mid-1990s. Community transport was highlighted as a particular matter of concern in the report. A follow-up report, entitled "Grimethorpe Transport and Mobility Feasibility Study" and produced in January 1998, highlighted the need for better public transport provision. A pilot project was started, and one minibus was loaned by Barnsley dial-a-ride to provide accessible transport journeys for youth and community groups in the local area. One trip a week was operated to a local supermarket, and group hire facilities were offered to a range of community groups. The pilot project lasted for six months from November 1998 to March 1999, and the main output was to introduce community-based transport solutions and train local volunteers in minibus operation.

At this point, I should like to pay tribute to one individual in particular. Local parish councillor Beryl Sargesson has been the main driving force behind the project from day one. The Minister met Beryl when he visited Grimethorpe, and she has asked me to thank him for the time that he took to speak to local people about the project.

The pilot aimed to enhance the local community's capacity to develop its own transport solution and increase people's employability through training. It trained volunteers in driving and customer care, and operational experience was gained by providing a one-day-a-week service to leisure and social opportunities. A core group of 12 volunteers were involved, three of whom were able to move on to secure full-time employment as a result of their work in the project. A group hire service was offered, but with only one minibus available for the pilot, it was not always possible to meet local demand.

The project experienced difficulties in securing more volunteers, especially when incapacity benefit rules excluded people from offering more than the occasional hour. It was concluded that the project needed to be developed more professionally and involve a number of paid staff who could deliver services not suited to provision by volunteers. The next period was devoted to acquiring resources and funding to implement the development plan. Funding was secured and the project became operational in June 2000. The main elements of its funding package of more than £500,000 came from three main sources: the Countryside Agency, via its rural transport fund; European regional development fund objective 2 priority 5 funding; and Coalfields Regeneration Trust money.

The project initially provided transport for community services in the Brierley and Darfield wards, but it was always planned to extend the area covered to include the Dearne to the south and to become a cross-boundary project by extending into the coalfield areas of south-east Wakefield. I am thinking particularly of what we call the SESKU villages, and I am glad to see my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) in his place because they are in his constituency. SESKU stands for South Elmsall, South Kirkby and Upton, which are three mining communities that are very similar to those in my constituency.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): My hon. Friend is a great fighter for coalfield communities, and I pay tribute to him for securing this debate. He mentioned some villages in my constituency, and he will know that deprivation in mining villages does not stop at the Barnsley boundary. Many of the villages that I represent suffer from the same problems of lack of access to work, leisure and education. I pay tribute to the work that he

has done, with the Minister and the other people involved, in bringing the project to the area and we look forward to its extension into my constituency.

Jeff Ennis: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments, and I shall refer later to a specific problem with extending the project into his area. I am sure that both he and the Minister will be interested to hear about it.

The proposals for a revised cross-boundary coalfield rural transport partnership are supported by Barnsley metropolitan borough council and City of Wakefield metropolitan district council and are now being implemented. Countryside Agency funding for a rural transport partnership officer has also been secured. The project management is based on a partnership that involves local authorities, passenger transport executives, Barnsley dial-a-ride, the Countryside Agency and, most importantly, the community, which has representation on the rural transport partnership. Barnsley metropolitan borough council acts as the lead authority.

The rural transport partnership determines the types and patterns of services to be provided. To date, 700 individuals are registered to travel with CCT. By the end of December 2001, more than 30,000 passenger journeys had been made by CCT services, including almost 4,500 for travel to work and training purposes. Assistance with travel to work and training opportunities are a vital ingredient of CCT, and are much appreciated by local businesses. Evidence of such appreciation can be seen in a letter from a large textile producer in South and West Yorkshire, SR Gent International, which has factory units in Barnsley, Doncaster and Wakefield. It is signed by the head of personnel and is addressed to CCT:

"Dear Madam, I am writing to tell you how invaluable is the transport that your organisation has provided over the past twelve months to our SR Gent site at South Kirkby . . . I am afraid that we would have lost some of our employees if the transport was not available. It is difficult to get to work from Grimethorpe at the time that the unit starts and finishes. It has also encouraged people from the Grimethorpe and Brierley area to apply for employment at the South Kirkby site that would not have done so if this transport was not available. I do hope that the organisation will go from strength to strength enabling it to help other areas similar to Grimethorpe to bring jobs to the people who are seeking employment in areas that would normally be beyond their reach."

That provides direct evidence of the good job that the partnership is doing and that CCT is providing.

Altogether, CCT has created 10 new jobs; 32 drivers—nine staff and 23 volunteers—have been trained; and six trainees have gone on to paid employment. Although the number of trainees moving into jobs was lower than expected, CCT has assisted the junction project in Grimethorpe, which deals mainly with young people with problems. It provided transport that enabled 20 youngsters to access job search facilities and visit potential employers. Those young people have not usually availed themselves of the more traditional routes into work via the Employment Service. The partnership and CCT are both viewed by Barnsley council as making a substantial and vital contribution to the social inclusion aims and objectives of the Barnsley community plan and the South Yorkshire local transport plan.

What does the future hold for CCT? I hope that it will be bright. The partnership is extending into west Yorkshire villages similar to my mining communities. The Government must acknowledge that community transport plays a vital role in recognising and providing for gaps in the local public transport network that are not usually met by commercial operators.

Sustainability is a complex issue. Affordability means that a subsidy is required to provide services. However, a window of opportunity is presented by the Employment Service via jobcentre clubs—as subsidy can be provided alongside potential sponsorship from employers—as well as the Countryside Agency, objective 1 funding and, I hope, passenger transport executives.

It is worth noting that in the Government's challenge fund, community transport is identified as an area to which funding agencies should look to enhance and sustain existing operations rather than to reinvent the wheel. We must ensure that future funding regimes have sufficient flexibility to cope with local community demands and that we avoid too much bureaucracy. The current expansion into West Yorkshire provides a classic example. South Yorkshire is an objective 1 area, but the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth qualifies only for objective 2 priority 5 funding, which can create problems. We need greater flexibility between the two funding regimes. Generally speaking, the provision of objective 1 funding can be very bureaucratic. I acknowledge that accountability is important when it comes to spending public money, but the bureaucracy should not be over-burdensome. I am not convinced that the balance is right for objective 1 funding.

There can sometimes be a conflict with the need for traffic-calming measures whose specification prevents low-floor vehicles from accessing kerb-to-kerb services. That issue requires much thought and attention from the local highways authority and the local partnership. My right hon. Friend the Minister may have some words of wisdom on that extremely difficult subject that I could pass on to my local highways authorities.

CCT was designed as a pilot to highlight some of the barriers identified in the coalfields taskforce report; to provide information on the potential changes needed in funding regimes, legislation and regeneration processes, both at a community and economic level; and to focus on residents who were suffering social exclusion and did not have access to a car.

During the period of operation, CCT has moved from an isolated cul-de-sac in the deprived mining community of Grimethorpe, Shafton and Brierley to being the fulcrum of a best practice project. It is not only achieving its core objectives on travel to work, but adding value to social and self-help community activities that had been stifled by affordability and availability issues. It is widely seen as one of the most successful partnership projects in the delivery of travel to training and work.

The project involves a continuous search for improvement and excellence as well as community accountability. That is achieved by liaison with communities at varying times of day and periods; passenger surveys, which check the relevance and effectiveness of the services; liaison with strategic bodies; and links with the Employment Service,

[Jeff Ennis]

employers and potential inward investors. I have watched the project grow and mature and I thoroughly recommend it to the House.

Jon Trickett *rose—*

Mr. Alan Hurst (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Gentleman can confirm that he has the consent of the Minister and the hon. Gentleman in charge of the debate to speak, I am more than happy for him to do so.

12.46 pm

Jon Trickett: Thank you, Mr. Hurst. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Jeff Ennis) knows that I wish to contribute, and my right hon. Friend the Minister has indicated that I have his consent to do so.

I wish only to emphasise one point that my hon. Friend made. The boundary for objective 1 status goes right through the middle of the coalfield communities, and the pit villages straddle both sides of it. The boundary is in fact a stream, which with my long legs it is possible to straddle. The fields on my hon. Friend's side are worth millions in terms of the money that is available; the fields on my side are rather barren.

There is the principle of contiguity, however. I understand that, where the boundary is contiguous with an objective 1 area, it is possible for funds to cross it to help to deal with deprivation, because clearly that does not end at a particular stream. Will the Minister ensure that his officials operate with some flexibility when they consider that matter? People travel from Barnsley to my constituency for jobs, and in the reverse direction.

Finally, I apologise if I infringed the protocol of Westminster Hall, Mr. Hurst. I shall ensure that I do not do so again.

12.48 pm

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Jeff Ennis) on securing this Adjournment debate. I also welcome the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett). Both raised a number of valuable points, which also have a wider relevance.

Transport is at the heart of the Government's agenda for a prosperous and just society. A modern transport system is not just about getting people from A to B; it must also support the Government's wider objectives of rebuilding communities and tackling social exclusion. That is particularly relevant in areas such as Barnsley, Hemsworth and Mexborough.

As we increasingly understand, good transport links and services are vital to achieving regional economic prosperity and stimulating regeneration. They encourage new businesses, allow established businesses to expand and bring potential markets closer. They also facilitate better access to jobs and services, helping to ensure that communities do not become isolated and disadvantaged.

That is why the Government are determined to improve transport throughout the country. We have made it clear that transport is one of our key priorities, alongside education, health and crime. Thanks to the 10-year plan for transport, we have made a step change in investment across all modes and introduced more certainty into transport funding.

Perhaps nowhere is the need for better transport links and services more important than in the former coalfield areas, such as Barnsley, which have suffered tremendous social and economic upheavals over the last thirty years. Many of those communities are predominantly rural in character, typically consisting of small settlements located some distance away from major urban centres. Access to transport is, therefore, vital for residents, many of whom face severe deprivation and isolation. Lack of access, particularly to cars, is one of the major causes of social exclusion in those areas. That fact was recognised by the Government back in 1998 when our coalfields taskforce reported.

Since then, we have agreed to fund, through the local transport plan process, all five of the recommended new road schemes identified by the taskforce and for which bids for financial support have been submitted. That included two new roads to improve access to the Barnsley coalfield regeneration area, and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough provided the details of those schemes. We have also accepted in the last two local transport settlements the case for a further four major local transport schemes in locations identified by the Coalfield Communities Campaign. The potential regeneration benefits of those schemes were one of the key factors in our decision to give them the green light. We want to see more such schemes coming forward from local authorities in the future.

Important though it is, we do not only need investment in the road infrastructure to stimulate the regeneration of coalfield communities. Public transport improvements are also essential, especially to tackle social exclusion, as we recognise that not everyone can or wants to have access to a car. We are therefore keen to encourage better bus and community transport services in coalfield communities.

The Government recognise that community transport in particular has an important role to play. It can offer a flexible door-to-door service in a way that conventional bus services, which may have a greater relevance in urban areas, cannot. That is particularly important for dispersed communities like the former coalfield areas. Community transport by its very nature also involves the wider community, which is essential if we want more local participation in coalfield regeneration.

Decisions must ultimately be made at a local level by people who understand the needs of that community, working in partnership with local authorities, bus operators, local businesses and interest groups. Partnership working is the cornerstone of our approach to delivering improvements in transport and I am pleased by how that is developing across the country. The success of the partnership approach is very much in evidence in the Barnsley coalfields rural transport partnership. As my hon. Friend said, I saw that in action when I visited his constituency recently. I saw the success of that programme and was delighted to participate in it and to talk to the users and those who have been so active in bringing it about. I am delighted that it is making further progress.

Our role must be to establish the right regulatory and financial framework to enable better public transport services to be delivered to coalfield areas and rural communities generally. That is what we have done. The coalfield communities have received a 54 per cent. increase in funding in the three years following the publication of the rural White Paper, compared with the period 1998 to 2001. The rural bus subsidy grant given to local authorities since 1998 has established more than 1,800 new or enhanced bus services across rural England. South Yorkshire passenger transport executive itself will receive nearly £500,000 this year.

The rural bus challenge has successfully funded a wide range of innovative door-to-door and demand-responsive services, including taxi-buses, dial-a-ride and other community transport services. Several former coalfield areas have benefited from challenge funds and guidance to local authorities on the next challenge round should be published next month. I hope that local authorities representing coalfield communities will come forward with further innovative and well thought out proposals.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, the Countryside Agency is also supporting community-based rural transport projects through its rural transport partnership initiative. That programme has already made a significant contribution to the funding of the Barnsley coalfields rural transport partnership. I understand that the agency has recently agreed to provide further funding for the partnership—as my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth said—in order to extend community transport provision north towards Wakefield. That is also important in linking the areas to try to increase access to the Wakefield-Leeds conurbation and its employment opportunities.

The Barnsley partnership has also been supported by regeneration funding, particularly from Yorkshire and Humber objective 2 money—although I take on board my hon. Friends' concerns. Such regeneration programmes offer a valuable source of funding for community-based transport projects in former coalfield areas. It is crucial that local stakeholders work in partnership to secure the funding available, as the Barnsley partnership demonstrates.

I understand concerns about the longer-term future of specific schemes, given that funding is usually only guaranteed for up to three years. We cannot give open-ended commitments to fund schemes requiring significant revenue support in the long term. Each scheme must continually prove its value in meeting the transport needs of the local community, in an efficient, timely and relevant manner.

In terms of individual programmes such as the rural transport partnership programme, it is also crucial to review regularly each programme and evaluate the progress that has been achieved before deciding on the future level of funding. That will help to ensure that we take account of new developments and have the most cost-effective and efficient means of delivering the improvements that we want in rural transport services.

We are not only providing the investment. We are looking to transform the regulatory framework for community transport so that this sector can grow and thrive. Dial-a-ride services such as those supported by the Barnsley partnership are now benefiting from the recent extension of bus fuel duty rebate to community transport operators. That has been widely welcomed across the country. The extension, from May 2002, should slash fuel costs for many section 19 community transport operators, saving them hundreds of pounds each year. Many have welcomed that development, which will create a more level playing field with commercial bus services.

We remain committed to consulting on possible changes to the current regulatory framework to reduce any unnecessary barriers to further expansion of the community transport sector. Consultation has been under way for some time. We want to consider routes and timetables on registered services especially, to make it easier to run flexibly routed bus services, which may serve areas such as Barnsley and Hemsworth more effectively than the conventional pattern. That will benefit both mainstream bus services and those provided under a community bus permit, which provide vital services to the general public.

Once the consultation is under way, we will look at the scope to relax the rules on voluntary sector transport. However, that is a difficult issue, as we must strike the right balance between providing useful freedoms and ensuring the proper level of vehicle safety checks, as well as the right balance between operators.

I acknowledge the concerns expressed so effectively by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough on behalf of his community. We remain committed to the regeneration of former coalfield areas such as Barnsley, and determined that transport should play its part in that regeneration. Better public transport to meet the community's needs is essential if we are to tackle social exclusion. Community transport, from dial-a-ride to shared taxis, has a valuable role to play, as the Barnsley coalfields rural transport partnership demonstrates. The Government have an important role in setting the right regulatory and financial framework, but the local community working in partnership can also help to deliver better public transport. Barnsley coalfields rural transport partnership shows the way forward for other coalfield communities, and we hope that it will continue to flourish.

Somerset Levels

1 pm

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater): I am delighted to hold a debate on the Somerset Levels.

The Somerset Levels are a unique feature in the United Kingdom. If you will cast your mind back, Mr. Hurst, to prehistoric times, the Levels began as an alluvial flood plain, and have, over the years, seen enormous change. At the time of floating villages across the Mendip hills and near Street, the area was built up by alluvial flooding and the destruction of forests. Over the years, the change has been the change of man. Avalon is at the heart of the Somerset Levels; one can imagine Arthur being taken off to Avalon, and ultimately to Glastonbury, to be buried. It is said that there was an inland waterway or lake, which was really a sea that ran from Bridgwater, around Glastonbury, and then covered the area surrounding what is now the Somerset Levels.

Since that time, man's intervention has created the Levels that we see now. We, as prehistoric man and his successors, decided to drain the Levels because we needed them for high-quality grassland and to keep back the flood water. By doing that, however, we created an artificial area. The Dutch are way ahead of us on that. In relation to the Levels, we have created a flood plain held back by walls of mud.

The problem, of which the Under-Secretary is fully aware, is that global warming is upon us. The water is rising by millimetres a year; that may not seem a great deal, but if it continues for 50 to 75 years, the entire area could suddenly become an alluvial flood plain once again. In the past, one year in 60 was the average frequency of a major flood, so it could be guaranteed that nothing would probably happen for 59 years; a little water might come, but the dam walls could hold it back.

The past five years have seen three major floods. That flooding has not just come over the banks; it has brought Bridgwater, Taunton, Langport and others under a direct threat. If that continues, the area could be cut off not only from the M5, but from the two railways that service London and Bristol, and from the A303 into Yeovil, although that does not quite come under the Levels.

I have just printed off two maps from the Environment Agency's website. The first shows the flooding area over the years. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), whose constituency is the other side of the Somerset Levels, has just joined me. The map is interesting because it includes a considerable amount of Bridgwater, much of Illminster and a considerable portion of my right hon. Friend's constituency in Wells.

The second map is the flood plan, which shows a completely different situation. One sees a waft of blue that would leave Glastonbury, Street, Bridgwater, Langport and Yeovil under serious threat in a major flood. The agency is not being alarmist, but showing where it believes there could be a major flood in future. If we go by what happened two years ago, when there was enormous pressure on dam walls throughout the levels, it is clear that the agency is not scaremongering, but suggesting a possibility. The agency is now rightly saying, through the Under-Secretary, that building on flood plains must be seriously questioned. I shall return to that point, but I urge him to stick to what he has said because our worry is not simply to do with insurance. If there were a major problem, we would not be able to reach people because of the speed of the water coming in. Having seen it, I know that it is positively frightening.

What is the role of the Environment Agency? The Environment Agency was a slightly hybrid organisation, set up to administer the rivers and waterways, and it has now taken on flooding as one of its major areas of work. It has done sterling work in the Somerset Levels—I have no problem with that—but what backing does it receive from the Department for an area that faces a direct threat?

The Environment Agency's problem is that the flood defence banks in the Levels are not in good shape. A massive amount of money needs to be spent on them. Over the past few years, when the walls have shifted, the Environment Agency has spent money on them. But when we ask the agency how much more money it needs to spend on what is a difficult plain to defend, the figure runs into many millions. The Environment Agency needs the backing of the Department to do the job that it is charged to do, which is to defend the Levels from wholesale flooding.

Over the past few years, a problem has arisen between the drainage boards and the Environment Agency, of which I know the Under-Secretary is aware. The problem is that there are two competing organisations. The drainage board is charged with looking at the reans—or streams—and cleaning them out and keeping them clear, with the Environment Agency overseeing the work. However, because the precepts have not always been paid to the Environment Agency by the drainage boards, as the Under-Secretary is aware, the bodies have been at loggerheads for some time. I urge him—I have no easy answer—to bring them together somehow. If the two bodies—one established for many generations and the other comparatively new—remain at loggerheads, that will cause problems for the future.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): As my hon. Friend knows, we share the Somerset Levels and I am delighted that he is raising this important issue. He has put his finger on the nub of the problem. The Environment Agency and many other environmental bodies seem to regard the rivers and drainage reans of the Levels primarily as environmental assets, when they were put in there in the middle ages for drainage purposes to protect agriculture and those who live and work there. Is there not a case for reorienting our efforts by recognising the utilitarian and industrial purposes of these assets, instead of treating them simply as environmental assets?

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: I agree, and I shall come to that point. The Levels have three facets; industry, tourism and a thriving farming community that has been there for generations.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells said, the drainage boards were set up to deal with drainage, but the problem is that there are an enormous number of them. The Under-Secretary is aware how many there are. I am not sure that I know myself, because they cover

a vast area. If we could find a way to bring all the bodies together so that there were no conflicts of interest—as a result of which precepts are not always not paid because of ongoing disputes—we could produce a much better overall strategy in the Parrett catchment area. The problem has been going on for a long time, but it worries me that it is continuing, because the moment a disaster occurs, the finger of blame is always pointed, and it is a fickle finger.

The Parrett catchment area project, in which the Under-Secretary was heavily involved, was set up to manage the water and the future of a highly floodable area. The Department has now put £61.5 million into the Environment Agency, rising to £65 million, and ultimately the allocation will be £114 million in 2003–04. I am delighted about that. Will he consider how we structure that money? My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells made a valuable point about the environment. The environment is marvellous and we must protect it, but we must also take a broader view. The Levels have an enormous industrial base, going back centuries, including Clarks in my right hon. Friend's constituency, British Cellophane in mine, Royal Ordnance and many other organisations. If they went under water, it would be catastrophic for the area. Will the Under-Secretary comment on that?

How can we approach the problem? The Under-Secretary knows what I am going to say. I want to refer to the Parrett barrage and the Parrett sluice, which is a way of controlling the Parrett. From Bridgwater to the sea, for eight miles, there is only a 4 ft drop; that is very little to play with. The Environment Agency—with the Parrett project, under Humphrey Temperley—has looked at putting a barrage or sluice at that point. If Hinckley C power station had been built, that would have helped to pay for it; but it is not on the agenda at the moment. Between £15 million and £20 million is needed. I accept that it must be seen as a long-term project, but I hope that the Under-Secretary will agree that it deserves serious attention, even if money is made available only for a detailed study to demonstrate whether it is a viable operation. If it is, we need to build it; if it is not, we still have to address the problem of flooding in the area.

There is nothing clever about the sluice; it controls the water up to 4 ft or 5 ft, the water builds up behind it, the tide goes out and the water goes out. That is straightforward. However, what it allows is a stop-gap between the backing-up of the Tone through Taunton and the Parrett through Bridgwater. If we can stop the water from coming back up at high tide, we will save the homes of a great number of people.

To give an example, there has been talk of managed retreat on the Steart peninsula, which is a marvellous area for bird watching. I do not accept the concept of managed retreat. We are not in a position to do it because we cannot control the power of water; we know that. If we try to control the power of nature, we do it at our cost. In that example, we would spend an enormous amount of money on few homes. However, if we did not, there would be serious repercussions for the environment, and the confidence of my constituents and those of my right hon. Friend the member for Wells—certainly in Burnham-on-Sea and Highbridge—would be fatally undermined.

How, then, can we proceed? Two inland seas projects have been considered, involving low-level water-holding catchment areas, one covering 4,000 sq m, at the cost of £23,000, and the other covering some 75,000 sq m. If we cannot control water, I agree with the idea of inland seas. I put it to the Under-Secretary that such projects will cost millions of pounds. That is not a lot, relatively, but I worry about the effect that they will have on local economics, on the local and surrounding landowners and on the people who live nearby.

We can create the seas, but how will the compensation for this environmentally sensitive area be put in place, given the existing constraints of the common agricultural policy, which I hope will be reformed? I do not believe that the two can be balanced. The studies are ongoing, but I worry about the aspiration to move 3,500 m of soil out to allow a sea to move in. I have grave worries, and constituents who have written to me—it does not affect my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells' area, but the principle is the same—are concerned about the consequences for their homes in the long term.

We must keep the Levels vibrant, so what else can we consider? Tourism is massively important; the M5, two railway lines and the A303 come through the area, but people do not stop there. They go to Glastonbury to climb the tor and to enjoy festivals, but they do not naturally come to the Levels because we have no attraction that automatically brings them in. The battle of Sedgemoor took place in the area; had that had a different result, we might not all be here. If we want to have a thriving community, we must encourage tourism.

The Government have looked at a lot of ways to attract tourists to the south-west. The regional development agency—not an organisation with which I always agree—is charged with that and promotes the whole area. There are more sites of special scientific interest on the Levels than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. It is a unique area. I do not say that it should be a world heritage site, but it is at that sort of level. If we want a thriving community there, people need to brought in to enjoy the area.

What about the wildlife? That is a subject close to the Under-Secretary's heart. For instance, Berwick swans, golden plover, teal, widgeon and other water fowl live on the levels—as many as 20,000 of them. That is stunning. I am an ornithologist, and I find it a beautiful place. Can we not encourage more people to come and enjoy it?

In its latest advertising campaign, the regional development agency showed the Clifton suspension bridge at Bristol with giraffes on it. The Under-Secretary knows that we do not have many giraffes on the Levels. We need to bring people to the area; if we can bring money to the area, we can do more to secure it. What about making it a special area of conservation? I know that that is being considered. If it were achieved, would more money be available? Could money be made available from Europe, through whatever mechanism we can find? I have already touched on the need to increase tourism. We have had cider growers and a vineyard in Somerset, and many people visited the area. However, many left because farming changed.

People are reluctant to set up business on the Levels. The recent opening of the catchment project offices is Middlezoy is a fine example, but it is unusual. People do

[Mr. Liddell-Grainger]

not want to move down there because of the flooding problems. If we want to encourage people to do that, we should not just emphasise the Bridgwater area. As the House is well aware, the area has problems in finding industrial land that is not on the flood plain. The last industrial land to be created had to be raised by 4 ft.

Building homes on flood plains is a thorny problem. The Environment Agency has set down firm guidelines. However, Sedgemore has been asked by the Government to build about 2,000 houses—an enormous number. However, houses cannot be built on the escarpments; the Levels are difficult to build on; homes cannot be built on much of the Quantocks; the coastline is somewhat erodeable. So where do we put the homes? The Government may say that we must build those houses without the land being available. We are going through the planning inquiry now, and the targets are difficult to achieve. I hope that the Under-Secretary will tell his colleagues that it is not always easy.

The Curry report mentioned three things that would be especially useful in our area. The first was modulation. I am not a great fan of it, but if we had modulation in farming, could it be used for only one part of an area? Could the modulation of 10 per cent. of an area be more useful in helping the environment than if it were applied collectively? I do not know the answer to that. Secondly, Curry mentions rural enterprise schemes and talks about a substantial increase, with a mid-term review, for rural enterprise. What is available to help rural enterprise in areas that are important to the well being of an area as vital as the Somerset Levels?

Lastly, Curry spoke of encouraging co-operatives. Rather like badgers, the subject seems to come round every two weeks. Is any mechanism available to the Under-Secretary to consider co-operation? That happens with cider to an extent, and with farmers markets and so on, but the Levels are unique. Many farms there are organic farms, which produce extremely high-quality produce in an area that comes under the category "special". I hope that he will respond to that.

I assure the Under-Secretary that I shall keep going on; indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells and I will continue to push for the future of an area of outstanding beauty. The west country would be badly depleted if anything happened to that area. Along with the Environment Agency and other organisations—including the Department—we will work together to ensure a future for the Levels. I hope that, in 50 years' time—we will probably be pushing ourselves around in wheelchairs by then—we can look back and say that we did a good job. If we do not do a good job, I worry for the future.

1.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. Liddell-Grainger) on securing a further Adjournment debate, following that of 25 March on the subject of farming in Somerset. I understand the points that he raises, which he made in a reasonable, articulate and reasoned way. As he is aware, I know the area well. I have been involved in discussions about it for some years, and I am pleased to see the progress that has been made, especially through people coming together to tackle the problems. There was tension in years gone by, and people took polarised positions, and I am glad to see that change.

The hon. Gentlemen touched on the major issue of flood management, and I understand the point. We must take global warming into account, but I assure him that it is taken into account in our investment programmes, engineering standards and projections. The potential impact of global warming—rising sea levels and changing weather patterns—has been built into our long-term projections. We are working on the worst-case scenario, as that is the most sensible way to act. The projections may turn out to be worse than reality, but it is better to be on the safe side than to put people at risk.

The flood risk maps were a good innovation by the Environment Agency, as they gave people an idea of where there was flood risk. However, they do not quantify the level of risk. People need not panic if they see their areas within the maps; the maps need to be more sophisticated, but that will come over time. The agency is considering the issue, and hopes to give people a clearer idea of what the maps mean.

I also understand the hon. Gentleman's point about drainage boards. I declare an interest in that I am the honorary vice-president of the Association of Drainage Authorities, so I have a close connection to those authorities. I have a long interest in the subject, as much of my constituency in north Lincolnshire is low-lying and relies heavily on drainage boards to keep it from going under water. I have followed the progress of drainage authorities with some interest.

DEFRA and the Environment Agency support the production of water level management plans. Every drainage board will have to produce such a plan, which will provide an opportunity to talk to the agency and other interested parties in the Somerset Levels about ways of tackling points such as those made by the hon. Gentleman. There would not necessarily be a conflict in terms of a pattern of drainage between environmental interests and the interests of agriculture or the wider community. The important issue is management.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I know that the Under-Secretary knows a good deal about the subject, but will he acknowledge that the reluctance of the Environment Agency to dredge reans and drainage rivers is a problem? Dredging can disturb wildlife and fauna, but the water needs to keep flowing for drainage purposes, which requires dredging. There can be a conflict—as was well articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater—with the balance shifting too far in favour of conservation to the detriment of the primary duty, which is to drain areas in our constituencies.

Mr. Morley: Yes, I can see when that balance—that is the key word—between conservation interests and those of the agricultural community is needed on occasion. Sometimes there is a role for dredging and keeping drains clear, and that is the principle responsibility of the drainage authorities and boards. However, dredging can sometimes have marginal benefits, depending on the circumstances of where it is done and what it is for. As

the right hon. Gentleman will know, the agency is obliged to take the relevant legislation on wildlife protection into account, especially in areas of special scientific importance. It must consider certain European Union directives as well, such as the habitats directive. The question is one of balance, and that balance can be struck.

Specific points were made about the Parrett sluice, in which there is plenty of interest. I acknowledge the work that has been done to try to identify a more sustainable approach to flood management in the Somerset Levels. As the hon. Member for Bridgwater will know, I met with Humphrey Temperley and discussed the options for future flood management in the catchment area. The report is an important step towards a solution. Everyone involved should be congratulated on that.

Much remains to be done on the report because many more technical assessments must be made, including investigating the role of a sluice and whether it would be effective. That work is under way, and DEFRA is funding a catchment area study, which is complementary to the work being done by the catchment area project study.

In addition, DEFRA is providing some £3 million in grant to the Environment Agency for strengthening flood defences on the lower River Tone at Baltmoor wall and Stanmoor bank. The Stanmoor bank reduces the risk of flooding to residential and commercial properties, a main line rail track and agricultural land in Stanmoor. The Baltmoor wall retains floodwaters within Currymoor and Haymoor, thereby defending Northmoor and Saltmoor, which also protects residential and commercial properties and a main trunk road.

In response to the autumn 2000 floods, grant-eligible expenditure for Somerset's local flood defence committee has increased from £3.5 million in 2001–02 to £4.4 million in 2002–03. The grant rate has increased from 65 per cent. to 75 per cent. in Somerset, in recognition of its particular needs.

The possibility of a sluice is being considered, with the normal technical, economic and environmental criteria being taken into account. However, big engineering projects that seem to represent the solution to a problem may not, in fact, be the solution. With periods of high river flow, backing up may occur even with a sluice, and if the water could not then escape there could still be a flood risk. That solution must be examined, as the Environment Agency is doing.

I accept, too, that there is an issue of structural funding. An advantage of DEFRA, which brings together environmental and flood defence funding, is that it can take a holistic approach. I do not rule out the possibility that we could give support through our agri-environment programmes to landowners who deliberately flood their land as part of an overall project. We should draw a distinction between land that floods regularly and land that is deliberately flooded, as a strategy.

I ask the hon. Member for Bridgwater to consider issues such as managed retreats on their merits, as they are a sustainable form of flood defence. We must consider each area on its individual merits. We do not take a blanket approach to the idea of managed retreats as there may be different solutions for different areas, with different management and engineering options.

I accept the hon. Gentleman's point about the tourist potential of the Levels, which is an internationally important wildlife centre. Many people go there for that reason. On my visits, I have seen farming businesses that have diversified, with on-farm shops selling produce and providing facilities for visitors, which has been good for the farms, for the area and for tourism. There may be more potential for such moves, and the regional development agency will consider that possibility along with the local authorities.

The area has some fantastic attractions and is internationally important. We recognise that it is also an environmentally sensitive area, and put considerable sums into the area through ESA—environmentally sensitive area—agreements. Farmers in the Somerset Levels received £3.3 million of direct support to maintain landscape and wildlife last year. Some 70 per cent. of the area and 65 per cent. of the SSSI land fall within the ESA boundary. The ESA is well established, and we are devoting considerable resources to it.

With regard to the hon. Gentleman's final three points, we are considering the Curry report and the question of modulation. Ring-fencing for an area is a double-edged sword, because the east of England would be keen on that, too, which would distort the amount of money available nationally. We will consider that issue, although it is difficult.

I discussed the rural enterprise scheme this morning with the Minister for Rural Affairs, and we are looking to see whether we can simplify and extend it.

On co-ops, there is potential support through the Farm Business Advice Service and the Rural Development Service. We also fund and provide planning advice, which I hope that farmers will take up. We are only too happy to give them that support.

Gas and Electricity

1.30 pm

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): I am delighted to have secured this short debate on the problem of the erroneous transfer of gas and electricity customers. This is by no means the first time that the issue has been raised in the House; there have been debates and parliamentary questions, and two early-day motions have been tabled in this Session alone. The fact that I am raising the issue again is an indication of the way in which the problem has persisted and, indeed, spread.

In many ways, erroneous transfer is too polite a term for the totally unacceptable behaviour of several major power suppliers. In some cases, I am afraid, terms such as scam and fraud come to mind. Erroneous transfer refers to the problem of customers being transferred against their will from one power company to another. They then find themselves entrapped in a morass of bureaucracy, administrative chaos and Kafkaesque resistance to efforts to sort the problem out. At best—if one can put it like that—the problem arises from incompetence. At worst, however, it often arises from selling techniques that vary from heavy-handed to fraudulent. I want to describe in a little detail some of the ways in which erroneous transfer manifests itself.

Consumers sometimes find that they have been transferred from one energy supplier to another on the basis of a signature on a contract or some other indication of consent, such as a verbal agreement. It turns out later, however, that they never signed the document in question or, if they did, they did not realise that it was meant to be a contract to transfer to another energy supplier.

I have come across several such examples in my constituency, and the consumer watchdog Energywatch details many cases in its recent report. It tells, for example, of a customer in Dundee who received a welcome letter from Virgin Energy, which was addressed to her husband. It claimed that a verbal agreement had been made, but her husband had died some years previously. A 92-year-old registered blind woman in London was tidying the balcony of her flat when she was approached by a British Gas sales agent. Her son found out later that she had been persuaded to sign a contract, even though she could not see what she was signing.

One of the worst cases that I came across was from the west midlands. A British Gas sales representative told a woman who did not have a good knowledge of English that her electricity supplier would soon go bankrupt, steal her money and leave her without power all winter. The woman, who had a disabled baby, was panicked into signing a form to change suppliers and issue the necessary direct debit instruction to the bank. As it happened, however, the bank account was in her husband's name, and when he returned home later that day, the sales reps were waiting for him, demanding that he sign the direct debit instruction. He refused, and they tried to pressure him into signing. They then physically prevented him from returning the form. He later found that the British Gas direct debit department had tried to set up a direct debit from his account.

Often, cases of erroneous transfer reveal incompetence, rather than heavy-handed selling techniques. My constituents Sarah Shepherd and Stephen Watson actually wanted to transfer their electricity and gas supplies from ScottishPower to Scottish Gas. They signed the forms, but nothing happened. After lots of telephone calls and correspondence, Scottish Gas told them that they had not taken over as their new energy suppliers. Not surprisingly, my constituents got fed up with being given the run-around by Scottish Gas. You can imagine what happened next, Mr. Hurst. Having told their energy supplier that they no longer wanted to transfer to Scottish Gas, after several months they began to receive letters from Scottish Gas saying that the company had after all taken over their gas supply.

The problem for my constituents is that they were in the process of moving house and, to cut a long and complicated story short, they then received an incorrect bill and final demands for hundreds of pounds, which after months of correspondence and phone calls were cancelled only when I was able to intervene in the case.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in this day and age, it is extraordinary that companies such as ScottishPower and Scottish Gas take so long to let people know whether they are supplying electricity or gas to a particular resident? One thing that I have found frustrating, as I am sure he has, is the length of time that it takes for the companies to verify whether they are providing a service. From his extensive experience, does he know of any other company or organisation that does not appear to know whether it is providing a service to an individual?

Mr. Lazarowicz: One would be hard pressed to find a similar example. My hon. Friend's point is illustrated by yet another example from my constituency. The case was not one of erroneous transfer but of erroneous failure to transfer. In this case, the company concerned, Spidacom Ltd., wanted to transfer its electricity supply from ScottishPower to npower. The supply was taken over by npower but the company failed to install the necessary meter for the off-peak tariff, which was the reason why the business had transferred in the first place.

It was claimed by npower that ScottishPower was making it difficult to install the off-peak meter. Mr. Hansen, the director of Spidacom, cannot say whose account is correct—npower's or ScottishPower's—but it is certainly true that, for almost nine months, all his electricity was being charged at the day rate and he was unable to get the off-peak meter that he had sought in the first place. Again, I was able to take the case up and, by a strange coincidence, his off-peak meter was installed just six days ago.

Those cases are just a few among many. I have had many more in my constituency and I know from comments from other hon. Members since the topic of this debate was announced that practically every other Member of this House has experience of similar problems. There have been various reports in the media and I particularly want to pay tribute to the excellent work of Sean Coughlan of *The Guardian* in exposing some of the problems with energy mis-selling.

What worries me is that I am sure that, as MPs, we are seeing only the tip of the iceberg. Intervention by the MP normally helps to resolve the problem eventually, and I was amused that, as late as yesterday afternoon, I received a faxed letter in my House of Commons office from London Electricity relating to a case that I had taken up on behalf of one of my constituents.

However, how many people are out there who have not gone to an MP or to Energywatch but are suffering in silence? I am particularly worried about elderly people, those who may not have a good command of English or those who are not familiar with our country's bureaucratic systems. My experience, and that of other MPs, is confirmed by the consumer watchdog Energywatch. It says, in one of its recent reports:

"Unscrupulous sales methods are used by the gas and electricity companies all around Great Britain, often by household names."

In Scotland alone, Energywatch received 8,500 complaints in a year, of which 25 per cent. concerned erroneous transfers, many of which the watchdog says were caused by cowboy sales agents.

Although the watchdog names npower as a top offender, it says that the rogues' gallery has many members. Among those whom I have discovered to be the subject of complaint, either in my constituency or elsewhere, are Scottish Gas, Virgin Energy, London Electricity, British Gas and Swalec. That shows clearly that the problem cannot be described in terms of a few sales reps; just a few bad apples in the barrel. It seems more likely that there is a whole orchard full of such apples. The extent of the problem is so bad that it must raise the suspicion of a certain amount of connivance—or, at best, complacency—about such practices on the part of some of the energy companies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) has drawn to my attention the case of Mr. Robert White, aged 70, who was the victim of what was indisputably fraudulent mis-selling by an npower sales representative. My hon. Friend has demanded that npower refers the case to the police, but in spite of his repeated demands, it has simply washed its hands of the matter by saying that the sales representative worked for a third-party agency, whose responsibility it is to take further action.

I know that the problem of mis-selling worries the Government and my hon. Friend the Minister in particular, and I know that the industry has adopted a voluntary code of practice, but still the examples continue to come. The voluntary code does not yet seem to be working and tougher action is certainly needed. Even Energywatch has been the subject of complaints from some of my constituents because it has not dealt with their complaints effectively. However, in fairness, I should add that other constituents have paid tribute to the effectiveness of intervention by Energywatch, and I have seen the good results of its intervention. I congratulate Energywatch on its "Stop Now!" campaign, which suggests that some action can be taken to try to deal with the problem of erroneous transfer. I endorse the suggestions that Energywatch makes.

Energywatch wants the industry regulator, Ofgem, to strengthen the conditions in operating licences, which govern the way in which energy companies should behave when selling to consumers. It wants Ofgem to use its fining powers on companies that engage in the sort of scandalous mis-selling that I have described. In my view, a few hefty fines and the loss of an operating licence for the worst offenders would be an excellent way to encourager les autres.

Energywatch wants the energy companies to set up a rogues register of sales agencies and individuals who fail to meet acceptable standards. It wants gas and electricity companies to pay proper compensation to consumers for the distress and inconvenience caused by the malpractices of their sales representatives, rather than merely refunding the bare minimum for financial loss, as happens all too often. It also favours the introduction of a standard format for energy supply contracts, which would help consumers to understand their contracts and compare them with those of other suppliers. Those seem like eminently sensible steps to deal with a scandal of immense proportions, and I hope that the Government will do what they can to turn them into reality.

1.42 pm

The Minister for Industry and Energy (Mr. Brian Wilson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) on securing the debate and thank him for raising an issue that concerns us all. I know that that sounds like a ritualistic introduction, but this is an especially appropriate subject for an Adjournment debate, and I am grateful to have a peg on which to hang a few remarks about the issue. As my hon. Friend was good enough to recognise, there should be no doubt about my personal commitment to resolving the problem.

In my ministerial role, I am inundated with letters from parliamentary colleagues, written on behalf of constituents who have, through no fault of their own and without their prior knowledge, been transferred to another supplier. If the number of letters that I receive is sufficient to make such an impression, it is a clue to the size of the iceberg that lies below the surface, because this is a problem of enormous scale.

So that I would be up to date with the effectiveness of exhortations against such practices, I carried out some checks this morning, and the figures that I found may be of some interest to hon. Members. Yesterday alone, Energywatch logged more than 650 complaints, and last month alone, it received 13,198 complaints. Those figures are extraordinary and totally unacceptable, and I want to give clear notice that if the existing law and its enforcement is insufficient to deal with the problem, the law and its implementation will have to be strengthened.

This might be a good time to highlight some of the main offenders. Unfortunately, the latest available figures for a reasonable period cover September to November last year. There must be a lag to allow a period of reconciling when companies can challenge a complaint. The figures to January this year should be available in the next couple of weeks and I assure my hon. Friend that they will be published and that the statistics will be transparent. When I go through the names from the September to November period last year, one or two names crop up again and again. On an initial reading of the latest figures nothing much seems to have changed in the interim.

The figures show that the three gas companies with the highest number of direct selling complaints per 1,000 transfers were Beacon Gas/Seeboard, npower and

[Mr. Brian Wilson]

Cambridge Gas. The three worst offenders per 1,000 transfers were npower, London Electricity/SWEB/ Virgin Energy and Seeboard. Turning to transfer complaints, which include erroneous transfers, the companies with the highest number of complaints about gas per 1,000 transfers were npower, Beacon Gas/ Seeboard, and Cambridge Gas. For electricity, they were npower, Yorkshire Electricity and ScottishPower/ Manweb. I draw the attention of hon. Members to the fact that npower appears in all four lists, which is a matter of some public interest.

The power to do something about those malpractices already exists. Consumer law and energy regulation provide a firm basis for all those involved—be they Ofgem, trading standards departments or the police—to take appropriate action against suppliers and salesmen. It is imperative that those powers are used to good effect before we consider additional powers. Anyone who commits forgery in that context is guilty of a criminal offence. I do not see why any police officer or law enforcement agency should decline, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith suggested, to investigate a prima facie case of forgery.

"Erroneous transfer" is a label that is applied to a range of problems. Essentially, they have two causes. The first is that an error has been made, whether in the information about a consumer's meter or address held by a supplier, or in the transcription of that information. A consumer may then be welcomed to a new supplier, of which he may never have heard. The second is when a salesman has, perhaps on the basis of information acquired in an underhand way, transferred a consumer's supply. Again, the consumer will be welcomed to a new supplier. While the causes of the problem are different, the impact, whether simple inconvenience or actual distress, is very similar. I emphasise that I am referring to erroneous transfers and not the wider problem of high-pressure selling.

I want to go into more detail about the different aspects of erroneous transfers and the responses to them. I shall deal first with transfers that arise from erroneous data or from an administrative mistake by an employee of a supplier. There are millions of gas and electricity meters throughout the country. With that volume of information, which is being called upon extensively, we all accept that errors will occasionally occur. The important point is that when problems arise suppliers should recognise the uncertainty that can be caused to consumers. Erroneous transfer can induce concerns, albeit unfounded, of energy supplies being lost. In such circumstances, companies are obliged to correct the problem quickly and efficiently.

Last year, Ofgem, which regulates supplier performance in this and other areas, took the view that the speed and efficiency that companies were showing was insufficient. That prompted it and Energywatch, the statutory gas and electricity consumer body, to broker a new erroneous transfer customer charter. The charter is designed to enable customers transferred in error to return to their chosen supplier as quickly as possible, with the minimum of inconvenience, and without the companies concerned passing the problem between them. The process should be largely invisible to the consumer, who will be able to obtain, on request, details of the compensation available from those who have caused the inconvenience. I wholeheartedly endorse the charter's objective and content. Time will tell whether the industry will live up the aims of the charter, which came into effect in January. Ofgem will review performance under the charter in the coming months, with a full review taking place in the autumn.

If the industry's performance is unsatisfactory despite the erroneous transfer customer charter, Ofgem will have the option of moving beyond what is in effect a voluntary code and imposing standards of performance on suppliers. Among other things, those could carry requirements for automatic compensation payments to consumers in the event of supplier error. Ofgem could also modify supply licence conditions. The demands made by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith will be very much in the frame if we find that the terms of the erroneous transfer customer charter—the voluntary code—are not being met.

I understand that, from 31 December 2002, in addition to the charter, the electricity distribution companies will be implementing a standard address format, which should reduce the incidence of erroneous transfers resulting from the use of inconsistent address formats. That should deal with some of the problems of erroneous transfers at source.

I turn from erroneous transfers arising from reasons that we can all understand to sales malpractice and consumers who find themselves transferred against their wishes through the tactics of sales staff. I am not talking here about high-pressure selling in a more general sense, however distasteful some of us may find that. I am referring to the individuals who ask for information and find that they have agreed a contract, quite without their knowledge and understanding—whether on a form or via the telephone—to those who are, unfortunately, unable to understand what they are being sold, and, in the worst cases, to those whose signatures have been forged. The erroneous transfer charter may help in returning consumers who have been transferred as the result of sales malpractice to their chosen supplier. However, that is not and cannot be the main method of dealing with mis-selling, because it was not designed to address that core problem. It was designed to address the problem of inadvertent and genuinely erroneous transfer, not transfer that is, not to mince words, fraudulent.

Understandably, erroneous transfers arising from mis-selling make individuals very angry. They also make those who represent them—including me—very angry. In such circumstances, there is a tendency to demand more and more legislation to deal with every potential problem that might arise. That is not necessarily the right way to address the problem, because legislation is in place. Sometimes we require emergency legislation, but the circumstances in which that is the case are somewhat removed from those involved in gas and electricity supply. I am not convinced that new legislation would be needed if the existing legislation were implemented, but, again, I leave the door open for that because the statistics that I quoted at the outset are, to me, totally unacceptable.

If what we have at present does not do the job, we must look for something else. The existing instruments are to be found in general consumer law and, I stress, in the specific powers available to Ofgem. They are

complemented by the scope for Ofgem and Energywatch to broker arrangements with the industry and to spread best practice. Let us be in no doubt that there are a lot of measures at the disposal of Ofgem and in the wider existing law. If those measures do not do the job, however, and if in the future we still see 13,000-plus cases a month giving rise to complaint, I will not countenance that or be held responsible for it.

I am often asked why salesmen cannot be prosecuted for fraud. As I have said, they can be. Under the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981, a person is guilty of forgery if—I make no apology for using legalese here—he makes a false instrument, intending it to be used to induce another to accept it as genuine and to do some act to another's prejudice.

My understanding is that, for the police or a trading standards department to bring a successful prosecution, it must be shown that the agent has gained a financial advantage at the customer's expense. In the case of energy supply, that is often not the case, because a customer transferring, albeit involuntarily, from an incumbent supplier will ordinarily be better off. In some cases, he or she will not, and that appears to offer scope for prosecution. Similarly, if a supplier has been defrauded by a salesman, it may seek a prosecution; in other words, in cases where a particular provider is the loser when the supply is taken away.

Again, I make the point that there is a range of general consumer law that can be brought to bear against rogue salesmen. In addition, there are further regulations specific to gas and electricity supply. Those take the form of conditions in supply licences and govern sales and marketing of gas and electricity on the doorstep, in the shopping centre and over the telephone. Among other things, they include rules on the selection, training and control of sales staff and the auditing of sales.

We were instrumental in the introduction of protections, known as marketing licence conditions, into gas supply licences, following the problems that accompanied the introduction of domestic gas competition in 1996. They were duly incorporated into electricity supply licences when the domestic electricity market was opened to competition. In 2000, Ofgem extended the conditions for a further two years, and took the opportunity to enhance them during that period, extending them to cover high street and shopping centre sales. Last month, following consultation, it extended them for a further two years.

In the light of responses to that consultation, Ofgem is currently considering how the conditions might be enhanced to make them operate more effectively for consumers. I understand that, for example, Ofgem is considering the practicality of developing a doorstep preference scheme along the lines of the telephone preference service overseen by Oftel. The conditions have two roles; the first is to allow Ofgem to undertake formal action against suppliers, and it has used them in this way. Last month, Ofgem acquired the right to levy financial penalties on companies breaching licence conditions. That will be another weapon in its armoury, and will give the marketing conditions added weight. Away from the glare of public, formal action, the conditions also provide an invaluable, informal method of improving the behaviour of suppliers. Once again, I emphasise the statistics that I quoted from the outset; that behaviour has not improved to a sufficient degree.

In addition to our encouragement of Ofgem to develop the marketing conditions, we underlined our commitment to assisting energy consumers by using the Utilities Act 2000 to create Energywatch as a vigorous advocate for gas and electricity consumers, and to give Ofgem the new principal objective of protecting consumers.

In tandem with this, we must remember what we as consumers can do to help ourselves. Of course, salesmen should not mislead, but we do not expect a tied salesman to do anything other than sell his product. People have to be on the look out for that. Let us not be surprised if he does not tell us about the range of offers in the market. If we were buying most goods or services, we would do a little research. We would not take the word of a salesman.

One of our objectives in establishing Energywatch was to create an organisation that would not only protect consumers and fight their corner against the industry, but help consumers help themselves, by educating them about the market and making them more demanding of the suppliers. Energywatch can provide comparative data on prices. It can also provide links to websites that make calculations for the individual. We live in an active market. It is important to say that, although the problems are huge, cause a great deal of individual distress—I have no doubt about that—and discredit the workings of the market as a whole, it is important to give perspective to the benefits of the market that operates.

In the period since 1996, that market has become extraordinarily active. About 6.7 million domestic gas consumers—34 per cent. of the total—are no longer with British Gas. About 7.5 million electricity consumers—31 per cent.—are no longer with their local supplier. In the last quarter of 2001, domestic gas and electricity transfers were running at 940,000 per month. That is an astonishing rate of activity, and it shows an astonishing recognition of the benefits that individuals can gain from competition. It puts in perspective, although in no way diminishes, the figure of 13,000-plus complaints that I cited at the outset.

During 2001, Energywatch received 39,000 gas complaints. A total of 43 per cent.—17,000—related to transfers, but not necessarily erroneous transfers. Moreover, 7 per cent.—3,000—related to sales practices. In the case of electricity, there were 37,000 complaints, of which 38 per cent.—14,000—related to transfers and 12 per cent.—4,000—to sales practices. Again, I emphasise recognition of the numerical scale of the problem. To carry out a quick piece of arithmetic, the idea of 13,000 complaints in one month does not imply to me that the problem is diminishing. It is increasing, and I recognise that.

Earlier this year, Energywatch launched its "Stop Now!" campaign, directed at mis-selling. One result of that will be that, next week, the suppliers will be coming together with Energywatch, Ofgem and the Department of Trade and Industry to discuss the problems of mis-selling and to identify solutions. The debate has been very helpful in focusing attention on the issues and statistics that underlie the discussions.

[Mr. Brian Wilson]

I end as I began; I believe the figures quoted at the outset to be totally unacceptable. I believe that the individual distress underlying those activities is totally unacceptable. I call particularly on the companies that I mentioned earlier to clean up their act before they bring the whole industry into disrepute.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 May 2002

[MR. JOHN CUMMINGS *in the Chair*]

Empty Homes

[*Relevant documents: Sixth Report from the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, Session 2001-02 HC 240-I, and the Government's response thereto. Cm 5514.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Woolas.]*

2.30 pm

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise the issue of empty homes. I am pleased that you are in the Chair for the start of the debate, Mr. Cummings, as you were a member of the Committee and did much work on the issue. I understand that this is a three-hour debate and that if Divisions occur in the House, injury time will be added on at the end.

I thank the members of the Committee, who worked hard on the issue, the staff who worked for the Committee and did a good job for us, and Professor Christine Whitehead, Professor Ian Cole and Brendan Nevin, who gave us a great deal of advice. Although we did not always agree with their advice, it was helpful.

I draw attention to the appendix of the report, in which hon. Members will find summaries of the letters that were sent to us. A strength of Select Committee reports is the quality of the evidence that we receive. In addition to the good evidence from organisations, we received many useful letters from individuals who stressed the hardship and upset caused by living next to empty properties.

The Select Committee identified two problems. There is a small national problem of houses that remain empty and that cause a lot of nuisance to those who live next door. We want local authorities, in particular, to tackle that problem by intervening at an early stage. People with mental health problems may be involved in some cases; at any rate, some people to whom properties are left are not quick at making decisions about them. Even one isolated property can be a nuisance if the roof is leaking, the walls are covered in graffiti and the windows are broken. We could marginally reduce the housing shortage across the country if we worked harder to bring those properties back into use.

The fundamental problem, however, is the one on which we spent most of our time. It occurs across a large swathe of northern England, where the housing market has collapsed or is weak. Some 250,000 houses across the line of the M62 cannot be sold or are difficult to sell, and many more houses are in that situation in the north of England. The number of people who have attended today's debate shows what a major problem there is in many northern constituencies.

I stress, especially for the benefit of civil servants and the London media, that many of those homes would be attractive to buyers if they were in other parts of the country. We have seen examples of houses on which more than £70,000 had recently been spent but which could not be sold. In places such as Bootle and north Manchester, there are houses that do not sell for £25,000, when they would sell for five times that amount in other parts of northern England and for 10 times that amount in the London suburbs. Therefore, we are not talking about properties that are past their useful life but about those for which there is no demand, even though they are often in good condition.

In Burnley, for example, we saw small terraced properties. In other parts of the country—certainly in some villages—people have knocked two or three small terraced properties together to make one house, which would have been worth a substantial amount. Some houses in Burnley are well-built stone properties, but there is no demand for them.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions is here to reply to the debate. I want to get across to him the fact that housing failure can occur very quickly. My constituency is in Greater Manchester, and during the Committee's inquiry, my attention was drawn across the border to a street of about 30 houses in the constituency of Manchester, Gorton. People there were very pleased when, just before Christmas, one of those houses sold for £25,000.

Around that time, two people on the street died, but their houses did not go on to the market. A solicitor who did not know the area very well advised those responsible to let the properties rather than put them up for sale. Someone who turned out to have been a drug dealer went into one of the properties, while someone who had been chased out of council housing because their children had caused great nuisance went into the other. Suddenly, residents found that there was a drug dealer and a person with four unruly children aged between eight and 12 on the street.

The immediate impact was that other people on the street put their houses up for sale. Three houses ended up with "for sale" notices outside them, but the owners discovered that they could not sell them. Fortunately, the police managed to deal with the drug dealer, because of his past performance, and he has disappeared from the scene. Furthermore, as a result of some very good work by social workers and the schools in the area, which are exceptional, those unruly children are now behaving pretty well. The perception remains, however, that it is not a good street on which to buy a house, and those three individuals have failed to sell their properties. All that happened in a very short time. The market can go down very quickly, and it is extremely difficult to build confidence back up.

One or two people have put it to me that part of the problem in northern constituencies is ethnic. I want to make it absolutely clear that there is no evidence for that. Indeed, we should put it firmly on the record that ethnic minorities have often helped the housing market to remain buoyant for much longer than it otherwise would have done. People from different ethnic groups who move into an area in no way damage the housing market—the opposite is true.

Several Government Whips and members of the Government are from the area, including my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley

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(Mr. Stringer), and they are particularly concerned about the problem. As another local Member, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas), has said, the Ritchie report discussed the ethnic issues and the problems in Oldham, but some of its recommendations on housing have not been implemented. I should stress that the failure to implement recommendations in the areas where there was difficulty last summer will make matters worse. Like my hon. Friend, I hope that the Ritchie recommendations can be introduced.

There is a bit of a problem in some areas with placing asylum seekers. The local authorities are doing a good job, but one or two of those in the private sector who make provision for asylum seekers are exploiting the situation. They are putting people into houses that are hard to let and not giving them support in the community. That is making the situation worse. I should stress to the Government that we need a bit more help if we are to deal with the problem. We must ensure that there is support for people who are put into areas of housing weakness, and that the local community is not simply left to cope.

The main exploiters are some private landlords, and there is considerable evidence that they deliberately drive prices down in some areas. For instance, if a house is hard to sell, the estate agent may say to the owners, "Look, we are trying to sell your house but we have had only a few inquiries. Why not bring the price down significantly?" Once the price has been dropped, the agent will find someone to buy the property—usually a property investor from outside the area. In such cases, the estate agent will often say to the investor that he will manage the property and make sure that it is let. At that point, the person managing the property may be tempted to put in tenants who have fairly low standards. The result of that will be that the rest of the properties in the street begin to go down in value. Normally, people who buy properties are interested in pushing the prices up—their own and those of their neighbours.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Does my hon. Friend agree that another way in which prices are driven down in such areas is when owners or their representatives take the houses to auction? That really does drive down prices.

Andrew Bennett: Yes, I understand that particular variation. However, I want to put across the fact that, although property owners normally want to push prices up, in some areas they are tempted to push them down. Their intention is quickly to get back the capital that was invested through housing benefit payments. They are then left not with a property but with a plot of land. It is the value of the land in which such people are interested.

I have said enough about the problems. I realise that other hon. Members want to speak, so I now turn to the solutions. The Committee's report found out a lot, and we are grateful that the Government's response to it deals with some of the possible solutions. Their response was a little slow, although I welcome today's announcement. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will tell us a little more about how they are getting a move on.

The most important thing is to put a floor in the market in some areas. Local authorities ought to consider designating certain areas, and saying to potential purchasers, "If you buy a house in this area for a reasonable price, we could guarantee it and buy it back if necessary." Doing that would put confidence back into the area, and many of those properties would be occupied. It is crazy that prices in some places on the south side of Manchester should be under continual pressure to rise while in some parts of the north side of Manchester they are collapsing.

It is important that private landlords should be registered. If they then want to get housing benefit, we could enforce certain standards. We have done work on improving compulsory purchase orders—CPOs—and local authorities must get to work on the new regulations. However, we need speedier powers for imposing CPOs. We need to look soon at the question of whether authorities should be able to purchase properties compulsorily to lease them.

Although we have some knowledge of the housing market renewal fund—I will come back to that—we want more detailed information about it. We must also look hard at what the Housing Corporation is doing. It is not doing enough to regulate the housing associations. Indeed, an imminent crisis faces those housing associations that have extensive property holdings. So far, the Housing Corporation has been able to persuade the bigger housing associations to take over the smaller ones that are in difficulty, but it is important that the market does not crash, otherwise the concept of housing being a safe investment will be destroyed.

Then there is the much bigger issue of equity across the country. It is tragic that we have a housing shortage in parts of London and the south-east while so many good houses are going to waste in northern parts of the country. We should be working hard to try to resolve some of those difficulties, because many of those houses are attractive. One or two local authorities have tried schemes. Huddersfield was in the news recently for trying to attract people to move from the south to council properties in the north. I am not sure that it has met with much success. However, retired people living in the south, who have houses worth £250,000, can find houses for a tenth of that price in some of the constituencies that are represented in the Chamber. If those retired people move to the north-west, they will have as good a quality of life and realise a considerable capital income to make their old age that bit more comfortable.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): That is a good way to deal with the regional imbalance in housing, but does my hon. Friend agree that it will work only if there is economic growth in the north of England and if the regional development agencies are not used to play one area off against another? People must have somewhere to go and work to do when they get there.

Andrew Bennett: I accept the argument about work and I also accept that few people move house once they pass 40. However, if one has passed the age of searching for jobs, there is some very attractive housing in the north of England. There are also attractive houses in areas of market failure in some south-coast seaside resorts. I understand why someone may not be

too keen to move from a London suburb to some parts of the north-west, because they do not know how attractive it is there, but most people from the London suburbs have some idea of what it is like in places such as Hastings, so it might be possible to encourage people to move there.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) that the main concern is to achieve a fairer distribution of jobs and more equity for those parts of the north of England where the housing is waiting for people if jobs can be created. The Select Committee will listen carefully to the Secretary of State's remarks, but we will want to return to the estimates. I certainly hope that, by the autumn, the issue of the pathfinder projects will be clear, that there will be more money from the spending round and that all those who are currently suffering from market failure will begin to feel that the Government are doing something about the problem.

2.46 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): I echo the thanks expressed by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Bennett), the Chairman of the Select Committee, to its members for co-operating with each other in their discussions. There is a lesson there that those outside the House fail to understand, especially in relation to Prime Minister's questions. I also echo his thanks to the staff and our advisers. As he said, we always listen to our advisers, although whether we follow their advice is another question.

I feel slightly guilty about taking part in today's debate because, although I am a member of the Select Committee, I had no part in producing the report or in any of the Committee's investigations. However, I feel a little less guilty for two reasons. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) attended all the investigation days and took part in the Committee's discussions and the assembly of the report. Secondly, although it was not mentioned by the Chairman of the Select Committee, I regard the report as only one of several key reports to be published. Perhaps the Secretary of State also recognises that and will respond to those future reports, rather than looking for friends, which I thought he might be doing by now. That would be encouraging, because the problem is not isolated to a few areas, as some of the interventions that we have heard suggested.

The report is short—almost a snapshot—but it puts into perspective the difficulties in the north and north-east. Of course, we must recognise that the situation in the south-east is entirely different, but I regard the two as interrelated. A microcosm of the problem existed in London some 20 years ago, although the situation there has changed dramatically. There were terrible problems in some parts of London, where prices were rising and people who had sold up and moved out could not afford to move back. I shall not mention names or areas just yet, but I might be tempted if I am goaded.

The Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Stephen Byers): Go on.

Sir Paul Beresford: Only if I am goaded.

There were areas of deep deprivation, which might explain why the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble), who I anticipated would reply to the debate, has not turned up. That could be connected with the fact that she was a leading local authority chairman in a key area that suffered some of those difficulties.

The report addressed two contrasting scenarios. The first concerned relatively isolated, almost individual homes—we still find this in London, where there is a healthier housing market—and the destructive effect that individual failure can have, particularly if the property is rented and the housing association or local authority is not prepared to deal with the problem.

The other, which the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish did not touch on, harks back to the past but still persists: some local authorities and housing associations that are large landlords are utterly incompetent. There are classic examples of that north of the border. Glasgow, which has been a disaster area for decades, is setting up a housing association. It will be intriguing to find out whether it will be able to deal with the situation. One frequent cause of problems is that the bigger a landlord's stock, the less able it seems to be to deal with problems. The Glasgow area should have been broken down drastically, if only to allow comparisons to be made between the approaches in different areas.

The second and more tragic issue that the Chairman of the Select Committee touched on is the collapsing housing market. It could be spelled out no better than in the dramatic line on page 5 of the report:

"The rows of abandoned terraces, the broken windows and the burned out houses were shocking."

That is not understood by many people in the south-east. The north-south divide can be illustrated no more dramatically than by considering my constituency in the south-east where there is exceptionally low unemployment, astronomically rising house prices and a high demand for housing. Looking north, we find a total contrast. The trouble is that demand in the south-east is such that the response of the Secretary of State's predecessor to local authorities that sought low-cost home ownership was to ram the figures in, with the result that our green belts and green fields are disappearing. It is clear that, in time, forcing that type of property into an area will fuel the market rather than stabilise it.

The Sub-Committee made three main recommendations and I intend to restrict myself to those. I am not being sarcastic, but to use a favourite phrase of the Chairman of the Select Committee, there is a touch of motherhood and apple pie in the statement of recommended aims. Beneath them, perhaps taking a little crust off the apple pie, are the sub-recommendations.

I was disappointed by the Government's response to the three recommendations. The Chairman was polite; he said that it was a little slow but he hoped that the Government would push forward. Perhaps that was cream on his apple pie. However, when we actually consider what the Government said, it is a case of "Not me, Guv". We have heard phrases such as pathfinder schemes, tools and stakeholders and a range of

[Sir Paul Beresford]

announcements on such matters as "lessons to be learned". It is all good spin-doctor stuff. However, the reality is, as we have found with some of the Sub-Committee's other investigations, that nothing is happening. The true statement in the response is the one that says

"The wholesale collapse of housing markets is relatively recent in origin."

That is correct, and it has got markedly worse since 1997. The Sub-Committee did not really face it, but the basic underlying problem—the Chairman touched on it and so did one of the interventions—is the economic and geographical imbalance in the country. We need to see the report balanced against the severe difficulties of the south-east, where we do not have the right homes because property prices are going through the roof. We would like to keep our green belt and green fields. I admire the fact that, to a degree, we have farmers rather than golfing establishments. I do not want the area to be built on, and nor do any of my constituents. We face a conundrum, and the situation is the complete reverse of that in the north. It is in the hands of the Government who must deal with it.

In the early to mid-1990s, the Labour party in opposition made much propaganda out of the recession. As we came out of the recession, however, the Conservative Government made great efforts to stimulate the economy in the north and check the overheating in the south-east. The main engine was not piles of taxpayer's money, local authority efforts or volumes of regulation, but the close co-operation between central and local government and the private sector. I am thinking of English Partnerships, challenge funding, the single regeneration budget and, most of all, firm and careful use of the planning system.

Overarching all that must be joined-up government, which is a difficult phrase. The Government have said a lot about joined-up government, but there is little evidence of it.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am sure that all hon. Members present will agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said. However, it is wrong to pretend that empty housing is only an urban problem. The problem of houses in rural areas being kept empty is a direct result of the planning system, which may encourage people to make two cottages into one and keep them empty in the meantime. Clearly, the planning system should diversify to ensure that the housing is used. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Sir Paul Beresford: To a large degree, I do. One solution must be the planning system. The investigation into the planning Green Paper may be a vehicle on which the Sub-Committee can move. It is not the whole answer, but part of it.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): My hon. Friend has huge knowledge of the subject. The Government are reviewing the joined-up government and the success of urban regeneration that took place under the Conservatives. Does he agree that there are too many schemes and budgets? No one knows what they are, so they are underspent and not effective. The system must be simplified to get urban regeneration going in the north, which will stimulate the economy and reduce the number of empty homes.

Sir Paul Beresford: I was about to thank my hon. Friend, but he has given voice to my next set of thoughts. I was going to say that the approach of the Conservative Government at their tail end was dramatically successful. I got an indication of that in a simple way shortly after the 1997 election, when I checked with a spokesman from the Council of Mortgage Lenders. Although he did not have the figures—he promised to produce them, but did not—he confirmed that lending on mortgages was declining to a remarkable degree in the south-east, but rising in the north, especially the north-east. Our Chairman would have been quite pleased with that, although he has escaped us now. Since 1997, that has completely reversed.

Over and above all the factors that the Chairman mentioned, the key must be to build confidence. We must beat street crime, as we did in London in the 1980s. We need to offset the decline in manufacturing, which comes back to the Treasury and the high pound. We must beat education difficulties. People will not move to areas unless they have jobs, decent education and a crime level that is low, or that people at least feel is low.

We should consider the Sub-Committee's third recommendation, which is probably the most important. It reads:

"The planning guidance on the re-use of existing brownfield sites contained in PPG3 must be forcefully implemented locally and regionally with a far more radical curb on greenfield development."

Since then, there have been a few words from the Government, but the reality is that they are not implementing that guidance. They are not helping in the north and are being restrictive in the south, especially in the south-east.

The recommendation does not apply to housing alone. It must also apply to businesses, because they provide jobs and opportunities, and to quality housing that goes with the businesses that could move into brownfield sites. Quality housing attracts executives to an area and ensures that businesses will move in and provide jobs for the people who will bring those dilapidated houses back into use. That requires cooperation between the private sector and local authorities.

Ms Oona King: The key point is that if people in the south-east do not want their green belt built on, it is in their interest to ensure that more jobs and infrastructure projects go up north. We must not continue to hog projects such as the national stadium and anything else we can get our hands on.

Sir Paul Beresford: I must congratulate the hon. Lady. I had not quite got to the sporting aspect, but she has succeeded in doing so nicely. From the smile on her face it would seem that it is a score that she wanted to make. I will let her have her moment.

The Government response, particularly to that recommendation, was pretty knock-kneed. They mouth platitudes while in reality the previous Secretary of

State—I hope that this one will not do the same—hammered the south-east with extra building requirements. I do not know where the new buildings will go—the struggle is enormous. As the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) said, we need to use jobs to persuade people to move north.

The Committee's first and second recommendations of the primary three are also correct. Several local authority areas in London have proved that to be the case. In the late 1970s, whole blocks of south London were designated as slums. In my own area of London at the time, the aim was to bulldoze those slums having shifted the residents out and accommodated them elsewhere. The former local authority took 10 years to move several hundred people into alternative accommodation. It then bulldozed the old accommodation and built what I suspect are the slums of tomorrow. The net gain was six fewer houses, an enormously dissatisfied population and a 10-year wait.

I found that the key was to try to work with people in their homes, with housing associations and with the private sector. The local authority acted as a catalyst and spent much less money by acting solely in that capacity. The most obvious, broad success was achieved through demolition in some areas, but predominantly by enveloping—wind and waterproofing. That gave the residents an opportunity to work on those properties because the initial work had made them structurally sound.

Where residents were elderly or unable to pay the substantial costs, even with the grants available, the cost of the process was set against the property, to be collected at a later date, often when the elderly people died and the property passed on. The intriguing part of the process was that as the work continued the value of properties in the area rose dramatically. The net effect was a big financial gain for the residents or those who inherited or sold the property after the work had been completed.

To my amusement, the Housing Corporation, on which the Chairman of the Select Committee touched, has discovered this as a new idea. It is not. It has been done by local authorities of all political complexions up and down the country. It is done with people in their own homes. Perhaps the most dramatic and intriguing change in my area was the number of branches of stores such B&Q and Wickes that suddenly sprang up to meet demand. That proved that the measures were working.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): I am listening with interest to the hon. Gentleman and I agree with much of what he has said. Birmingham city council was one of the first authorities in the country to develop enveloping schemes in the 1980s, and Sheffield followed closely afterwards. However, the Tory Government of the 1990s, to whom he was paying tribute a few moments ago, changed the rules on enveloping so that grants were no longer available to continue the schemes. The gap in the 1990s when nothing could be done is one of our greatest problems. Does the hon. Gentleman take some responsibility for that?

Sir Paul Beresford: No, because my local authority used the opportunities for gaining capital receipts to find a way around that and provide the grants directly from internal funding. We did not experience difficulties because of Government decisions. We aimed to use capital receipts rather than extensive loans, the use of which I suspect caused Sheffield some difficulty.

The other key factor was the use of the private sector in partnership with local authorities. As many hon. Members will recognise, the Government are referring to planning tariffs and, as the Minister of State recently told the Select Committee, discussing the EU regeneration grant system, which is slowly collapsing or not even working. They have demolished English Partnerships. Everything seems to be spiralling downwards while the north, especially the north-east, is collapsing and the south is being concreted over. I suggested in desperation that the Minister of State had clear signs of the Nero syndrome: he was talking while everything around us collapsed.

As I said, the report should not be considered in isolation. Further reports are to come, which I hope will involve other aspects, until the full, interrelated picture can be seen.

It is not a happy scene for the Government. I am sure that the Minister will be tempted to repeat the "18 years" mantra, but the situation has declined dramatically in the north and north-east since 1997. As the Chairman of the Select Committee pointed out, unless something is done quickly, in some areas, the spread will resemble an unpleasant cancer.

3.6 pm

David Wright (Telford): I am shocked by your generosity, Mr. Griffiths, in calling me to speak so early in the debate. I expected a long wait.

I welcome the Committee's report on this complicated and critical issue. It helps move housing up the political agenda. For far too long housing has been in the doldrums of the political agenda in this country, and it is time that it moved up. I agree with the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) that the matter is linked to other factors relating to education, welfare and social indicators that make areas sustainable. Housing is crucial. It touches everyone's lives and is extremely important. I shall focus on two aspects—there is an obvious split between public sector and private sector housing—and will draw some of those themes together in conclusion.

Our policy in the local authority and registered social landlord sector in the post-war period has been one of never-ending growth—excluding, of course, the right to buy, which has shaken out properties from the social housing sector. There has been a continuing commitment to providing increasingly more units. We must accept that in some areas that process has been largely unsustainable.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): The hon. Gentleman refers to the right to buy and says that otherwise the provision of housing has been steadily growing. Does he recognise that in the past five years the provision of social housing in this country has fallen dramatically? That is one reason why we are suffering key-worker housing shortages in the south of England.

David Wright: I would have some sympathy with that argument if the hon. Gentleman were not from a party

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that has pursued a policy of aggressive disposals in London during the past 20 years, selling off properties cheaply. He now complains about the social housing market throughout the country, including London. He needs to look more closely at the policies followed by the Government he supported in the 1980s.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): In 1979, when the Conservative Government came to power, London boroughs were building an average of 1,300 homes every year. In 1997, when the Conservatives were finally kicked out, only one house in the entire Greater London area had been built by a London borough.

David Wright: I thank my hon. Friend for those figures, which I believe are mirrored throughout the country. The Conservatives do not have much to say or be proud of in relation to social housing.

Chris Grayling: We must not allow ourselves to be too diverted down that track. The Conservative Government created an entirely new sector of registered social landlords—the housing associations that form the bulk of the affordable housing sector. There was considerable investment in the early 1990s. Since 1997, investment in social housing has fallen significantly, and that statistical information is admitted by the Government.

David Wright: I find it strange that the hon. Gentleman wishes to claim credit for the registered social landlords movement. Its base was rather broader than the construct of his party. It was born of the voluntary sector and of those who wanted to provide housing for people in need. He cannot claim credit on behalf of his party for establishing that movement.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in *The Observer* on 28 April 2002, Ben Summerskill wrote:

"Just 162,000 new homes were built in 2000-01. This figure is the lowest in any year since 1927 except the war years"?

That is under the Government who the hon. Gentleman claims have built more social housing units.

David Wright: I want to develop my argument further. I was trying to explain that, since the second world war, the provision of social housing units has increased. That trend of growth has proved to be unsustainable in some areas, because we are now seeing a decline in demand. My main point is that a "one size fits all" housing policy is no longer appropriate. For too long, our housing policy has been based on the ongoing and increasing demand for social housing in the south-east of England, and that no longer fits all areas of the country. It is time to acknowledge that fact, and we have begun to develop housing strategies that are more regionally distinct.

Some of the policies pursued by Opposition Members when in government during the 1980s exacerbated the problems on social housing estates. For example, they introduced a programme called estate action. It was founded on good principles and objectives, such as trying to improve social housing estates that were falling into decline. However, many of those estates were unsustainable in the long term. In fact, some of the worst estates were saved, when a more radical approach of clearance and redevelopment would have provided quality new housing on a mixed-tenure basis. Several policies pursued by Opposition Members during the 1980s and 1990s created some of the sink estates and, consequently, some of the problems that we now see throughout the country.

Chris Grayling: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; this will be my last intervention on him. As part of the investigation, we visited the Hulme estate and the Ordsall flats in Salford. Both received investment and precisely fitted the picture described by the hon. Gentleman. The case of Hulme, in particular, is striking. It was an early 1990s initiative and was the model of the way that things should be.

David Wright: I am happy to give credit to the Labour council that was involved in setting up that initiative. My point was that, in many cases, estate action—the platform for the Government's policy during the 1980s—was unsophisticated. We need to take a more sophisticated approach and develop distinct, focused, regional and sub-regional strategies for dealing with the issues surrounding housing demand and empty homes.

We have already heard this afternoon about the cycle of decline that occurs in areas where one or two properties become empty. In my constituency, one of the key signs is a decline in owner-occupation. The private rented sector moves in, purchasing large numbers of properties, but makes insufficient investment for repairs. As a result, such areas fall into decline and malaise. We need to look in a more sophisticated way at how the private sector is operating because, often, small landlords buy up one or two properties but fail to maintain them adequately. We are only now beginning seriously to take demand factors into account in developing our housing strategies.

While I am concentrating on local authorities and RSLs, I should say that a major issue that is not highlighted in the report is the impact that empty properties can have on the sustainability of stock transfer vehicles. If we allow empty properties in towns and cities in the north of England and the midlands to go unchecked, the financial models that have been established for stock transfer vehicles will start to founder. I want the Secretary of State to explain how we could deal with that problem. This is not a party issue; for some time, both parties when in government have addressed the matter of stock transfer. There is a serious issue to do with long-term demand and its impact on transfer vehicles.

Many local authorities are starting to adopt comprehensive clearance strategies. When I worked for Sandwell metropolitan borough council, I was known as Demolition Dave because I believe that we must often accept that certain areas of property are beyond saving, and that they must be cleared and replaced with mixed-tenure developments. There is no political divide over that either. We need to diversify the tenure base in many estates and areas, and local authorities should take public sector clearance far more seriously.

I turn to private sector housing. For several years, our national strategy on private sector renewal has been extremely weak—for instance, it was very poor during the 1990s. The mandatory grant regime meant that many local authority housing budgets collapsed, and we are seeing significant abandonment in private sector areas. Substantial clearance is now on the agenda again for abandoned areas of private sector housing, and we should not shy away from that. We must ensure that redevelopment strategies are implemented effectively.

The report identifies another important issue: the lack of skills in compulsory purchase order activity in the UK. Few local authorities have pursued CPO activity in recent years, and that has led to a loss of that skills base in the local authority sector. We must try to reinvigorate it, so that CPO activity becomes more effective and rapid.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most serious problems in the housing sector is the decline in skills in many local authority planning departments, and that the Government must urgently address that?

David Wright: I do not agree that there has been a decline of skills in those planning departments. My point is about cross-departmental working, especially with regard to CPOs. CPO activity is a technical process, and many local authorities have shied away from such orders for several years. They can be an effective tool, and time and effort must be invested—probably at national level—to reinvigorate that skills base.

We need to develop regionally and sub-regionally distinct housing strategies. This is not just a north-south issue. We need a sophisticated policy approach to deal with the problems in the south-east, but we need to look at the other regions too, because they may also have distinct problems that require specific solutions. Intervention strategies need to be based on a comprehensive market analysis. Some of the work that has been done in servicing the Committee—such as that by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies—was pioneering, and it should be applied throughout the country.

The Government's policy of housing market renewal is crucial, and we must support it. In many areas, we are beginning to make strides towards creating an integrated public and private sector strategy, under the banner of housing market renewal. That needs to be tenure-blind, but it must develop distinct strategies to deal with both public and private sector housing.

Concentrating resources in the most deprived neighbourhoods could lead to areas at risk being ignored. In some urban areas, we may need to write off certain neighbourhoods because they have gone too far to be able to come out of the cycle of decline, and to re-deploy resources in areas that are just beginning to slip into disrepair. That will be difficult for many local authorities—and for many communities. However, we must bite the bullet and adopt that approach—and so must they. Taking the approach that all areas can be saved through refurbishment can no longer be applied, as it no longer fits the agenda. We must be brave enough to take such decisions.

We also need to reintroduce housing investment into other major programmes. One weakness of initiatives such as the new deal for communities and the single regeneration budget has been insufficient emphasis on housing investment. During the past four or five years, I have been involved in bids for such funds in which we were told not to include housing investment. I do not find it pleasing to say that, but it is a fact. We must acknowledge that housing investment can be the cornerstone of ensuring that areas may recover.

Comprehensive regional clearance and redevelopment strategies are important. At present, housing corporations and Government offices produce regional housing statements, but we need local authorities and private sector partners to sign up to those formally and to integrate them with regional planning guidance. There is too great a gulf between our approaches to housing targets and to planning. We must get local authorities to sign up formally to figures and to explain clearly in their local plans and responses to planning guidance how they intend to meet demand and clear and replace empty homes.

We must ensure that registered social landlords review their business plans in respect of empty homes. We will experience a major problem unless we secure recognition that decline of the housing market might destroy the stock transfer vehicles that we have established.

3.20 pm

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire): It is a great pleasure to participate in the debate. I became active in politics in the first place because the London borough in which I lived contained more empty council houses than homeless people. I made my maiden speech on Second Reading of the Homelessness Bill, and I was proud to serve on the Standing Committee that considered it with several hon. Members who are present today.

My constituency experience is the reverse of the northern Members present, and is more in line with that of my hon. Friends who have spoken. The overwhelming problems that are brought to my constituency surgeries week by week are faced by homeless young couples who want a first home or by families who are inadequately housed. Examples of such families are those with children who are ready to move out of a cot and into a bed for which there is no space in their room, or those with children who have bedrooms that are so small that there is room for a bed but not a wardrobe. South Bedfordshire district council, which is my local housing authority, manages its housing stock efficiently but is unable to meet the huge demand that is presented by the constituents who visit my surgery week by week.

I am extremely interested in empty properties in my constituency because anything that we can do to increase the supply of houses in my constituency—and, I suspect, in most English constituencies more or less south of Birmingham—would be welcome. I pay tribute to the two recommendations in the Select Committee report that suggest that action be taken on that matter. At the moment, the best value performance indicator for local authorities measures only the number of private sector houses that have been empty for six months. The report recommends that the measurement should be extended throughout all housing sector tenures.

3.23 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.38 pm

On resuming—

Andrew Selous: I very much support the second proposal in the Select Committee report; local authorities should initiate an immediate review if more than 2 per cent. of their housing stock is vacant. That recommendation is along the lines of an amendment to the Homelessness Bill tabled by the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) who is also present this afternoon. The amendment was supported by all members of the official Opposition on the Standing Committee and by all Liberal Democrat members present, but was sadly lost by a single vote—by eight votes to seven—which was a great shame.

The amendment would have required local authorities to make specific reference to the nature and extent of empty housing and vacant property in their districts. Local authorities would also have had to produce a target for the reuse of such properties and a strategy to achieve that target. It is a pity that the amendment was not agreed to, especially as the Empty Homes Agency estimates that more than half of all local authorities have no credible or effective empty property strategy. It is a matter of great regret that the amendment was not accepted.

I warmly endorse the third major recommendation of the report; that more impetus should be given to PPG3, which supports giving more urgent attention to building properties on brownfield sites. That is especially relevant to my constituency, all of which falls within a green belt. I welcome the provisions in the 2001 Budget to increase the measures used to turn flats over shops into residential properties. That is a huge untapped source; it could make a real difference to constituencies such as mine by increasing the supply of properties.

So far this afternoon, we have considered the supply side of the equation. I should like to dwell briefly on demand. The Department commissioned a report in 1990 entitled "Divorce, Remarriage and Housing: The Effects of Divorce, Remarriage, Separation and the Formation of New Couple Households on the Number of Separate Households and Housing Demand and Conditions". The report estimated that roughly 70,000 extra properties are required a year as a result of various forms of family breakdown. I should be interested to know whether the Department has commissioned further research on the subject to update that report, and what further recommendations Ministers think should flow from that.

On the subject of young homeless people, 86 per cent. of young people leaving home do so because of conflict with step-parents, or when their families fall apart. That is relevant to what we are talking about because the question is one of both supply and demand. I urge the Secretary of State to consider that in his future policies.

3.42 pm

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak about the Select Committee report, which I welcome, along with its detailed recommendations.

In many ways, this is the most important debate in which I have taken part in my 19 years in the House, because the issue is of great importance to my constituency. However, I accept that Burnley is not unique; other areas have problems with empty houses. I recognise that there is a problem across east Lancashire, and I support the work undertaken by East Lancashire Partnership in putting forward a bid for housing renewal. I hope that hon. Members will understand if I make Burnley my main theme. We have the biggest problem of any borough in the country. Out of 40,000 houses, 4,000—10 per cent. of the housing stock—are empty at present.

Burnley has several other problems, which have been given a lot of publicity in recent weeks, but this issue is of great importance, too. Burnley's number one core problem relates to empty houses and all the problems that go with it—dereliction, vandalism, drug addicts, the lowering of the lower end of the housing market, and many others.

The Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Bennett), referred to two issues on which I would like to touch. One was the rented properties issue. He spoke about a registration scheme, which I strongly support. People across Burnley would recognise that there are major problems with landlords who do not live in the area. They buy properties at a low value and let them knowing that, in most cases, the rent will be paid because of people receiving housing benefit. They are not bothered about who they put in the houses and what problems those people bring to other residents in the area. Such landlords cause the problems to which my hon. Friend referred. A registration scheme to ensure certain minimum standards for such tenancies is important, as is the type of property that is provided in return for the rent.

My hon. Friend referred to the ethnic issue in Oldham. That has been cited as a problem in Burnley; it was certainly used in the election campaign last year and in the council elections this year. Particular reference was made to an alleged preference for certain areas. The accusation was that the council had given more resources to Daneshouse ward, which has a majority of Asian people. It is 40 to 60 per cent. white people, but sometimes people believe that it is 100 per cent. Asian. The reason why that area has received a large amount of resources is because it is the eighth most deprived ward in England. It would be spent on that ward, regardless of who lived in it. Such accusations about preferences are appalling.

It is not true to say that we have not spent resources in other parts of the town. Massive investment has been made throughout the town, but misinformation has been put out as fact and, unfortunately, people tend to believe it. Two years ago, Burnley had a housing stock transfer. The Government wiped off £23 million of residual debt. That allowed the transfer to take place, because the properties were not worth the money that was owed on them. The decline in the value of housing in the area has allowed Burnley and Padiham Community Housing to invest in the properties. We are grateful to the Government for their action because they have now allowed the council to concentrate on the private sector problem.

I was glad that members of the Select Committee came to Burnley. I attended the briefing at Turf Moor. Members toured some of the key difficult areas in the town. I know from comments that were made to me by both Labour and Opposition Members that they were visibly shaken by what they saw. Other areas in the town would have shaken them just as much. I am not criticising them. I have been a member of Select Committees and I know that time is limited, but they only saw a snapshot of the town.

On page 67 of the report, paragraph 4.1 describes what was said at the briefing meeting. It states:

"In Burnley, we heard that aspirations had changed and that people wanted more space and higher quality housing than the existing pre-1919 stock."

That is true. It must be understood that many people do not want to live in that type of terraced housing. About 20 or 30 years ago, we would have been happy to go on holiday, stay in a boarding house with a toilet at the end of the corridor and a shared bathroom. In 2002, such accommodation is not acceptable. People's housing aspirations have moved on. A terraced house might be decent, but with another terrace in front of it and one behind, little sunlight can get in, and that makes such housing no longer desirable.

The council is worried about the loss of single regeneration budget funding that, until now, has allowed councils to work in areas of private sector housing. The North West Development Agency told the council that its priorities have been shifted by central Government and that it will no longer be able to make funding available for that purpose. That is extremely worrying. The agency said:

"Where demolition is proposed there is an additional problem as local residents are frequently trapped in negative equity and relocation grants are inadequate."

Constituents visit my surgery week after week with the same problem. Last week, a person told me that he had bought his house for £24,000 a few years ago. He still owes £16,000 on the mortgage. He now has to move because his house is to be knocked down. He will get £10,000, but that leaves £6,000, which his building society is not prepared to forgo. One can imagine that that person feels somewhat aggrieved. People find out that they have a negative equity problem only when they have to move—for work, or any other reason. It is not a problem until they move, but it exists for many people.

The appendix to the Select Committee report includes several letters from Burnley residents. Some of them are tragic and detail moving cases. If any hon. Member thinks that the letters are odd or unique, there is not a single week in which I do not receive one, two or three such letters, and people visit my advice bureau with similar cases.

Last week, a family visited my advice bureau. I have known them for 40-odd years. In fact, one member of the family was on the executive committee of Burnley Labour party when it appointed me to work for the Labour party in Burnley in 1963. The family's home is an absolute palace. The next-door house on one side has been empty for 10 years and the next-door house on the other side has been empty for two years. The house on the opposite side of the road had two fires last week, and a house in the block at the back of the family's home had a fire last week. The family is absolutely terrified of living there, and I would be terrified if I lived there. It is unacceptable that such a situation exists in 2002.

During my 19 years as a Member of Parliament, Minister after Minister has visited Burnley to look at our housing problems, although several of them fell by the wayside in the Conservative Government almost as soon as they had visited. The problem is getting worse. Lord Falconer of Thoroton, the Minister for Housing and Planning, visited Burnley and east Lancashire on two separate occasions. When we met him in Hyndburn, I thought that it was the first time that we had a Minister who understood both the problem and the action that was needed to deal with it. He accepted that the problem could not be solved overnight, but that it required urgent action followed by a long-term commitment. That is very important.

During my 19 years in Parliament, I have asked more than 300 questions in the House on housing issues, most of which were in respect of Burnley. I referred to renovation grants during an Adjournment debate in 1984. Grants were available prior to the 1983 election, but as soon as the Conservative party won that general election, it axed the available money. We built up a queue of people but we could not find the money to give them grants.

The previous Conservative Government introduced value added tax on renovation work. Recommendation (k) on page 60 of the report suggests that VAT should be equalised for renovation and new build work. There is a good case for that. Areas such as Burnley are low-income areas with low-value properties. They contain many pre-1919 properties. The former Minister, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), said that the areas have a peculiar cocktail of problems. The problems cannot be solved because people do not have the resources to invest in a house that might not be worth any more in future. That is the reality that we have to face time after time. I referred to that in another Adjournment debate in 1986.

In the Queen's Speech debate on the first day of the new Parliament, I referred to the situation as I saw it. I said:

"East Lancashire has 225,000 privately owned properties, about half of which were built before 1919. A quarter of the whole stock, some 52,000 properties, is unfit for habitation, and a similar proportion is in serious disrepair."—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2001; Vol. 369, c. 139.]

That is the problem not only in Burnley, but in east Lancashire as a whole.

Members of the Select Committee who went round Burnley would have noticed boards with a Union Jack-type symbol that read, "Best offer to date: £1,450". In other cases, no offer is mentioned at all because people cannot get an offer on their property.

I hope that the Government will take note of a further difficulty. If one asks for council tax on property that has no value, and that people are not able to sell, it is no wonder that people try to disappear. It is not like having an empty second home. People just cannot get the money, and they feel outraged when they receive a bill for council tax if they are doing everything possible to try to sell their property.

Bradford and Northern housing association, an important association in my area, states:

"The level of funding that will be required to tackle declining neighbourhoods is not small—the National Housing Federation estimates that £100m will be needed in 2003/4, rising to £500m by 2005/6".

[Mr. Peter Pike]

The National Housing Federation states:

"Falling demand reflects economic decline, but in some areas of the north and Midlands, decline has accelerated into a downward spiral."

That is what we face in Burnley. We are in a downward spiral, and we cannot reverse it by ourselves.

The Government's response acknowledges some of the problems. The Secretary of State said in a statement that

"Derelict homes don't just scar the landscape. They make life intolerable for those still living there. Those who can leave, those left are often trapped in negative equity. Legitimate landlords struggle whilst rogue landlords flourish. Crime is endemic. Hard working people find that their investment in a home of their own is suddenly worth a fraction of its true value...The knock on effect is immense, it permeates our towns and cities. Declining areas destroy the fabric of our society."

I shall be brief, because I know that many other hon. Members want to speak. Burnley needs urgent action. We welcome the pathfinder project and today's announcement by the Secretary of State of the money raised for preparatory work. A number of options are available for Burnley. Together they will help to solve our problem. I stress that Burnley needs to reduce the number of houses available until it equals the number of houses wanted. As we get nearer to that figure—as those 4,000 empty houses reduce in number—we need to demolish 2,000 of them as speedily as possible. I hope that the Secretary of State understands that. We can then start to see a solution for Burnley and for the other areas affected by this appalling problem. We can start to move forward.

3.57 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike). We may not share political views, but I am aware of his commitment on this matter. The Select Committee's visit to Burnley was probably the most moving part of our visit to the north-west. His constituency clearly suffers intense problems and there is a real need for urgent action. I hope that the Committee's report will encourage the Government to take the necessary action.

I am pleased to see the Secretary of State here. I am not a founder member of his fan club on transport matters, but I am pleased that he has taken the trouble to attend this important debate. I hope that he will take away with him some of the lessons that hon. Members learned while making the report and some of what is said this afternoon.

For someone who has not been directly exposed to the collapse of housing markets, the Committee's visit to the north-west was a thought-provoking experience. I am not a pure southerner. I have lived also in the north-west. However, unless one has seen the affected areas at close quarters—they are often only a few miles from areas that have perfectly normal, buoyant housing markets—one cannot comprehend the scale of the problem. The report highlighted a number of extremely important issues; some require Government action, but others go beyond intervention, because it is not a problem that can be regulated out of existence. The problem will have to be dealt with by society as a whole.

Some fundamental planning concerns need to be considered; I felt that particularly strongly during our visit to Liverpool. I was a candidate for the Warrington seat for the 1997 general election. I was concerned about the spread of housing into green land in such a pleasant part of rural Cheshire. It is pertinent that only a few miles away, close to the Liverpool city centre, large Victorian houses are standing empty and going to rack and ruin when, in another part of the country, they would have substantial value.

Although I endorse what the hon. Members for Burnley and for Telford (David Wright) said—I agree that, in some places, there may be a need for bulldozers—in places such as Liverpool there is clearly housing stock that should be returned to general use. It makes no sense to continue to develop on green land throughout Cheshire, causing people to drive long distances to work, when there are perfectly decent quality homes in places such as Liverpool and Manchester.

There is no doubt that some of the housing that we saw is obsolete. Some of the terraces in Burnley and east Manchester, for example, were past their sell-by date in the view of all the Committee members who visited them. Tough action needs taking and clearance will be required. We saw examples of new estates that were literally down the road from old estates but which were doing reasonably well on the housing market. It became clear that there were blocks of housing for which there was simply no demand and which, regrettably, would have to go.

We also saw clear evidence that, to coin a phrase, one cannot buck the market through state involvement and intervention. On a rundown estate in east Manchester, we saw examples of housing in its second or third phase of regeneration, which had been done up 10 or 20 years ago with grants provided by local authorities and Government. Those houses had repeatedly been improved to a small extent but then carried on declining. Such examples make it plain that we cannot escape reality and that change is necessary. Some estates will have to be cleared to make way for new housing and some communities may have to reduce in size.

The conclusion drawn by the hon. Member for Burnley is inescapable; in some places communities will have to become smaller to become sustainable again. However, the Committee was concerned about the ways in which some communities were starting to become smaller at their fringes. We saw evidence of haphazard clearance; for example, of a couple of houses being knocked down in a block, creating a scrubby piece of land with no purpose. That type of clearance only adds to the problem and damages rather than enhances the character of the area.

Clearance must be done strategically, and the Government should play a role in that. We cannot simply clear away whole areas of housing without the right compulsory purchase structure and financial underpinning of the clearance. There is a strong case for spending the money on radical change that in the past might have been used merely to shore up some of those areas. Some could be returned to parkland or green belt or turned into development areas, where a new kind of housing could be built that would appeal to a more modern marketplace.

We saw examples of policy failure, too. Gap funding was one such area, and the Committee has recently discussed it in debates on the European regeneration framework. We heard from many people involved in regeneration that the removal of gap funding, of which hon. Members may be aware, occurred because the European Commission suggested that the provision of that funding gave British developers an unfair commercial advantage over their European counterparts. The gap funding was ruled out of order, which is simple madness.

Some schemes in our inner cities cannot go ahead, despite the need for them, due to the lack of gap funding. The Government need to be tougher in their dealings with the European Commission, and we should certainly not have accepted that decision. Instead of providing gap funding in a place such as Liverpool—where it could make the difference between a declining and restimulated housing market—we are creating artificial competition rules between British and French developers. That makes no sense when we should be breathing life into areas that can live again.

Another regulatory point about which all on the Committee felt strongly was landlord registration. Given the political corner that I come from, hon. Members will not be surprised to learn that I am no great friend of undue regulation. It was clear, however, that the absence of regulation of private landlords in some of the areas that we saw was an omission. I do not want sweeping regulation of private landlords across the country, and I say that—as the Register of Members' Interests makes clear—as a small private landlord. Indeed, the co-Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), noted during our investigation that she, too, is a small private landlord. I hope and suspect that those of us in that position are responsible, let within the private sector and do a good job for the tenants in our properties. I think that that is true of private landlords across the country.

It is clear, however, that some landlords abuse the system. I would like—the report highlights the need for this—a system that would require landlords to meet certain standards if they wanted to let to people who need housing benefit. Giving local authorities the right, rather than the mandate, to regulate such private landlords in areas with failed housing markets would, the Committee felt, make a significant difference to some of those areas.

My third point relates very much to the other end of the scale. We also visited Tower Hamlets, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King). It was striking from our discussions with people involved in regenerating housing there that they had difficulty with the right-to-buy rules, and I was disappointed with the Government's response on that issue. Those people told us that they would decide to raise the quality of an area by regenerating—stripping out and doing up—a block or a whole estate. Once they announced the scheme, however, people would exercise their right to buy, and their properties would immediately be compulsorily purchased at the full market rate. The whole budget for the regeneration scheme would disappear before the scheme had even started, which is mad. I would not like the right to buy to be curtailed generally, but the situation that I have described is close to insider dealing. It is totally illogical that the current rules on the right to buy permit such circumstances to continue.

The report says that we need radical intervention in the areas that the Committee saw, which is true up to a point. In discussing our experiences as we visited different areas, however, we agreed that there was a limit to how far one could interfere with the market. It was clear, however, that radical solutions are needed, and they are not simply a matter of housing regulation.

We need tough policing initiatives. In one area of east Manchester, I saw people going in and out of a property down the road who did not look like they were about law-abiding business. In every area we visited, people talked to us about drug problems and crime. The hon. Member for Burnley referred to frequent fires. It was striking in his constituency that one could walk down streets and look into houses that still had all the furniture in the front rooms because people had simply gone away. The house next door would be burnt out. The hon. Gentleman is right that that should not be allowed to continue.

Such areas will need tough policing; we need the kind of strong community policing tactics that have been used to clean up parts of New York. The broken windows syndrome can be no more visible than it is in Burnley, Liverpool, east Manchester and the other places that we visited.

We also need tough action against anti-social residents. People should not be able to disrupt the areas that they live in to the extent that was clearly happening in the places that we visited.

Finally, there are several lessons to take into account. In Liverpool, we were told that public transport could make a major difference. The area that we saw really should not have been as run down as it was. It was close to the city centre and had big, attractive Victorian houses, which should have been prime property. Funding a local tram system, for example, in areas that are suffering in that way could make the difference between a failed and a recovering housing market.

The Government clearly need to tackle VAT, because it is totally illogical to stack it more favourably on new housing than on housing renovation. There should at the very least be parity, and there is a strong case for giving VAT preference to investment in rundown areas.

It was also clear to us that regeneration can work only if it is radical; if one takes an area like Hulme and transforms it. We were impressed by the experience of Hulme; a partnership between a Labour Government and a Conservative council, but a model of what urban regeneration should be, creating high-quality, affordable housing and high-quality private housing and transforming an area that had been a derelict ghetto. That is what we should be aiming to achieve in some of the areas.

We should also not be afraid to let communities become smaller, and to return housing areas to green land or parkland if that is appropriate. We must be sensitive to the needs of the residual community; clearly those people have rights. However, we cannot leave citizens who might not know where to go or how to solve their problems living in the middle of wastelands such as we saw. We cannot buck the market or change the world for those people, nor can we restore in all areas a vibrant

[Chris Grayling]

and buoyant housing market. However, we owe it to them to try to find better solutions for towns such as Burnley. If we fail to do so, we let down not just those people, but our country.

4.11 pm

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I, too, want to look at the problem from a northern perspective. We seem to be hearing mainly from northern people but the problem is greatest—certainly in terms of derelict empty properties—in the north. There is a vast difference between the north and the south.

I should like to question the way in which we approach regeneration. When I became chairman of housing in Bolton in 1986, the environmental health officers marched in and told me about the next clearance scheme: 700 properties, all in one area of Bolton. We would have swept them all away, and the whole community with them. It was clear to me that the money would not be available for all the housing problems that we were facing in both the public and the private sectors. I told the environmental health officers that that was the end of clearance in Bolton until a Government were prepared to make the money available. We have not yet had a Government, including the current one, who have made the money available for that kind of problem. From that day to this, Bolton has cleared only a small number of houses. We have done three terraces of 70 houses between then and now—the largest clearance that we have ever had—yet Bolton has 22,000 unfit properties, 5,000 to 6,000 of which are classed by environmental health officers as irredeemably unfit. There is no way, they tell me, in which they can be saved. We have 4,500 empty properties, mainly in the private sector.

We have not reached the state of Burnley and Salford, where one can see terraces that are largely derelict. We are fighting; we are not complacent. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Bennett) has indicated how quickly housing markets can collapse. Our housing officials and councillors are worried that Bolton is on the precipice of market collapse in some areas.

Interestingly, the area that I mentioned, where 700 properties were suggested for clearance in 1986, has been fully improved. The problem is that it is all factory housing built on narrow streets. The living conditions are dense and some of the new immigrants who have moved into those areas have large families—extended families, in fact. When we improve those areas, they want large extensions to be added to the properties, and those cover the small back yards behind the terraces. One of the problems with such regeneration is that it increases the density phenomenally. That is beginning to create other problems. People cannot find anywhere to park, street cleaners cannot clear the streets and the environment becomes a mess, ambulances cannot gain access and fire engines cannot reach houses—they have to run their hoses straight down the street to the middle of a terrace to fight a fire.

I wonder whether that is the right way to improve properties that were on a clearance programme more than 10 years ago. With 22,000 unfit properties in Bolton and 5,000 to 6,000 irredeemable, we should be tackling some of those that are coming to the precipice. Places such as Bolton, Burnley, Salford and Liverpool should be given the money now to clear the properties that are determined by environmental health officers to be irredeemably unfit.

Another problem in the north is that when money has been spent on small two-up, two-down terraces merely to envelop the properties and bring them up to standard—of course, the occupants themselves pay for the extensions—the equity is negative. If people spent the money themselves, they would be deeply in negative equity, never mind the problem of mortgage negative equity that my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) mentioned. If people did up the sort of properties that we have up north down here, those houses would have huge positive equity. That is the big difference between the north and the south.

About 50 per cent. of previous owner-occupiers in the clearance areas in Bolton opted to go into council housing or housing association properties. There were no problems with low-demand estates or empty council properties when we regenerated the town on that scale. I do not think that we should go back to that scale of clearance, but I say to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and other colleagues that, if regeneration is to mean anything, we will have to do it on the basis of a rolling programme, not in the stop-go way that has predominated in the past. Regeneration must be slow and sympathetic in trying to clear communities to adjacent brownfield land, if it is available. Plenty of derelict cotton mills and clapped-out engineering works and forges in the north are waiting for regeneration. That should not be so difficult.

Regeneration means jobs. In east Manchester, the manufacturing industry collapsed because it was redundant for this country. The cotton industry and the heavy engineering that supported it went abroad, where the labour was cheaper. The grand old post-Victorian manufacturing industry collapsed in east Lancashire and Bolton. The mining industry throughout Lancashire collapsed, and there was huge haemorrhaging of jobs. If we are to reverse that, we will have to provide jobs in the north to make people want to live in areas that have experienced or are still experiencing the problems that we are discussing.

Facilities such as shops and parks are important, too. Perhaps my walk to work here is unusual, but there are green parks wherever one goes in London. In the north, where the old factories were built, it would be a job to find a park, except perhaps for one big park on a peripheral part of the town. Let us put some daylight into those areas. Let us have some green spaces, provide play facilities for children and make those places attractive, so that people want to live there.

I would place the best school in the borough or city in the middle of the regeneration area. People for whom it is economically viable pay the earth to move to a house next to a good school, so that they can get their children into it. If we placed the best school and other facilities into the area that we were trying to regenerate, we would make people want to move there.

The question is one of confidence, as my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish said. He gave an example of how fragile confidence is. One house goes up

for sale or is derelict, and a rumour flies round the constituency that prostitution is rife in a street. Such stories are often only rumours, as my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley will tell us, but they send confidence over the cliff, and down goes the housing market in those areas.

Housing ought to be higher on the political agenda, as my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (David Wright) said. In my book, it ought to be near the top of it. If people do not have good houses, they will not have good health. If children live in an overcrowded property, they will never benefit from even the best school in the area because there is nowhere to do homework. In any case, the place is probably depressing, with wallpaper coming off the walls. How can our young children be educated in properties such as that?

Crime and drugs are a problem in such areas as well. They are where the drug pushers live. I live in the middle of Bolton, and a quarter of a mile from my house heroin is sold in one such area.

We must look radically at the way we regenerate, particularly in the Burnleys, the Salfords, the Liverpools, the Boltons and the Deptons of this world. We are tackling the worst properties but others are falling into unfitness faster than we can tackle those. We have to go back up the chain and save the properties that will be in that condition in a few years' time. I ask the Secretary of State to listen carefully. Please help us in the towns and cities that we have mentioned this afternoon.

4.20 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): It is satisfying that so many hon. Members are in the Chamber today and that the Secretary of State is here in person. That is a measure of the excellence of the Committee's report and the importance of its subject. I shall begin by echoing a comment by my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (David Wright). We must not lose sight of the fact that, in tackling housing problems, regional identity is very important, as are differences between regions. We must not get carried away with one monolithic structure or with two—one for the south and one for the north. That would be completely the wrong attitude to start with.

I shall make two assumptions for the purposes of my speech: first, a lot more public money will be available for housing during the next three years; and secondly, the Government's reforms of the planning system will go through largely as they have been proposed. Some may think that those are ambitious assumptions, but I think that there are grounds for optimism on both fronts.

I have heard Ministers say that they have begun to recognise the importance of placing housing at the top of the policy-making agenda. They have been making the links between housing and other factors such as education, health services, law and order, employment and a stable economy. Following the spending review this summer, more money may be available for housing, although spending money is only part of solving the problems.

On the issue of planning, the Government have an ambitious agenda to get away from rigid structure plans that seek to cover the whole country, and to encourage strategic planning regionally and more comprehensive development plans locally that engage local communities in the making of the plans. That is crucial to the success of improving planning.

One of the daughter documents that resulted from the Government's planning reform consultation was about compulsory purchase powers. I hope that everything that the Committee recommended on compulsory purchase powers comes out in the results of the Government's review. In particular, the Committee recommended that the need for housing regeneration and renewal ought to be sufficient authority for obtaining compulsory purchase orders, and that a local authority's master plan should include sufficient indication of the end use to allow the compulsory purchase order to be confirmed.

As a footnote, I add that my ten-minute Bill of a couple of years ago proposed that property standing empty and blighting streets ought to be sufficient grounds for the making of a compulsory purchase order. My eyes slightly stood out this morning when I read the briefing from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, which goes one step further in suggesting that non-payment of council tax should be grounds for such an order. It also refers to an American scheme, that I personally know nothing about, called QuickTake.

I am sure that points made by the Committee in its other recommendations are relevant to the issue of planning powers. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) mentioned suspending the right to buy once a renewal scheme is announced. I see the importance of that and am convinced by the Committee's argument. I am also in favour of broadening the compensation arrangements that are permitted under compulsory purchase order schemes. Particular mention is made of home-for-a-home compensation instead of cash payment.

There is the issue of council tax discounts for housing standing empty, which is a perverse incentive to keep them empty. The Committee says that councils should have the discretion to impose up to 100 per cent. council tax on a ward-by-ward basis, which echoes the warnings that housing conditions vary within quite short distances. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors agrees with that. To hark back to my ten-minute Bill, it recommended that councils should have such a discretion, although I suggested that they should be given the discretion to set the council tax at between nought and twice the standard rate, not simply at 100 per cent. of the rate, to provide some stimulus for people to make up their minds about what to do with their empty properties.

The extra money over the next three years will pay for five policy objectives: first, tackling the problems of failing and failed markets, especially establishing the housing market renewal fund; secondly, facing up to the actions that need to be taken to reduce the number of empty homes, wherever they are; thirdly, confronting the need for more affordable homes; fourthly, confronting problems of high prices in the owner-occupied sector; fifthly, improving the private rented sector.

On tackling the problems of failing and failed markets, we received a briefing from the National Housing Federation, which discusses in more detail the housing market renewal fund referred to in the report.

[Mr. David Kidney]

First, the briefing proposes re-establishing healthy housing markets, to which I would add the Committees' strong recommendation to take preventive action to rescue markets at risk of becoming dysfunctional. Secondly, it suggests a healthier mix of types of housing, dwelling type, tenure and population. Its third suggestion is that social regeneration initiatives should be phased in with the other adjustments.

In north Staffordshire, which overlaps slightly with my constituency of Stafford, we see those differences in the housing market. In Stafford borough and south Staffordshire district, there is a strong housing market, with house prices slightly above the national average, but in the city of Stoke-on-Trent and the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, there are some very mixed areas; there are some especially distressed markets in Stoke-on-Trent. That is why one of the Government's pathfinder schemes covers parts of those areas.

One precondition for making the work successful is genuine partnership and co-operation among all relevant stakeholders. The National Housing Federation talks about market renewal plans or prospectuses. The Committee recommended a clear conurbation-wide strategy and a master plan for the development of an area, informed by regional housing statements. The Committee says

"local authorities and registered social landlords should work with private sector organisations such as the Council for Mortgage Lenders".

I am not sure why that organisation was picked out from the many that exist, but it is important.

The Committee pointed out that

"consultation needs to recognise at the outset that change is required and that speed is of the essence".

That has been supported by today's many contributions about the rapidity with which the housing market can fall into dysfunction. The National Housing Federation suggests that a start should be made immediately in pilot areas, and today we have seen the press release about money for pathfinder areas.

Apart from failing and failed markets, the Committee discussed the work of the Empty Homes Agency, which is very valuable, empty homes strategies—not so valuable if they are just more documents to put on the shelf—and empty homes officers. It warns that care must be taken about how they are used. The report quotes a submission from Southampton city council:

"The City Council contends that Southampton's success is partly due to the appointment of a dedicated empty property officer who, unlike other council colleagues has the benefit of time and flexibility to work through labour-intensive personalised agendas."

Such officers can be useful, but appointing them does not automatically solve the problem.

The empty homes strategy was discussed during debates on the Homelessness Bill, which is now an Act. Since then, the Minister has answered my parliamentary question, saying:

"statutory guidance on the homelessness provisions in the Homelessness Act 2002 will urge local authorities to include a review of empty properties within their district as part of their homelessness review".—[*Official Report*, 16 April 2002; Vol. 383, c. 797W.]

The Committee identifies the problems of blight, antisocial behaviour and waste of a scarce resource. The tools that we need to tackle those problems include persuasion, an appropriate council tax rate and compulsory purchase orders. The latter is not necessarily a resource problem, if a local authority can pass the property straight on to a registered social landlord or even a willing buyer, depending on the use to which the property is to be put. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors even recommends rewards for councils in funding if they achieve targets in empty homes strategies. A footnote on its submission says

"For goodness sake Government—sort out the running sore about the use of Council Tax data to trace owners of empty homes!"

I do not want to go into detail on the other issues that I have mentioned, but the statistics show that there is a growing problem with the availability of affordable homes. We should tackle the shortfall sooner rather than later, because it will contribute to rising house prices as well as misery for those in need.

The report of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's land for housing inquiry was published in March 2002. That valuable report suggested that the Government had three critical challenges: to redesign the planning system to work proactively to link housing and labour markets, to begin the process of renewing Britain's housing stock and to provide more affordable housing.

In relation to high-value areas, the report called for more use of intermediate housing markets, equity sharing and land pooling or community land trusts. It also identified a need for new types of agencies to deal with the strategic use of land. For high-value areas and areas with failing housing markets, the report calls for a strong lead from Government to promote effective use of land, integrated transport policies, a proactive planning culture and land assembly mechanisms as well as a range of interventions.

The report identifies problems, especially in failing markets, of absentee landlords, high rents paid for by housing benefit without any regard to fitness standards, decent services or conditions for tenants, and it calls for licensing, which I support. There is a Government policy for a statutory licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation. The Government propose licensing in some areas of the country.

I am not convinced that such schemes can be limited to landlords who receive housing benefit, although I understand the danger of scrupulous as well as unscrupulous landlords worrying about more red tape and the burdens of registration and licensing—landlords preferring an easy life would not let properties at all, which would reduce the supply of private housing. Landlords should receive something in return for registration, such as the assurance of a light-touch licensing scheme and support that benefits business. The Committee suggests support from local agencies such as the police and youth offending teams in relation to antisocial behaviour, but there are other suggestions. We should consider speedy processing of housing benefit claims by council treasury departments, inspections and advice from environmental health officers, deposit and rent guarantee schemes as a matter of course and the availability of capital for improvements to properties. Tax incentives are another story. No commitments will be given today.

Local authorities should be the strategic authority on housing matters. Whether they have the right skills has already been questioned in relation to compulsory purchase orders, and they sometimes seem unwilling to work fully with partners from other sectors. Nevertheless, local authorities are the right people to take the lead role. They may need guidance from the Government about how to reduce the number of empty homes, and they should identify their partners and what they have to offer. Sometimes, my colleagues on Labour councils complain that they do not have enough freedom to act. On this subject they can take centre stage, and I hope that they earn rave reviews.

4.32 pm

Mr. Joe Benton (Bootle): I shall be brief because much of what I wanted to say has already been mentioned in the main by my hon. Friends the Members for Burnley (Mr. Pike), and for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). My constituency of Bootle shares many of the problems described. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley was right in saying that this is one of the most crucial debates for a long time.

I have long been aware of the background to the Bootle problem. As a young boy, I remember many salubrious districts being described as Victorian or Georgian. They are now nothing but ghettoes. The Committee visited one in Bootle, and I apologise, because I was unable to be there that day.

I compliment the Committee and the Chairman—I agree with the bulk of his earlier remarks—on the report. Page 67 of volume I states:

"The Council has decided to stop making piecemeal investments in the area and wishes to pursue a strategic approach. There are 4,000 properties in the area, which need to be cleared; many may not be replaced. There is, however a £350 million funding gap to achieving this."

I wish to home in on the general point of funding. I agree with everything that has been said about it. At the end of the day, such blighted areas will require one thing above all others, which is constant resourcing. We are facing a huge and frightening problem. That there are funding gaps as large as £350 million displays the magnitude of that problem. I cannot be parochial about the matter; it is a national problem. The Government will have to provide huge resources, and those resources will have to be constant, effective, and applied where they are needed.

Much of what I wished to say this afternoon has been somewhat circumvented. I was going to appeal to the Government to take strong and urgent action to resource such areas and their local authorities. I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement earlier today. However, it is only a kick start, as was said in the preamble to our debate.

Huge resources will be needed if we are to deal with this matter. We must get that across to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in an emphatic manner, when the time comes to consider the spending review. We must say to him that the problem of empty homes and blighted areas throughout the country must receive urgent and constant attention. That will make a big demand on the Exchequer—I am well aware of that. However, that must be said to him, because I can think of few more shocking experiences than to go to some of the areas in my constituency and see what people have to live in.

A quote from a council report will give hon. Members some indication of that and of the extent of the problem:

"Significantly more and more owners in these two areas (especially the Bedford Road area) are abandoning their properties altogether and leaving them to deteriorate and attract vandals, drug abuse and other street crime into the area, which in turn drives house prices and demand for the area even lower."

The report goes on to give the example of a road that has 26 vacant properties out of a total of 40. I can imagine what that situation must be like, and it is not unique to my constituency.

I emphasise that it is not only the private sector that is facing such problems. They are also faced by registered landlords, such as Riverside Housing Association and Pierhead Housing Association in my constituency. They have properties that are only five or 10 years old and cannot be let because of the surrounding blight.

We are facing a huge problem. Unless we provide constant resourcing and ensure that mechanisms are set up to direct the money to the right places to eradicate the problem, our future will look gloomy. I would say that to any Government. I welcome the initiative that the Secretary of State announced earlier, but I urge him to keep my comments in mind.

4.39 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): The Secretary of State has indicated the importance that he attaches to the subject of empty homes by his presence, and by his announcement this morning of an allocation of about £25 million to new pathfinders, specifically to deal with the issue. I thank him for that. I hope that it is just the start and that he will bring us further good news about dealing with this major problem.

The issue is a major problem mainly in the north of England and the midlands. It is extremely important not only for individuals and their well-being, but for general regeneration, local communities and economic development. It has particular significance in Liverpool, which has lost 25 per cent. of its population since 1971. Regeneration is under way in Liverpool. In my constituency of Liverpool, Riverside, unemployment has been halved in the past five years, and investment is visibly evident. Liverpool has submitted a strong bid to become European capital of culture 2008, which I am sure hon. Members support.

For too many people in local communities, too little has changed. In the inner core of my constituency, about 20 per cent. of some local neighbourhoods are vacant. In the inner core of Liverpool, 90 per cent. of housing is in council tax bands A or B, the most susceptible to abandonment. In Liverpool, there are more than 18,500 empty properties—9 per cent. of housing stock—64 per cent. of which are in the private sector. Liverpool has twice as many terraced properties as the national average. It is with older terraced properties in low council tax bands that the greatest problems are experienced.

The issue relates to people's choice of housing. All too often, people trapped in neighbourhoods in economic and social decline find that, when their individual prospects rise, they cannot stay in such areas because the housing that they want is simply not available. They therefore move out, which has an impact on the green belt in the rest of the north-west, especially Cheshire, but

[Mrs. Louise Ellman]

other areas, too. The issue is significant not only for individuals, communities and local authorities but for the region.

In Liverpool, the Government have successfully introduced several initiatives to deal with local problems relating to regeneration. The new deal for communities in Kensington and Smithdown deals with housing, among other issues. Regional investment companies such as Include in Dingle have been set up. The Government have provided a great deal of funding for neighbourhood renewal, which I hope the local authority will use for the purpose for which the money was intended—new initiatives—not as a substitute for its own budgets, which it seems to have chosen to cut.

On their own, the initiatives are simply not enough. I welcome the pathfinder initiative and the £2.6 million for Liverpool, Wirral and south Sefton, the grouping that has combined to deal with the issue. However, that alone is simply not enough. I make four requests. First, I ask the Secretary of State to announce the establishment of a housing market renewal fund with significant funding of billions of pounds over a minimum of 10 to 20 years. We need such a fund in addition to existing housing funding in order to make an impact. Such a fund would allow flexibility to deal with the various problems and different areas such as hon. Members have described, must be sufficiently substantial to make a difference, and should have the flexibility to consider different needs in different areas.

Secondly, I ask the Secretary of State to make a commitment to tackling negative equity. People trapped in neighbourhoods may like their individual houses but the street or neighbourhood may be in decline, and they want to move but simply cannot. I ask him to consider the progress of schemes such as the swap scheme in Salford, which is tackling the issue. That is vital for individuals, whose needs must be paramount.

Thirdly, I ask the Secretary of State to address the issue of speculators—that is, landlords who speculate with poor-quality property in areas where housing benefit enables them to make a great deal of money at the expense of tenants. Those tenants may not get a fair deal, and some of them cause problems in their neighbourhoods while the landlord shows no interest in what is going on. I ask the Secretary of State to consider licensing schemes or other means of dealing with the issue.

Fourthly, I ask the Secretary of State to consider gap funding, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). Gap funding is a major issue, but I hope that the Secretary of State will consider it in relation to housing before the Government resolve the wider regeneration issues that relate to it. Why has the Scottish Parliament found a solution to housing gap funding problems and reached agreement with the European Commission, while the Government are still struggling to find an answer? Does that mean that devolved Governments are far more focused on the needs of their areas than central Government? I look forward to his answer.

The extent and significance of the problem has been well articulated by the many hon. Members who have spoken. We must remember that the solution involves, and indeed requires, co-operation and co-ordination between several authorities. Regional development agencies have an important part to play. It is essential that they recognise the importance of housing as a key part of economic development. I am pleased that the North West Development Agency is starting to do that. I urge regional development agencies to consider the significance of housing to economic development, to think about the funding required, and to make housing, and the improvement of it, part of their economic development strategies.

The Housing Corporation has a major role. I am pleased to note that it held its first meeting outside London in Liverpool recently, and I acknowledge its work. The private sector also has an important role. Local authorities are key in driving the issue forward; only elected local authorities, accountable to their populations, can understand, monitor and oversee progress and push for more change. However, regional assemblies also have a critical part to play. Presently, that includes monitoring the work of the regional development agencies, but they also have important work to do in their own right.

I mentioned that the problem was of particular importance for the north and parts of the midlands. Funding for housing, and funding investment, must be considered in regional perspective. I should like the regional development agencies to ask how housing investment funding is allocated. What is the balance between the needs of the south, where the predominant issue is shortage of housing, and the needs of the north and part of the midlands, where the issue is regeneration, including abandonment and empty homes? Those are key problems with a regional dimension, and I hope that, in due course, directly elected regional assemblies will pursue them. In the meantime, I hope that the existing assemblies and chambers will pursue those matters with the regional development agencies.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Bennett) on the way in which he has conducted the inquiry into this important subject. I am delighted that so many hon. Members, both on the Select Committee and not, have come to the debate. Above all, I am delighted that the Secretary of State is here. I thank him for the statement that he made this morning, in which he announced £25 million as a starter for the new pathfinder areas, and I hope that he has more good news to bring us at the close of the debate.

4.49 pm

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): We should congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) on the work that he has done, over several years, to push this issue on to the political agenda. We are discussing a matter of great importance not only to his constituency, but to many others.

When the Select Committee travelled around the country looking at the evidence, it became clear that the problem affected different areas in various ways. My first plea would be that although we need a national framework to resolve the problems, we also need local solutions. We cannot have one imposed solution from the centre that seeks to deal with everything in a

particular way. Unfortunately, over the years, housing has been littered with grand ideas from central Government that have been forced on local authorities, which have then had to sort out the mess.

During our visits, we saw that one of the clearest connections between the different problems is a lack of investment that dates back several years. My own city of Sheffield is an example. In the early 1980s, we were spending £80 million a year on the private and public housing sectors. By 1997, we were spending only £20 million a year. Thanks to the Government's initiatives, we are now spending £40 million a year. In cash terms, that is still half of what we were spending in the early 1980s. In between, there were years of underinvestment and the problems have grown and developed. The need for investment has increased every year and that is a fundamental problem. Whether we consider the problems in the private sector, such as houses not being demolished because they cannot be replaced—which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon)—or those affecting the modernised council houses in Sheffield, underinvestment is still the link. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (David Wright), who said that such debates help to move housing up the political agenda. He is absolutely right. Housing is a key issue in so many people's lives.

I am disappointed that when senior figures in the Government make lengthy major policy statements, they often find time for only a small passing mention of housing. I am not referring to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, who is pushing the issue with more force than we have seen anyone do for a considerable time.

I support the concept of a housing market renewal fund. I welcome the pathfinder projects that were announced today. That is a good step forward. However, £500,000 a year is a gross underestimate of the funding requirements of those types of initiatives. The problem affects many different parts of the country on such a scale that we will have to spend billions of pounds, far exceeding the original estimate.

I agree again with my hon. Friend the Member for Telford about demolition, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East also mentioned. We need to reconsider whether demolition is appropriate in many cases. Some areas, such as Burnley, may simply require that houses are taken out of the housing stock and the site cleared up and improved. In other areas, the houses will need to be replaced, and that is where costs are incurred.

In my constituency, the then Liberal Democrat city council—that fortunately, is no more—tried to force demolition on three estates, Weaklands, Newstead and Scowerdons Farm, against the wishes of most local people. The council promised them brand new homes, but when the issue was pushed, there was no evidence of any money to fund the new houses. Clearly, we need to examine those issues. Demolition may be the answer, but where replacement is needed, the extra resources will have to be made available. We will need to take people with us on those issues, but they will not give us their trust and confidence until they believe that the resources are in the pipeline.

I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Telford about not necessarily dealing with the worst houses first. When we visited Manchester, we saw properties that had thousands of pounds spent on them only three or four years earlier, but they were empty because people simply did not want to live in them. In the meantime, other houses that might have been saveable three or four years ago have deteriorated to such an extent that they are probably not saleable either. Sometimes, it means throwing good money away.

We need to look carefully—and sometimes probably a little harshly—at the issues and try to concentrate on properties that are saveable. Equally, we should offer communities alternatives to demolition and rebuilding, allowing them the right to remain as communities. That means securing the money quickly and not having massive time lags, such as those in Norfolk Park in Sheffield, where houses were demolished, but four, five or six years later, no new houses have been built because one funding scheme after another has collapsed and failed.

In some areas, stock transfer may be a way of attracting new money. In others, stock transfer is either inappropriate or tenants do not want it. We have seen that happen in Birmingham, and there is a similar feeling in Sheffield. I believe that it was one of the issues that led to the demise of the Liberal Democrat council at the local elections.

I was very pleased that when the Secretary of State addressed the Select Committee in January, he said clearly that if tenants do not vote for stock transfer, funds will still be available to bring their houses up to a decent standard. It is important that people are not forced into stock transfer simply because funding is available only through one form of housing ownership.

I welcome the Government's PPG3 on housing. My constituency has an inner-city element at one end and green fields at the other. There is great resistance to building on the green fields and a lack of commitment to build on the brown fields. PPG3 has helped enormously. It has already been said that gap funding support is needed to start the initial development on the brownfield sites. That happened with the first phase of the Attercliffe village development in my constituency. Unfortunately, there were problems with the European Commission to which the Government did not react quickly enough and, thus, enable a new scheme to be in place. However, a new scheme is now before the Commission and I hope that funding will be available soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) said that the RDA in the north-west was supportive of housing regeneration and of providing funds from its resources, but that is not the case in Yorkshire. The Yorkshire and Humberside RDA has said that it has no intention of funding housing regeneration schemes. That is such a backward step. The decision was taken without consultation with the local authorities or local MPs, and I hope that the RDA will reconsider.

I support many other issues that have been raised, such as the Government's new proposals to deal with antisocial behaviour and the licensing scheme for private landlords, but the scale of the problem is enormous. It has been growing for years; it has suffered

[Mr. Clive Betts]

from under-investment, as a result of which the problems have not been tackled. Local authorities have not had the resources. If the problem in different forms and different areas is to be tackled in future, substantial extra investment will be needed. That is the key to the problem.

4.56 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): One day I will speak in a debate—perhaps in the next life—without prefacing my remarks by saying that there is no time left in which I can make my speech. That day is not today. I shall just focus on a few matters. I begin first with the Government's response to some specific recommendations of the Select Committee that affect people in areas of both low and high demand.

Recommendation (o) concerns the licensing of private landlords. The Government acknowledge that there may be circumstances when the licensing or registration powers might be used in high-demand areas. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State write to me about that point if he cannot expand on it today?

Recommendation (n) covers the suspension of the right to buy in areas of regeneration. I plead with the Government to rethink their strategy. I wholeheartedly endorse the principle of a public subsidy to help people on low and medium incomes to buy homes, but it is madness to do so at the expense of social housing for the most vulnerable who cannot afford to buy their homes.

I am probably giving the Tories more credit than they deserve, but I genuinely do not believe that the architects of the right to buy intended it as a money-making scheme for private landlords. If they did, it is working well and I congratulate them. If they did not, they and the Government must support changes in the law. At the moment, property companies are offering financial inducements for tenants to exercise the right to buy, so that flats can be leased for commercial letting at market rates and taken out of the stock of socially affordable housing. Worse still, they are going round estates, asking, "Are you in debt?" Obviously, many people—even in this House—will answer yes. The companies then offer to help them with the right to buy, finance the mortgage and pay off their debt.

The sums can be £8,000. The tenant has his debt paid, but he loses his home and the right to local authority housing. The companies are fleecing the taxpayer and siphoning funds—legally, at the moment—that should be going into social housing. The tenants who use the companies are not to blame, but the companies are asset stripping public housing and they must be stopped or at least discouraged from doing so. How can that be done? The clawback period could be extended from three years to seven, so that it would be less in their interests to take such action as it would be economically uncertain. In areas of chronic housing shortage, perhaps we could introduce a stipulation that properties can be sold on only to a key worker—although key workers in London cannot afford houses. The qualification period for the right to buy could be made longer to get people thinking about the right to buy. Other options such as increasing the maximum cash incentive scheme grant could also be considered.

If we do not introduce such measures, we are trying to fill the bath without putting in the plug. Last year, 3,000 new affordable housing units were built in London, but 11,000 went under right to buy. It is absolute madness. It has to stop and I ask the Secretary of State for his thinking on the matter. I should like to reiterate my strong support for the Sub-Committee's recommendation to end the council tax discount on empty homes and to equalise the rates of VAT on new-build housing and renovations and repairs to existing stock. We must pull every lever at our disposal to ensure that we reach the Government's laudable and extremely ambitious target of a decent home for all, wherever they live, by 2010. To do that, we need affordable housing and we must deal with the problems in the north and the south. Conservative estimates suggest that that will require an additional £1.7 billion annually for housing. I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to deliver that in the comprehensive spending review, and I thank him for his presence.

5 pm

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): This is an excellent report. It brings a range of issues before the House and the country in an intelligent way. It is important that the public should recognise that.

May I draw the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to the problem that most of the available initiatives are retrospective? We must sharpen the ability to respond to the crises that break out in different areas. The Chairman of the Select Committee reminded us of the point made in the report about how quickly an area can be transformed by the process of dereliction. I have seen that in my constituency, which the Sub-Committee visited. Within a matter of months a street that has been full of people living contentedly can be transformed into a wreck; one house becomes empty and is trashed, those who have the capacity to move do so and more and more homes are abandoned. Those who are left behind are the owner-occupiers who, because of the nature of the area, are often elderly. They are stuck with all the problems of immobility, exacerbated by the fact that the equity structure means that they have no capacity to move elsewhere.

We need to enable local authorities and other agencies to respond rapidly. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) referred to the problem caused by individual empty houses. That is a major problem. I agree with those who said that we should impose a financial penalty on people who allow houses to be abandoned, rather than giving them incentives such as the non-payment of council tax. I understand from my local authority that even when it recognises the need to act quickly, its power is circumscribed. It would make sense if local authorities were able to act quickly at the point of abandonment. We must give them the power to do so.

I should like, briefly, to mention negative equity. One problem is that mortgage lenders are incredibly unsympathetic. They know that they are on to a winner; they can insist that the debt travels with the individual. In a society like ours, in which market failure can be random—it is not always the most obvious areas that are abandoned—those who lend should accept the insurance principle that there is a collective need to underwrite at least some of the damage done to

individuals. We, as a society, have abandoned some parts of our northern and midlands cities. In the process, we have insisted that a limited number of individuals pick up the big price tag. That is unfair and inequitable.

I should like to couple my thoughts with those of others, and to draw them to the attention of my hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Hulme in east Manchester has been mentioned. It has done well, under both Conservative and Labour Governments, in terms of the new deal in Manchester. That is important, and it is beginning to rebuild confidence in the area.

In rebuilding east Manchester, we must ensure that we do not transfer the problems to other parts of my constituency or to adjoining boroughs. That is one reason why I welcome the pathfinder approach; it recognises that we should not simply concentrate direct pressure, but allows us to look a little beyond our problems. The pathfinder project is welcome; it is a genuine accomplishment and thanks are due to the Secretary of State. However, as other hon. Members have said, it must be followed by sizeable amounts of money. We need the neighbourhood renewal fund, because it will enable us to intervene in the market. It will make a real difference.

I met some of the residents in the new deal area this week. I asked them, "If there is one thing that you want for this area, what would it be?" They said that they wanted the licence to penalise landlords through the benefits system, but stressed how important it is that such a change should not be years away. They said, "Our problems are here and now. The landlords are doing the damage today, next week, and the week after. We need that legislation in operation quickly, so that we can begin to deal with the worst offenders."

5.5 pm

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): It has been a fascinating debate. It was kicked off by the attempt of the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) to rewrite the history of the Conservative Government on affordable social housing. I represent a London seat, and I had to readjust my mind to the term "empty homes". The idea that properties exist that cannot be sold even for £1,000, when in my borough the average house price is more than £300,000, is astonishing.

The basic factor in this interesting debate is the importance of ensuring that everyone in the country has a decent home. The point has already been made that if people do not have a decent home, the major changes that the Government are making—improving education, health and employment—simply will not work.

I make two essential points to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on the estimated number of empty properties in London, which varies between 100,000 and 160,000. First, some boroughs have already instituted an empty homes strategy and employ an empty homes officer, who is responsible for finding empty homes and attempting to bring them back into use. I believe that that should be required of all London boroughs. In truth, I think that we should have a Londonwide strategy. One person per borough is not enough. As the Empty Homes Agency said in its evidence to the Select Committee, as many as five local authority departments can be dealing with the issue, but all that happens is that five envelopes go through the letter boxes of empty houses.

Secondly, the Government should take a lead by dealing with their own properties. If such properties are brought back into housing use, I understand that they are required to make a market return. That is simply not feasible for people in desperate need of housing in London. Such people are almost invariably dependent on housing benefit. An increasing number of young people are in need of housing, and virtually no provision is being made for single people of all ages. That is an issue that must be tackled.

I shall not repeat the points already made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) about how some of the worst landlords—not only in London or in England, but in the world—are clearly exploiting public money through the housing benefit system. I therefore believe that, at all possible speed, we should register landlords to ensure that if their tenants claim housing benefit, they have to put money back into improving the housing stock.

5.8 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): May I say how much I have enjoyed the debate and that it is wonderful that so many hon. Members are participating in it? I genuinely welcome the Secretary of State, whose presence demonstrates the importance of the subject. Like other hon. Members, I welcome today's announcement about the £25 million for the pathfinder project. Like them, I also welcome the Committee's report, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Bennett), the Chairman of the Select Committee, and all the Committee members for addressing what I believe to be a serious problem.

I suspect that all members of the Committee agree that it is a disgrace that we have three or four times as many empty houses as there are homeless families. We need to address that issue seriously as the report and this debate have done.

Although I said that the ratio was three or four to one, it is difficult to be precise because of the inadequacy—which the report rightly points out—of the information available on empty homes, which allows different people to make different interpretations. To be slightly mischievous, I shall draw attention to the Department's recently published report, "More than a roof: A report into tackling homelessness". Page 34 states:

> "Much has been done in recent years to reduce the number of empty homes. Overall, the number of empty homes fell from 868,600 in 1993 to 744,200 in 2001."

That sounds particularly impressive. However, if we examine other figures such as those provided by the Empty Homes Agency and look at a wider time frame, we discover that there was a significant bump in the figures between 1992 and 1997. On either side of that bump, the figures have remained remarkably static for a long period. Indeed, they show that in 1991 there were 752,700 empty homes and 10 years later in 2001 there were 753,100. In those 10 years the number of empty homes increased.

That demonstrates that we are not doing enough to tackle the problem and that is why the report, with its many sensible recommendations, is so important.

[Mr. Don Foster]

I appreciate entirely that, as the Chairman of the Select Committee said, the report could not tackle all the issues. There are many others that no doubt many of us would like to have seen in the report. For example, I believe that more could have been said about the issue of short life and the contribution that that can make in areas of high demand to reducing the housing problem and reducing crime. I am aware of the difficulties following the Bruton ruling of 2000 and the bad reputation that short life enjoys in some quarters, but I believe that it can make a contribution. Equally, empty commercial property is very little mentioned in the report. Clearly, that issue has huge potential that needs to be addressed.

Many other issues could have been included in the report. I make no criticism of the fact that they were not, but it would be interesting to have much more research on the reasons why some house owners leave their properties empty. For example, it is interesting to note that the Council of Mortgage Lenders believes that a large number of owners are fearful of leasing, renting or letting their properties because they do not believe that they will ever get their tenants out. That may indicate some people's ignorance of current landlord and tenant legislation, but it is clearly a concern that we need to address.

I welcome many of the report's recommendations, including those for strengthening compulsory purchase order powers for local authorities—for which Liberal Democrats have long argued—and the more recent proposals on compulsory leasing, which deserve significant attention. I welcome, too, the report's proposals on putting a floor in the housing market in areas of low demand. I hope, therefore, that the Government will consider that recommendation. Their response says that they will consider the recommendation that the DLTR, the Council of Mortgage Lenders, the Treasury and others should get together to develop an insurance scheme to underwrite the values of property in areas of low demand.

It is worrying that the Government's response seems to imply that they are happy to leave it to local authorities under their existing powers to indemnify mortgage loans. The reality is that although many local authorities recognise that they have the powers, they do not have the resources to implement them.

Local authorities can do a lot. I understand the point that was made a few minutes ago about the importance of finding local solutions to the problems. Therefore, it is disturbing that far too many local councils do not appear to have an effective empty homes strategy.

I make one criticism of the Government's response to recommendation (d) of the report. The recommendation is that, rather than developing

"a discrete empty homes strategy, local authorities should address the problem through a local housing strategy"

that integrates the problems of empty homes with their overall housing strategy. That is right. The Government were wrong to insist in the Homelessness Act 2002 that there be a homelessness strategy separate from a council's housing strategy. The response ought to be integrated. It is disappointing that the Government's response to the Select Committee's recommendation ignored that need for integration.

Local authorities can do a great deal. Their properties often remain empty because of poor management, such as failure to tackle repairs, delays in nominations and the making of unsuitable offers. Some local authorities can do better, but so can central Government. It is all very well for the Government to impose targets on local authorities for the maximum percentage of empty homes, but let us remember that the Government also have a large amount of housing stock. It would be interesting to see what they would do to try to achieve a similar target to that that they have imposed on local government.

I warmly welcome other recommendations, such as the removal of the 50 per cent. council tax discount in respect of second homes and long-term empty houses. My party has campaigned for that for a long time. Consultation ended on 15 February, and all that the Government have said so far is that they will make a final decision later in the year. I hope that the Secretary of State will tell us more about that in his reply to the debate. Let us get on with implementing that recommendation, which has support on both sides of the House.

Frankly, it is complete madness that the Government, having made some welcome moves on the VAT equalisation proposal, are not prepared to go further. All they say is that they

"will keep the VAT treatment of housing under review".

They need to take the Committee's recommendations seriously. It is crazy that full VAT of 17.5 per cent. has to be paid on repair and renovations to bring an empty home back into use, unless it is in one of the exempted categories, whereas no VAT whatever is paid to build a mock-Georgian, four-bedroom, double-garaged house on a greenfield site. That is ludicrous and needs to change.

We need to widen the issues on planning. There is not enough time to go into the details, but we must do much more. The Government are failing to meet their target of building 60 per cent. of new housing on brownfield sites. I wish that they would consider more seriously than they have to date not only the Committee's recommendations, but the imposition of a greenfield development tax.

Hon. Members from all parties have picked up on the regional imbalance. We all recall that only a few years ago the Prime Minister sought to downplay that imbalance, but he was wrong, as there is significant regional imbalance between different parts of England. However, I hope that no one will forget that the problem of empty homes exists in every region of the country, whether there is high or low housing demand.

I referred to the figures produced by the Empty Homes Agency. It is worth noting that the figures for empty homes in low-demand areas such as the north-east, the north-west and Yorkshire and Humberside are 45,000, 140,000 and 100,000 respectively. Those are huge numbers and several hon. Members have explained the reasons for them. However, the same figures show that there are also huge numbers of empty homes in areas of high housing demand. There are 104,000 in London, 86,000 in the south-east and 67,000 in the south-west. As other hon. Members have pointed out, the problem affects rural as well as urban areas.

There remains a need to tackle those regional imbalances, and inter-regional mobility schemes are already in operation. I welcome details of the Burnley and Padiham housing scheme, which has already brought 60 tenants from London to Burnley and has a waiting list of 300. Much more needs to be done to address the imbalances in terms of jobs, skills and the economy generally. That is why the current regeneration schemes are so important.

The sad truth is that there are too many overlapping schemes, each with its own complex and bureaucratic bidding system. Because of that, far too many of those schemes are underspending. Indeed, some schemes have spent less than 10 per cent. of the money originally provided at the announcement of their launch. For example, in the first year of its operation, the new deal for communities, which has now been replaced, spent less than 2 per cent. of the money it was allocated. The European regional development fund underspent by millions of pounds, and other schemes underspent similarly. We need to develop a single, flexible regeneration scheme to which people can gain easy access.

I welcome the report, however, and the Government's response to it. They have taken the report more seriously than some Select Committee reports. It is a tribute to the Committee that the Empty Homes Agency says of the report that it

"represents a radical agenda for action and a check list for the coming few years to ensure that we maximise the potential of this wasted national asset."

That is what the empty homes problem amounts to—a wasted national asset—and we need to do something about it. The report makes good recommendations for tackling the problem.

5.21 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am delighted to be able to take part in this serious debate. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Bennett), the Chairman of the Select Committee, introduced the debate very reasonably. We have heard good speeches from hon. Members of all parties, and the attendance in the Chamber shows how seriously hon. Members take the issue.

I welcome the Secretary of State. He will have heard hon. Members' comments, and should be able to take action to deal with the problem and tell us what action he is already taking.

Before the 1997 election, the Prime Minister said that there was no doubt that the homeless problem had been increased by the shortage of affordable rental housing. He said that Labour's approach would be founded on the basic aim of ensuring that everyone had a chance to a decent home, both the majority who wanted to own their own homes and the minority who could not afford to buy or chose to rent. We would all say, "Amen" to that.

The Select Committee report makes some excellent recommendations, but the Government response is somewhat weak. The problem is serious, as the report suggests when it states:

"We received many moving letters from those trapped in areas of low demand. They did not prepare us for the desolation that we saw on our visit to the North West. The rows of abandoned terraces, the broken windows and the burned out houses were shocking. There are 280,000 houses in and at risk of low demand in the M62 corridor alone."

The hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) described the situation clearly in an excellent speech. I pay tribute to him, as he has tabled some 300 written parliamentary questions on the subject and has shown dedication to the issue over a long period. The Select Committee visited Burnley Wood in his constituency, which is possibly one of the worst places in the country for this problem, and saw the 30 per cent. vacancy rate of empty homes. If that is not a graphic illustration of the seriousness of the problem, I do not know what is.

The problem is that there are 753,188 empty homes in the country. On any measure, there are approximately 115,000 homeless people, which gives us a one to seven ratio of homeless people to empty homes. Surely, it is not beyond the wit of the Government to start to redress that imbalance. If we make even a small difference, that will have a huge impact on the number of people who are homeless.

It is good to welcome the Secretary of State to the debate, but we should not forget that it is taking place against the background of rising homelessness and a fall in the number of houses being built. A total of 162,000 houses were built last year, the lowest figure in any year since 1927. The number of people in bed-and-breakfast accommodation is rising hugely. Perhaps most tragically, the number of child homeless is rising significantly. The situation is, therefore, serious.

I take the point that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, as many hon. Members have said. Even within London, areas have different problems. Some are affluent, while others suffer extreme poverty. Some have relatively few empty homes, while others have a great number.

On the whole, however, the problem is significantly worse in the north-east and the north-west. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) made it clear that that is because of an imbalance in the economy. Nothing can solve the problem in a more sustainable, long-term way than encouraging economic development and growth, and we must make the climate for such things more satisfactory. *[Laughter.]* Hon. Members may laugh, but that is what we must do if we are to avoid pouring ever more taxpayers' money into the issue with no real long-term effect. Hon. Members should remember the investment that the Conservatives encouraged in the north-east during our 18 years in power and its knock-on effect on solving some of the housing problems in that deprived area.

In the short time left, I shall ask the Government to consider a number of issues. It is all very well levering in more public sector money, but the Government are taking in significantly more in stamp duty than they did when they came to power—some £7 billion a year more is going to the Exchequer. Surely, a larger fraction of that could be recycled into the housing sector.

What is the Secretary of State doing to consult the private sector, the Council of Mortgage Lenders and the Treasury to ensure that, whatever public money is put into the housing sector, an equally large amount is levered in from the private sector? Ultimately, it is the private sector that can open many doors.

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

I agree with hon. Members and with the report's recommendation that we need to examine compulsory purchase powers. One reason why our urban regeneration corporations were so successful was that we allowed them to cut through bureaucracy and red tape to acquire large enough blocks of land. As a result, regeneration schemes were large enough and effective enough to make a real difference.

I want to bring the Secretary of State's attention to an innovative scheme in Edinburgh and to ask him whether he can replicate it throughout the country. A developer called George Heywood negotiated with the owners of 70 sites in the city. Taking 50 per cent. of the increased value of the sites, it was possible to raise a huge amount. The money was originally estimated at £21 million, but eventually provided all of the £35 million required to bring in a completely new suburban rail system. Has the Secretary of State considered a system of increased site value to fund public sector infrastructure, using the private sector to fund public sector infrastructure? When the public infrastructure was put into the dome site, there was a huge increase in its value, but the public sector never really benefited.

I quickly want to go through several of the issues that have been raised. Mention was made of the lack of compulsory purchase and planning skills in local authorities. That is a real problem. It is because people who work in local authorities are not valued, are not paid enough and are poached by the private sector. We have recently received many representations to the effect that planning departments in local authorities are losing those key skills, and if they lose those skills, they will be unable to perform their regulatory functions properly. What is the Secretary of State doing to resolve the European gap funding problem? That problem has been solved by the Scottish Parliament, so why cannot the Government solve it for England and Wales?

What is the Secretary of State doing about the scam of right to buy when a local authority has decided that a compulsory purchase order should be implemented? It is totally wrong for developers to be able to come along and make an instant profit. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Win Griffiths (in the Chair): Order.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: What is the Secretary of State doing to make sure that the Housing Corporation properly regulates its housing associations? There have been a few notable failures among housing associations. Others are running their affairs in a sloppy way, taking too long to re-let their properties and letting properties to unsuitable tenants in unsuitable areas.

When is the Secretary of State likely to introduce legislation on registration of houses in multiple occupancy and changes to the law on dealing with rogue landlords? That issue has been raised by many hon. Members and must be dealt with, because landlords are letting to unsuitable tenants and bringing whole areas into disrepute. Furthermore, if the landlord is receiving housing benefit or any other public funds, the public have a right to expect that landlord to manage his property reasonably.

This has been an extremely good debate about a very good report, which has not been regarded by the Government with the seriousness that it deserves. One of the best recommendations in the report is recommendation (tt), which says—*[Interruption.]* I wish that hon. Members would listen rather than tittle-tattling. The recommendation says:

> "Different solutions are required in different places, taking account of the circumstances facing the housing market in each conurbation and the need to manage change. The rules governing a Housing Market Renewal Fund must provide sufficient flexibility to take account of that diversity."

The Government replied in four lines

> "As mentioned earlier the housing market renewal fund proposal is being considered as part of the current spending review."

We all know that. The Government must take the report much more seriously, and we will be holding them to account. The situation is fragile and deteriorating. I welcome the Secretary of State to the debate today, but I warn him that we will hold him to account and make sure that he delivers on his remarks.

5.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Stephen Byers): I will be held to account by my hon. Friends because this is a key issue that affects many of their constituents. That is why so many have contributed to the debate today and others who have been unable to take part in the debate have attended, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin), my hon. Friends the Members for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Heyes), for Rossendale and Darwen (Janet Anderson), for Stroud (Mr. Drew), for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien), for Bassetlaw (John Mann), and for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), reflecting the fact that this is an issue of great concern.

Andrew Selous: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Byers: I want to get through my introduction first, and I am badly squeezed by the time that I have available.

The reason why we have had such a well-informed debate is because it is based on a good report from the Select Committee. I do not often say that about Select Committee reports, but this one analyses the situation extremely well and comes up with some very practical proposals for the way forward. I am disappointed that the Government's response has not been warmly endorsed by Opposition Members, but I want to say how we intend to carry forward the issue, especially in three broad areas: the pathfinder projects; the licensing of landlords; and how to use the planning system to the best possible effect. First, however, I want to touch on a number of other issues that hon. Members raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) raised the important issue of intervening before the situation gets out of control. The report makes that point very well when it talks about areas that are fragile, rather than failing. Such areas have not quite slipped down to the depths that hon. Members have spoken about this afternoon, but they are vulnerable. We therefore need an early-warning system and measures that will allow us to intervene quickly.

To be honest, we shall not be able to do that from the centre. We shall have to involve local authorities and other bodies that have responsibility for housing and powers to intervene quickly if we are to ensure that difficulties are not experienced. In introducing the report, the Select Committee's Chairman gave the vivid example of a street in Manchester, Gorton, where the situation worsened rapidly over a handful of months. We must find a way to take powers, so that there can be intervention when it is needed.

Several hon. Members mentioned the right to buy. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) has raised the issue with me privately several times, and it is a real issue for her. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) also mentioned it. There is an issue about right to buy in areas that are subject to regeneration programmes. I read the Government's response again last night, and I understand why it has been interpreted in the way that it has. Let me, however, make our position clear. Our problem with the specific proposal in the report is that there are practical difficulties with it. We want, however, to give the principle detailed consideration.

There is clearly an opportunity to exploit the right-to-buy provisions as they are presently drafted. That is particularly true in areas where regeneration is taking place, and we must examine what we can do in those cases. I am willing to do that, and the Government will do so. I am more than happy to provide the Committee with a supplementary report at a later date to explain how we think we can deal with this concern. The Government therefore recognise the principle, but we have concerns about the practical proposals and need to consider other ways in which to deal with the issue.

Hon. Members, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) and for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), mentioned regional variations. What is fascinating about housing is that no single solution will apply in the north-west, the north-east and in London. We need a lot of different solutions in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe raised the specific issue of housing stock transfer and what we do to ensure that all our cities and towns have the opportunity to bring their properties up to a decent standard. When one examines the different levels of debt in each housing authority, for example, it becomes clear that what might be a solution in Birmingham will not be appropriate in Sheffield, because the burden and the overhang of debt are different. We must therefore find tailor-made solutions to the housing needs of our cities and towns. That means that we must talk directly with Sheffield, Birmingham, Bolton and so on to identify what the needs and priorities are and how we can respond positively.

My position as Secretary of State is clear. I do not stand in dogmatic opposition to council housing, but believe that there should be genuine choice. That means that we must consider new forms of funding. We have the housing stock transfer, the public finance initiative and arms-length management organisations, to which we must give greater attention. We shall also have the new capital borrowing powers if we get the legislation into this year's Queen's Speech. Therefore, a range of options will be open to individual local authorities.

The three key issues that ran throughout the debate were pathfinder projects, the planning system and landlords. On pathfinders, we have identified nine areas where some 720,000 are in low demand or abandonment out of a national total of some 880,000. Therefore, those nine areas cover the bulk of the problem.

Janet Anderson (Rossendale and Darwen): I know that the Secretary of State is aware of my disappointment, which is shared by my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope), that Rossendale has not been included among the pathfinder authorities. Will the Secretary of State give me an assurance that it will be included? I reassure him that he need have no doubts about the ability of Rossendale's local authority to deliver, because it has been Labour controlled since we gained 12 seats from the Tories at the local elections.

Mr. Byers: I am sure that that is the case. On my hon. Friend's specific point, we have drawn up provisional boundaries for the pathfinder projects but we are open to expand them where appropriate. When we consider how we can draw together the details of the pathfinder relevant to Rossendale, we shall give proper consideration to extending it to include Rossendale. That would make a lot of sense, given the opportunity we have to consider the case.

Today, we announced that £25 million would be made available immediately from the capital modernisation fund from the Treasury for the nine pathfinder projects. As I said in my parliamentary reply at 12.30 pm, that money is intended to kick-start the process. We should all be realistic in recognising that significant sums will be needed if pathfinders are to be a positive development. We are seeking not only a housing solution but, as hon. Members have said, a solution to the problems of market renewal, antisocial behaviour, crime and drug dealing. All those issues must be tackled together if we are to overcome the problem of housing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) articulated the difficulties and the desperate situations that people encounter when facing market decline, such as we have seen in Burnley and other places. We have a responsibility to people in Burnley and elsewhere to ensure that the situation does not continue.

We will need to use planning effectively if we are to be successful. I am keen that our regional planning guidance should be clear about using that important lever to achieve our objectives, especially in the case of brownfield site development. The next regional planning guidance happens to be for the north-west and will be published on 20 May. When hon. Members read the details of that document, they will see that we intend to use the planning process to move development from greenfield to brownfield sites.

Sir Paul Beresford: I thank the Secretary of State for responding on the question of planning. Will he go on to address the issue of tariffs, which would be a disadvantage in encouraging development on brownfield sites? Many suspicious people would identify another difficulty—I would include myself among those people. Tariffs may be an advantage in areas of development but a disadvantage in other areas, and we foresee the tendency for the tariff to become a form of

[Sir Paul Beresford]

stealth tax by adjustment of the Government funding, under whatever name it is called at that point. Will the Secretary of State give us an absolute guarantee that that will not happen?

Mr. Byers: We are consulting on the question of planning tariffs and the planning gain we should get from them. We shall use them not as a way of raising tax but to ensure that planning is used as a means of economic regeneration and social renewal. That applies to housing and other areas. I am sure that, when hon. Members see the guidance on 20 May, they will welcome it enormously.

We need legislation to introduce licensing of landlords. Before that, however, we can use the lever of denying landlords the opportunity to get housing benefit directly from local authorities and require that they get it directly from their tenant. That is a significant lever, which we may exercise and to which we are giving proper and detailed consideration. We must ensure that the £11 billion of public money paid out in housing benefit gives us decent accommodation and landlords who discharge their responsibilities.

I would have been delighted to address a range of other issues at length. The empty homes question is a priority for the Government and one that we take seriously and recognise will not simply go away. Housing is rising up the political agenda. There is a responsibility on the Government to respond positively, and we intend to discharge it.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at sixteen minutes to Six o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 7 May 2002

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Manufacturing

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will provide a breakdown of the investment her Department made in 2000–01 to the programmes designed to improve the competitiveness of the manufacturing sector. [49877]

Mr. Wilson: The Department's expenditure in this area is reported under the objective of "Promotion of enterprise, innovation and increased productivity". The total cash outturn for this objective is shown in the Appropriation Accounts 2000–01 (HC 335-IX), and the resource outturn in the Consolidated Resource Accounts 2000–01 (HC503). Further breakdowns will shortly be published in the Department's Expenditure Plans Report for 2002–03, and also in the Treasury's Supplementary Budgetary Information (SBI) tables. I regret that a breakdown between manufacturing and service sectors is not available. However, a good proportion of this money, though not all, will have benefited manufacturing directly or indirectly.

Better Quality Services Initiative

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which of the services of her Department have not been reviewed under the Better Quality Services Initiative; and when they will be reviewed. [50319]

Ms Hewitt: The Department has been reviewing its services under the Better Quality Services programme for some time (see Trade and Industry—The Government's Expenditure Plans 2001–02 to 2003–04), and building on this work, my Department has recently undertaken a review of its role, priorities and structure, and a review of its business support. As a result of these reviews, from 2 April 2002, a new structure has been put in place that is designed to help facilitate change and help the Department become more customer-focused. Tools and techniques from BQS will now be included in the Department's change management programme as part of improving customer focus and the effectiveness and value for money of service delivery. The Department is continuing its reviews of its agencies in line with BQS principles.

Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how the draft EU Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive will be applied in the UK in respect of *(a)* foreign manufactured equipment and *(b)* equipment personally imported into the UK from outside the EU. [50915]

Mr. Wilson: The Common Position text requires the end of life costs for equipment imported into the UK to be met by the manufacturer in the case of EU-made goods or the professional importer in the case of goods made outside the EU.

A decision on personal imports will be taken after full consultation on implementation options.

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Government will seek to prevent adoption of the draft EU Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive in the form recently approved by the European Parliament. [50913]

Mr. Wilson: The UK continues to support the Common Position text adopted by member states at the Council of Ministers meeting in June 2001.

The Government will consider the European Parliament text carefully in conjunction with other member states.

Research Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to her answer of 18 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 86W, on the Research Council, what the Government's policy was on the work of the expert group on bioterrorism. [50993]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's policy was to welcome the establishment of the EU R and D expert group on countering biological and chemical terrorism which should lead to improved coordination of member states' research efforts in this field.

Recruitment

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many net additional staff her Department has recruited in each month since June 2001 at *(a)* executive officer level and *(b)* administrative level. [52426]

Ms Hewitt: The figures requested for my Department are set out in the table.

	Administrative grades	*Executive officer*
June	11	0
July	24	–2
August	3	–1
September	5	–2
October	4	4
November	–5	–1
December	2	–3
January	4	3
February	0	0
March	13	0

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what subjects and on which dates her Department has consulted organisations representing young people; and if she will list such organisations. [52492]

Ms Hewitt: I regret to inform my hon. Friend that the information is not held centrally in the manner requested and that the information can be secured only at disproportionate cost.

However, the Department of Trade and Industry will be guided by the new core principles for the involvement of children and young people in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them. These principles were published by the Minister with responsibility for young people in November 2001.

Construction Industry

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what progress her Department is making in establishing a quality mark scheme for the construction industry; [52990]

(2) what action she is taking to rationalise the number of registration schemes which promote quality within the construction industry. [52991]

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend the Minister with responsbility for energy and construction announced his decision to roll out the scheme across the country over a three to four year period, in his answer to the question from the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) on 12 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 891W. A Quality Mark Shadow Ownership Group has since been set up and, at its first meeting on 19 April, it began developing a comprehensive implementation strategy and detailed business plan. The group is finalising decisions about the next stages of the roll out.

Following recommendations in the pilot review, the scheme is developing recruitment mechanisms to accelerate achievement of a critical mass of members. So far 175 builders have been awarded the Quality Mark and 247 are in the assessment pipeline, with more firms expected to apply shortly.

The DTI is also working with local authorities, financial services groups, consumer groups and others to promote the scheme to tradesmen and encourage their participation.

The national launch of the Quality Mark at the Ideal Home Show produced extensive television and radio coverage and articles in regional newspapers. The scheme is already being marketed successfully to consumers in Birmingham and Somerset through a variety of media, including Yellow Pages and Thomsons directories, household leaflet distribution with advertising and editorial coverage in a number of local papers and radio stations. Further targeted marketing will follow in new areas once sufficient numbers of builders and tradesmen are registered, to satisfy consumer demand.

The DTI is working with a number of trade bodies to fast-track members into the Quality Mark scheme through use of trade association vetting procedures adapted as necessary. The DTI is also examining the scope for developing closer links between the Quality Mark and Constructionline, looking for some form of passporting system between the two schemes that might allow fee reductions and reduce duplication of assessments. However, the schemes do have different client targets and operating systems and a number of issues need to be considered carefully. In addition, the DTI has been liaising closely with DTLR on self-certification schemes and extension of non-notification of building work under amendments to Part L of the Building Regulations.

Westfield

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the dates since 1 May 1997 when *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials have met representatives of Westfield. [52164]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* Ministers and civil servants meet many people as part of the process of policy development and analysis. All such contacts are conducted in accordance with the Ministerial Code, the Civil Service Code and Guidance for Civil Servants: Contacts with Lobbyists. Some of these discussions take place on a confidential basis, and in order to preserve confidentiality, it is not the normal practice of Governments to release details of specific meetings with private individuals or companies.

Imports

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the total value of imports of *(a)* paper, *(b)* cloth, *(c)* chemicals, *(d)* foodstuffs, *(e)* medical supplies, *(f)* fruit, *(g)* grain, *(h)* cars, *(i)* computer equipment, *(j)* steel, *(k)* alcohol and *(l)* livestock to Wales was in each year since 1997. [53487]

Nigel Griffiths: The information requested is not available since it would require local firms to divert resources to fill in forms and submit them to Government and therefore pose a significant additional burden on respondents.

National Missile Defence

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions her Department has had with UK firms bidding for work on the US-initiated programme of National Missile Defence; and if she will make a statement. [53596]

Alan Johnson: A decision to bid for work on the US-initiated programme of National Missile Defence is a commercial one for individual firms to make. DTI Ministers and officials have regular meetings with UK aerospace and defence companies on a range of issues and is supportive of decisions to bid for work in this and in other areas.

Office for Civil Nuclear Security

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, (1) pursuant to her answer of 22 October 2001, *Official Report*, column 7, to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North, (Mr. Chaytor) when she received the annual report from the Office for Civil Nuclear Security; and when she plans to place a copy in the Library; [54209]

(2) when she plans to publish the annual report of her Department's Office for Civil Nuclear Security. [54172]

Mr. Wilson: I have not yet received the report, but understand that I shall do shortly. I shall publish it and place a copy in the Libraries of the House before the end of May.

Overtime Payments

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Government will introduce improved safeguards to stop employers requiring their employees to work overtime without payment. [54187]

Alan Johnson: Payment for overtime is a contractual matter for negotiation and a agreement between employers and employees (or their representatives). Employees can already seek redress in the form of a breach of contract claim if they suffer financial loss because any terms of their contracts of employment are changed without their consent. Workers can also seek redress if unlawful deductions are made from their wages.

Holiday Entitlement

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Government will introduce legislation to require employers to agree holidays with their employers on an annual basis. [54186]

Alan Johnson: Under the Working Time Regulations, which implement the European Working Time Directive, employers are already required to ensure that their workers are given the opportunity to take four weeks leave with pay each year.

Icelandic Trawlermen (Compensation)

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make it her policy to accept sworn statements from those wishing to make claims under the Icelandic waters trawlermen compensation scheme whose services records are lost; and if she will make a statement. [54512]

Ms Hewitt: The Scheme rules state that, in exceptional cases, e. g. where it can be demonstrated that fishing records were lost in a fire or similar circumstances, the Redundancy Payments Service, to assist in validating claims under the Scheme, may be prepared to accept a sworn statement from the claimant in lieu of documentary evidence.

Small Businesses

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assistance the Government have given to small businesses to help them through the global downturn. [54194]

Nigel Griffiths: Government provide a range of assistance to small firms experiencing difficulties.

Small businesses dependent on UK airlines affected by 11 September will benefit indirectly from the aid package provided by the UK Government to the aviation industry which is in addition to the significant financial contribution the Government make to the aerospace industry generally.

There are also other forms of generic business support available to small firms facing difficulties:

The SBS launched its Company Rescue Pilot scheme in September 2001. The pilot scheme will initially run for 6–12 months. It is aimed at giving SMEs suffering from short-term financial difficulties a second chance.

The Business Link network provides advice and support for businesses suffering as a result of a recent crisis including advising on a range of disaster management issues. Businesses should telephone 0845 600 9 006 in order to contact their local Business Link Operator.

The Government have recently established the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) to improve the UK's resilience to disruptive challenges at every level through improved anticipation, preparation, prevention and resolution. In addition, the Small Business Service (SBS) is identifying current market weaknesses in the provision of emergency loans to small businesses affected by disaster and will report back to Government with its findings and recommendations.

Finally, the National Business Debtline is in place to help Micro Businesses in England and Wales facing debt problems to obtain free, confidential and impartial advice.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the written questions asked of her between *(a)* 1 to 30 June 2001, *(b)* 1 to 31 July 2001, *(c)* 1 to 30 September 2001, *(d)* 1 to 31 October 2001, *(e)* 1 to 30 November 2001, *(f)* 1 to 31 December 2001, *(g)* 1 to 31 January 2002, *(h)* 1 to 28 February 2002, *(i)* 1 to 31 March 2002 and *(j)* 1 to 30 April 2002 that had not received a substantive answer by 30 April; and if she will state (i) the name of the hon. Member asking the question and (ii) the reasons the question had not received a substantive answer. [54091]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, columns 949–50W, by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House.

Questions that remain unanswered within the dates listed are as follows:

(a) 1 to 30 June—*(f)* 1 to 31 December: 0

(g) 1 to 31 January: 1

(h) 1 to 28 February: 4

(i) 1 to 31 March: 7

(j) 1 to 30 April: 41.

The delays in answering these questions have been due in part to work pressures throughout the Department. However answers will be provided shortly.

Liquid Petroleum Gas

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what measures her Department is taking to encourage the use of liquid petroleum gas; [54228]

(2) what incentives her Department offers to retailers to encourage the sale of liquid petroleum gas. [54229]

Mr. Wilson: This Department is actively working with colleagues in DTLR and HMT, and with the energy and transport industries, to promote wider uptake of alternative fuels, in particular liquid petroleum gas (LPG).

At the opening to the 1,000th LPG filling station in February this year I announced LPG Boost, a £1 million DTI funded programme over two years to boost the uptake of LPG as a vehicular fuel. This programme (in conjunction with DTLR funded PowerShift) is aimed at

boosting consumer demand for, and availability of, good quality LPG vehicles, especially in three target areas, the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, Mid Wales and rural East Anglia.

Additionally, the LP Gas Association inform us that new retail sites are opening at a rate approaching one per day, with 1,076 sties as of 29 April. Given these incentives and the rate at which sites are opening the Government feel that it is not necessary to offer direct capital incentives to retailers.

Beer Production

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the total annual UK production of beer is in pints. [52983]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Nigel Evans, dated 7 May 2002:

As National Statisician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the annual UK production of beer in pints. (52983)

For the year 2000, the total annual UK production of beer in pints was 10,370 million (rounded to the nearest 10 million). Details are given in 'ONS ProdCom (Products of the European Community) 2000 Annual Inquiry' which is available on the National Statistics website at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=7384&More=N.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Solicitor-General if she will place in the Library copies of each version of the internal guidance which have been drawn up by her Department since 1 January 1999 to assist staff in her Department to answer subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 1998. [53377]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* My own Department, the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers, has not produced separate internal guidance on answering subject access requests.

In the Department for which the Attorney-General is responsible, details are as follows:

The Crown Prosecution Service issued guidance to staff about the Data Protection Act in February 2000 (Inform Insert Issue 6) and September 2001 (Data Protection Act 1998 Update), and has also produced a poster.

The Treasury Solicitor's Department issued guidance to staff in February 2000 (Office Notice 9/2000).

The Serious Fraud Office has not produced separate internal guidance on answering subject access requests.

I have placed copies of this guidance in the House Library. No other separate guidance has been issued.

All Departments also have the central guidance on handling subject access requests issued by the Lord Chancellor and placed in the House Library on 25 April 2002.

Sentence Referrals

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Solicitor-General on how many occasions in each of the last five years for which figures are available her Department was unable to complete the usual procedures in handling requests for referral of a sentence to the Court of Appeal on the grounds of undue lenience within the required time limit. [53396]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The Attorney and I have been able to consider and take a decision in all cases received at his office within the time limit.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Solicitor-General what deadlines and time limits exist on the referral of sentences to the Court of Appeal on the grounds of undue lenience; and if she will make a statement. [53397]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The Attorney-General has the power (under section 35 and 36 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988) to refer a sentence for a specified category of offences, to the Court of Appeal for review, if it appears to be not merely lenient but unduly so. Schedule 3 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 specifies that notice of an application for leave to refer a case to the Court of Appeal shall be given to the Registrar of Criminal Appeals within 28 days from the day on which the sentence, or the last of the sentences, in the case was passed. This period cannot be extended.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Solicitor-General if she will make a statement on the procedure undertaken by her Department upon receipt of a request to refer a sentence to the Court of Appeal on the grounds of undue lenience. [53398]

Solicitor General: *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The Attorney receives requests to refer a sentence to the Court of Appeal on the grounds of undue lenience from two sources.

The first source is the prosecuting authority (such as the Crown Prosecution Service, the Serious Fraud Office etc.), which conducted the case against the offender. The written request is accompanied by various documents. These invariably include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Relevant case papers, including material obtained for the purpose of the sentence, such as pre-sentence reports, the offender's antecedents, if any, etc.;
2. A summary of the prosecution's case, the defence mitigation and the learned Judge's sentencing remarks.
3. Relevant authorities, that is decisions in previous cases.
4. Advice from Treasury Counsel, not involved in the prosecution of the case.

The Attorney gives due consideration to the information and takes into account Counsel's advice. He is however not bound to follow the advice Counsel offers. The Attorney also receives requests for referral to the Court of Appeal from members of the public and also Members of this House. In such circumstances the relevant prosecutorial authority is approached and is required to provide the above stated documents.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Solicitor-General how many requests to refer sentences to the Court of Appeal on the grounds of undue lenience her Department

has received in each of the last five years for which records are available from *(a)* the CPS and *(b)* other sources. [53445]

Solicitor General: *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Relevant records are only available for the year 2000 onwards. The following figures are available. These figures represent the number of offenders whose cases were referred to the Attorney General's office on the grounds of undue leniency:

Year	*CPS*	*Other sources*
2000	136	27
2001	226	49

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Solicitor-General how many sentences have been referred to the Court of Appeal on the grounds of undue lenience following representations from *(a)* the CPS and *(b)* other sources in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [53444]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Relevant records are only available for the year 2000 onwards. The following figures are available. These figures represent the number of offenders whose cases were referred to the Court of Appeal.

	CPS	*Other sources*
2000	87	6
2001	136	18

Dublin Monaghan Bombing

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Solicitor-General what funds have been set aside to conduct a defence in proceedings brought by families of victims of the Dublin Monaghan bombing. [53514]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* No funds have been set aside to conduct a defence of proceedings brought by families of the Dublin Monaghan bombing. In the event that proceedings are commenced, then the Department responsible for defending the action will be billed after the event in the normal way in respect of any work done. No proceedings are currently on foot.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Solicitor-General what solicitors he has appointed to represent the Government in proceedings brought by families of victims of the Dublin Monaghan bombing. [53513]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* In the event that any proceedings are issued, the British Government will be represented by the Treasury Solicitor instructing local (Dublin) agents as necessary.

Sovereign Immunity

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Solicitor-General in how many Northern Ireland conflict-related cases sovereign immunity has been sought since 1980; what reasons were given in each case; and what rulings were subsequently made by each court or tribunal. [53512]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* From the research that has been possible in the time available, I am aware of three cases in which a claim of sovereign immunity has been made or intimated in Northern Ireland conflict-related cases.

The cases are:

McElhinney *v.* Williams and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in which proceedings were commenced in the Republic against the United Kingdom Government by a claimant who claimed in respect of an alleged shooting incident at the border. The decision of the Irish Supreme Court is reported at [1996] ILRM 275, and the Court explains in detail the basis of sovereign immunity upon which it upheld the order striking out the claim.

Bridget McGovern *v.* Ministry of Defence (in the early 1990s, unreported), in which the claimant claimed in the Republic in respect of damage to her property caused by an explosion at the border. Her claim was struck out by the Irish Court on grounds of sovereign immunity. Ms McGovern subsequently issued proceedings in the Courts of Northern Ireland and recovered damage for her loss.

Adams *v.* Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and George Mitchell (1998 unreported). Mr. Gerry Adams sought judicial review in the Court of the Republic in respect of the decision of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to exclude Sinn Fein at that stage from the peace negotiations. A claim for sovereign immunity was to be made but the claim was not pursued to a substantive hearing, probably because the negotiations returned to Northern Ireland.

Sovereign immunity is an elementary principle of international law which states that in general an independent sovereign state may not be sued in the courts of a foreign state against its will and without its consent. One factor of relevance is which is the most convenient forum for the claim to be heard, and it is noteworthy from the McGovern case that Ms McGovern was able successfully to pursue her claim in the Courts of Northern Ireland.

PRIME MINISTER

Sellafield

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister how many pieces of correspondence in connection with the Irish Government campaign with regard to Sellafield he has received; what recent discussions he has had with the Government of the Irish Republic on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [53950]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) in the House on 1 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 941.

Ministerial Visits

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on *(a)* security issues and *(b)* nuclear weapons in respect of his visit to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in January; and what representations he has received regarding the state of intergovernmental relations in the sub-continent. [54212]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 11 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 1034W.

We remain deeply concerned by the continuing tensions between India and Pakistan. We have called on Pakistan to ensure an end to cross-border terrorism, and on both sides to resume a dialogue so that a lasting solution can be found to the issues between them.

Gibraltar

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Prime Minister what meetings he plans to hold with the Prime Minister of Spain to discuss the future of Gibraltar within the Brussels process; and what discussions he has had with the Prime Minister of Spain about Gibraltar since the European Council's meeting at Barcelona. [54602]

The Prime Minister: I talk to the Spanish Prime Minister frequently on a range of EU and foreign policy issues, and I look forward to seeing him at our next planned meetings on 17 and 20 May. I have not discussed Gibraltar with Mr. Aznar since the European Council in Barcelona.

Meetings

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister when he next plans to meet the Prime Minister of Spain; and what will be on the agenda for discussion. [54243]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) today.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1 Palace Street

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if sapele wood was used in the recent refurbishment of 1 Palace street. [54345]

Clare Short: Sapele was used in a small number of doors during the recent refurbishment. These were used only in the small Grade two-listed section of the building, following consultation with local planning officers. The suppliers no longer purchase veneer from tropical forest zones, and have been permitted by WWF to use up the veneer from existing stocks.

International Debt

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the value is of bilateral debt repayments to the United Kingdom for *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02, broken down by each of the HIPC eligible countries. [53791]

Clare Short: The value of bilateral debt repayment to the UK by the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries is £11.603 million for 2000–01 and £19.575 million for 2001–02. These figures relate to old rescheduled debt owed to ECGD from the 1970s and 1980s; details are set out, by HIPC country, and by financial year, in the table. There were no repayments on aid loans to the UK, as we have already cancelled our aid debts to all the poorest countries, not just HIPCs.

The Government provide 100 per cent. relief on their bilateral debt to HIPC countries once they qualify for debt relief under the HIPC initiative.

Amount of debt repayment received by ECGD from HIPCs

Recoveries £ million

HIPC country	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Angola	—	—
Benin'	0.146	0.051
Bolivia'	0.872	0.409
Burkina Faso'	0.066	0.061
Cameroon'	1.421	0.363
Central African Republic	0.010	—
Congo	—	—
Cote d'Ivoire	—	—
Democratic Republic of Congo	—	—
Ethiopia'	0.526	—
Ghana'	0.705	—
Guinea Republic'	0.185	0.012
Guyana	3.026	1.228
Kenya	—	14.942
Liberia	—	—
Madagascar'	—	—
Malawi'	0.114	—
Mali'	0.240	0.095
Mauritania'	0.005	0.009
Mozambique'	—	—
Nicaragua'	—	—
Niger'	—	—
Senegal'	0.013	0.176
Sierra Leone'	—	—
Somalia	—	—
Sudan	—	—
Tanzania'	—	0.387
Togo	—	—
Uganda'	0.465	—
Vietnam	0.749	0.699
Yemen'	0.213	0.186
Zambia'	2.847	0.957
Total	11.603	19,575

' Have now passed Decision Point.

Note:

When HIPCs reach their Decision Points they are no longer required to service their debt—with a commitment to full write-off, eg Bolivia, Uganda, Mozambique and Tanzania.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which countries she expects to reach decision point under the HIPC initiative in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* 2003. [53790]

Clare Short: So far this year, Ghana and Sierra Leone have reached their decision point under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, bringing the total to 26 out of a total of 42 HIPCs. We hope that, by autumn, Cote d'Ivoire will be added to the list of countries benefiting from the Initiative. In 2003, three countries (Comoros, Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo) may qualify for HIPC relief. The prospects for the remaining eight unsustainable countries are not good. Six—Burundi, Congo Republic, Liberia, Myanmar, Somalia and Sudan—are still affected by conflict; Togo has governance problems; and Lao PDR is undecided as to whether to opt for HIPC relief. Angola, Kenya, Vietnam and Yemen already have sustainable debt burdens.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the value was of payments made by the United Kingdom towards the HIPC Trust Fund to contribute towards multilateral debt relief for *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02. [53786]

Clare Short: The total UK pledge to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Debt Initiative Trust Fund, which is funded by the Department for International Development, is US$306 million, including our US$85 million share of the EC contribution. In 2000–01, DFID paid US$40 million to the HIPC Trust Fund, and in 2001–02 DFID paid US$33.7 million. The UK contribution is paid on an as-needed basis on request by the International Development Association (IDA), which is administering the Fund.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) if she will list the multilateral institutions which received payments from the HIPC Trust Fund to cover their provision of debt relief broken down by *(a)* amount received and *(b)* country; [53787]

(2) which countries had financial assistance from a multilateral debt fund in the financial years *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02; and how much they received. [53788]

Clare Short: The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Debt Initiative Trust Fund makes payments to multilateral creditors to enable them to meet their shares of the costs of providing debt relief to eligible HIPC countries. The Trust Fund is administered by the International Development Association (IDA), which holds the details of information sought. I will write to the hon. Member with further information shortly.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much of the bilateral debt owed to the United Kingdom by each of the HIPC eligible countries *(a)* has been written off and *(b)* is outstanding, broken down by country. [53789]

Clare Short: The total outstanding bilateral debt owed to the UK by the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) is £1.529 billion; the amount written off is £0.703 billion. Most of this relates to old rescheduled debt owed to ECGD from the 1970s and 1980s; details are set out, by HIPC country, in table 1. The outstanding debt figure includes £53 million of aid loans which have already been cancelled but are still in DFID's accounts, as payments are written off as they become due; details are set out, by HIPC country, in table 2.

The Government provide 100 per cent. relief on their bilateral debt to HIPC countries once they qualify for debt relief under the HIPC initiative.

Table 1: Amount of ECGD debt outstanding and written-off to date for HIPCs

£ million

HIPC country	*Amount of debt outstanding*	*Amount of debt written-off*
Angola	131.0	—
Benin[1]	2.6	5.9
Bolivia[1]	—	53.2
Burkina Faso[1]	1.1	1.1
Cameroon[1]	50.9	38.0
Central African Republic	0.4	0.3
Congo	149.0	—
Cote D'Ivoire	33.2	6.5
Democratic Republic of Congo	165.0	—
Ethiopi[1]	12.6	5.1
Ghana[1,2]	150.0	—
Guinea Republic[1]	3.7	1.3
Guyana[1]	33.0	90.0
Kenya	44.3	—
Liberia	18.0	—
Madagascar[1]	25.0	3.6
Malawi[1]	0.4	0.3
Mali[1]	3.0	8.9
Mauritania[1]	5.9	3.0
Mozambique[1]	—	105.6
Nicaragua[1]	1.1	1.1
Niger[1]	9.5	5.3
Senegal[1]	1.5	1.9
Sierra Leone[1]	5.0	0.6
Somalia	29.0	—
Sudan	361.4	—
Tanzania[1]	—	232.1
Togo	15.7	4.5
Uganda[1]	—	23.5
Vietnam	8.9	12.0
Yemen[1]	2.3	6.4
Zambia[1]	212.0	84.3
Total	1,475.5	694.5

[1] Have now passed Decision Point.
[2] The amount shown is ECGD's exposure some of which shall shortly be restructured/reduced.
Note:
Total amount outstanding column includes principal outstanding together with any arrears of interest.

Table 2: Amount of aid loans outstanding and written-off for HIPC countries

£

Country	*Balance at 1 April 2001*	*Written off 2001–02*	*Balance at 1 April 2002*
Angola	0	0	0
Benin, People's Republic	0	0	0
Burkina Faso	0	0	0
Burundi	0	0	0
Cameroon	0	0	0
Central African Republic	0	0	0
Chad	0	0	0
Congo, People's Republic	0	0	0
Ethiopia	0	0	0
Ghana	6,071,475	1,667,600	4,403,875
Guinea	0	0	0
Guinea-Bissau	0	0	0
Cote d'Ivoire	1,684,482	213,126	1,471,356
Kenya	0	0	0
Liberia	0	0	0
Madagascar	0	0	0
Malawi	96,000	76,000	20,000
Mali	0	0	0
Mauritania	0	0	0
Mozambique	907,704	695,721	211,983
Niger	0	0	0
Rwanda	0	0	0
Sao Tome and Principe	0	0	0
Senegal	160,330	56,000	104,330
Sierra Leone	0	0	0
Somali Democratic Republic	0	0	0
Sudan	0	0	0
Tanzania	0	0	0
Togo	0	0	0
Uganda	0	0	0
Congo, Democratic Republic	0	0	0
Zambia	28,210,920	2,549,200	25,661,720
Bolivia	0	0	0
Guyana	23,690,803	3,374,420	20,316,383

Table 2: Amount of aid loans outstanding and written-off for HIPC countries

£

Country	Balance at 1 April 2001	Written off 2001–02	Balance at 1 April 2002
Honduras	1,164,476	324,476	840,000
Nicaragua	398,200	0	398,200
Burma	0	0	0
Laos	0	0	0
Vietnam	0	0	0
Yemen, Republic of[1]	0	0	0
Yemen, People's Democratic Republic	0	0	0
Myanmar	0	0	0
Vietnam—Hanoi	0	0	0
Vietnam—Ho Chi Minh City	0	0	0
Total	62,384,390	8,956,543	53,427,847

[1] YAR to May 1990

Health Aid Budgets

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the proposals to increase health aid budgets contained in the World Health Organisation's report by the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health, published on 20 December; and what role her Department has played in the report's distribution in the United Kingdom and in British overseas territories and embassies. [54166]

Clare Short: We welcome the broad messages of the Commission for Macroeconomics (CMH) report. It has provided clear evidence that investing in health is far more important for economic development and wider poverty reduction than was previously understood, and we embrace the call for extra resources from both donors and developing countries.

I hosted the worldwide launch of the CMH report at the Department for International Development headquarters in December. Later this month I shall be opening a conference (organised and part funded by my Department) to disseminate the messages of the report to the global audience and plan how to take these findings forward.

Poverty

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made toward the 2015 targets for reducing poverty. [53711]

Clare Short: Latest forecasts from the World Bank suggest that globally, meeting the 2015 target of halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty is attainable. There has been progress. During the 1990s, the proportion of people living on less than $1 a day in the developing world fell from 29 per cent. in 1990, to 23 per cent. in 1999. This was mainly due to the substantial progress made during the 1990s in east Asia, and in particular China.

In the developing world, progress has also been made during the 1990s against almost all the other 2015 Millennium Development targets. The proportion of children completing a full course of primary school increased from 68 per cent. to 73 per cent.; the under-five mortality rate decreased from 88 to 84 deaths per 1,000 births; and the proportion of people with access to an improved water source increased from 73 per cent. to 79 per cent.

However, to meet all of the 2015 targets progress must be improved. The sub-Saharan African region presents the biggest challenge to meeting the 2015 targets. We need an enormous effort internationally to accelerate progress in Africa. My Department is dedicated to do all in its power to accelerate progress towards the targets.

A detailed description of progress towards all the 2015 targets is contained in a recent World bank publication: World Development Indicators 2002, which can be found at the following website: http://www.worldbank.org/ata/wdi2002/worldview.pdf.

St. Helena

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with the representatives of the island of St. Helena on assisting with financial provision for providing an airport on St. Helena. [53699]

Clare Short: A St. Helena Government team visited the UK in February 2002 to take forward discussions on air access for the island with my officials. The team reported on these discussions to the St. Helena Government at the beginning of April. Further discussions on the issue of air access will take place over the coming months.

Donations (Tax Relief)

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what role her Department will play in deciding whether tax relief on donations of medical supplies and equipment to developing countries announced in the Budget is supportive of recipient countries health strategies; [53343]

(2) what role her Department will play in the interpretation of "humanitarian" in relation to tax relief on the responsible donation of medical supplies and equipment to developing countries announced in the Budget. [53344]

Clare Short: My Department has been working closely with HM Treasury, Inland Revenue and other Departments on a range of measures to improve access to medicines for the developing world, including tax relief on donations of medical supplies.

The tax measure is intended to be supportive of health strategies in developing countries. The Inland Revenue will be issuing guidance to its tax inspectors on interpreting what constitutes a donation for "humanitarian purposes". The Inland Revenue guidance will include appropriate reference to elements of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Guidelines.

The WHO guidelines clearly set out that drug donations should: constitute a sustainable contribution to government health strategies in developing countries; be based on need and relevant to the disease pattern of recipient countries; have at least one year remaining shelf

life; be of a quality which complies with the standards of donor and recipient countries; and only provided after consultation and at the request of the recipient.

Chechnya

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment she has made of the humanitarian situation in Chechnya; and if she will make a statement. [53058]

Clare Short: We closely monitor the situation in the North Caucasus, both from our desk in London and through regular visits to Moscow.

According to research by the International Committee of the Red Cross(ICRC) food, clothing and shelter are the priority needs for internally displaced people(IDPs) and vulnerable persons in Chechnya. Water supply, reconstruction and education are also seen as important areas of need.

We continue to work with UN agencies and international NGOs to improve assessment of humanitarian needs and evaluation of impact. This includes funding through the UN Office of the Security Co-ordinator (UNSECOORD) and the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) (including part funding of a senior humanitarian specialist) in support of strengthened co-ordination and security for humanitarian agencies working in the North Caucasus, including Chechnya.

Commonwealth Development Corporation

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many *(a)* investments were held and *(b)* new investments were made by the CDC in (i) South Asia, (ii) Sub-Saharan Africa, (iii) countries defined by the CDC as poorer and (iv) in total in (A) 1998, (B) 1999, (C) 2000 and (D) 2001, broken down by country. [52251]

Clare Short: The information is as follows:

Country	*Poorer (yes/no)*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
(a) Number of investments held					
South Asia	—	85	75	71	71
Sub-Saharan Africa	—	177	176	149	136
Poorer	—	338	329	295	268
Total	—	418	407	374	349
Bangladesh	y	6	7	7	7
India	y	44	35	30	30
Sri Lanka	y	8	7	7	9
Pakistan	y	26	25	24	22
Other South Asia	y	1	1	3	3
Total South Asia	—	85	75	71	71
Botswana	n	6	5	2	1
Cameroon	y	4	4	1	1
Cote D'Ivoire	y	8	9	5	5
Esca Regional Fund (South Africa)	y	1	1	1	1
Gambia	y	1	1	1	1
Ghana	y	16	16	14	11
Kenya	y	18	18	16	15
Lesotho	y	3	3	2	2
Liberia	y	4	4	5	5
Malawi	y	11	8	7	3
Mauritius	n	7	3	5	5
Mozambique	y	7	7	6	6
Namibia	n	2	2	2	2
Nigeria	y	3	3	4	4
Seychelles	n	2	2	0	0
Sierra Leone	y	3	3	3	2
South Africa	n	9	14	14	20
Sudan	y	1	1	1	1
Swaziland	y	12	11	10	8
Tanzania	y	15	17	15	14
Uganda	y	11	10	8	6
Zambia	y	15	16	16	13
Zimbabwe	y	16	15	9	7
Other	y	2	3	2	3
Total Sub-Saharan Africa	—	177	176	149	136
Argentina	n	0	0	2	2
Barbados	n	1	2	2	2
Belize	n	5	5	6	4
Bolivia	y	4	4	5	4
British Virgin Islands	n	1	2	4	4
Cayman Islands	n	1	0	0	0
Costa Rica	n	17	15	15	15
Cuba	y	2	3	3	3
Dominica	n	2	2	2	2
Dominican Republic	y	8	9	11	11
Ecuador	y	6	7	5	4

Country	Poorer (yes/no)	1998	1999	2000	2001
El Salvador	y	1	1	2	1
Grenada	n	1	1	1	1
Guatemala	y	3	4	5	3
Guyana	y	6	6	8	8
Honduras	y	9	9	7	6
Jamaica	y	10	9	6	5
Mexico	n	0	0	1	1
Nicaragua	y	4	5	5	4
Peru	n	0	1	2	3
St. Lucia	n	1	1	1	1
Trinidad and Tobago	n	3	2	1	1
Other—[redacted]	y	1	0	0	1
China	y	0	0	3	4
Fiji	n	4	4	2	0
Indonesia	y	18	19	13	12
Laos	y	1	1	1	1
Malaysia	n	4	4	3	3
Mauritius	n	0	0	0	1
Papua New Guinea	y	12	11	11	9
Philippines	y	10	8	9	10
Singapore	n	0	0	1	0
Solomon Islands	y	4	4	3	3
Thailand	n	13	13	12	11
Vanuatu	y	2	2	2	2
Vietnam	y	2	2	1	1
Other—Asia Pacific	n	0	0	1	1
(b) Number of new investments					
South Asia	—	10	4	7	8
Sub-Saharan Africa	—	51	43	32	31
Poorer	—	73	60	60	40
Total	—	96	90	86	63
Bangladesh	y	0	1	1	2
India	y	6	3	3	2
Sri Lanka	y	2	0	2	3
Pakistan	y	1	0	1	1
Other South Asia	y	1	0	0	0
Total South Asia	—	10	4	7	8
Malawi	y	4	4	1	0
Mozambique	y	3	2	1	0
Zambia	y	3	3	2	1
Zimbabwe	y	4	3	1	1
Kenya	y	5	4	4	3
Esca Regional Fund (South Africa)	y	1	0	0	0
Mauritius	n	1	0	1	2
Tanzania	y	11	6	9	5
Uganda	y	5	2	1	1
Swaziland	y	2	3	2	2
South Africa	n	8	9	5	13
Cote D'Ivoire	y	1	2	2	0
Ghana	y	2	5	2	2
Nigeria	y	0	0	1	1
Sierra Leone	y	1	0	0	0
Total Sub-Saharan Africa	—	51	43	32	31
Papua New Guinea	y	3	2	2	2
Solomon Islands	y	1	0	0	1
Barbados	n	0	4	1	1
British Virgin Islands	n	0	1	4	2
Cayman Islands	n	0	0	1	0
Cuba	y	2	3	0	0
Dominica	n	1	3	0	0
Guyana	y	0	1	1	1
Jamaica	y	1	1	1	0
St. Lucia	n	1	0	0	0
Argentina	n	0	0	2	1
Belize	n	3	5	2	1
Bolivia	y	3	2	2	1
Costa Rica	n	7	7	6	2
Dominican Republic	y	4	1	6	2
Ecuador	y	1	1	0	0

Country	Poorer (yes/no)	1998	1999	2000	2001
El Salvador	y	0	1	1	1
Guatemala	y	0	1	1	1
Honduras	y	1	0	0	0
Peru	n	0	1	1	1
Latin America	y	0	0	0	1
Mexico	n	0	0	1	0
Nicaragua	y	1	2	0	0
Asia Pacific	y	0	0	1	0
China	y	0	0	3	2
Indonesia	y	0	4	6	2
Malaysia	n	0	0	0	0
Laos	y	1	0	1	0
Philippines	y	2	3	2	2
Singapore	n	0	0	1	0
Thailand	n	2	0	1	0
Vietnam	y	1	0	0	0

Note:
Numbers of individual investments do not reflect benefits to poorer developing countries overall.

Poland

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment she has made of the value for money achieved by the Rural Development Project in Poland. [49162]

Clare Short: This project was formally reviewed in June 2001 and has been monitored on a regular basis since then. It is an institutional building project focused at national and local government levels, NGOs and civil society. The project is assisting the Polish authorities in changing the way regional planning is implemented in line with good EU practice by the instruction of a more participative and bottom-up approach to decision-making processes.

DFID assessments have shown that the project is providing value for money in terms of its impact on (i) the progress being made in the Lubelski voivodship in building local capacity and networks and (ii) links being made into the national policy debate to inform regional policy in preparation for Poland's accession to the EU and its future effective use of structural funds.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Local Authority Capital Receipts

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on the proposed changes in the rules relating to the use of right to buy receipts; from when the new rules will operate; what changes are envisaged for debt-free authorities; for what reason debt-free authorities will be required to set aside a percentage of prior receipts in future; what the percentage will be; how this money will be redistributed to other authorities; under what statement these changes will be introduced; whether it is Government policy to match exactly the higher allocations to support general borrowing as a result of the ending of the authorities' ability to finance expenditure from receipts; which authorities he estimates will be affected, and how much will be redistributed in each case; what consultation he will undertake before introducing this change; and if he will publish the results of the consultation. [53955]

Ms Keeble: The local government White Paper—"Strong Local Leadership—Quality Public Services"—set out our intention to pool a proportion of housing capital receipts arising in debt free authorities to finance new housing investment in areas where it is most needed. The change will put the treatment of housing capital receipts in debt free authorities on an equal footing with their treatment in other authorities. It also removes a real disincentive to authorities to take up the new borrowing freedoms planned as part of the simplification of the local authority capital finance system described in the White Paper.

The change will be introduced alongside the wider changes to the local authority capital finance system which require primary legislation; the timing of this is still to be decided. The detailed arrangements for pooling, including the proportion of receipts to be pooled, and the allocation of resources from the pool are currently being considered. The new arrangements will not apply to receipts already realised. We will be consulting on detailed proposals and will report on the outcome of the consultation.

The number of authorities that will be affected by the change will depend on what happens to debt levels and on housing stock transfers between now and the introduction of the pooling arrangement. A list of the authorities that were debt free at 1 April 2001 was given in reply to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) on 9 April 2001, *Official Report*, columns 330–32W. Housing capital receipts are mainly generated from the sale of dwellings and around 30 of these authorities own council housing. The amount of additional resources for allocation from the pool to fund new housing investment will depend on the proportion of receipts to be pooled and future levels or receipts for debt free authorities.

Planning Policy

Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will publish a report on the progress on adoption of area-wide local plans and unitary development plans. [55053]

Ms Keeble: The report on the progress on the adoption of area wide local plans and unitary development plans is published today and details the progress made by local authorities in England in preparing and reviewing their development plans.

Although it was considered that the publication of the planning Green Paper would raise uncertainties in respect of local authorities preparing plans, this report gives a clear indication that local authorities are continuing with development plan work. We have yet to achieve 100 per cent. national coverage and there are still 13 per cent. of LPAs who have not produced an adopted development plan. The continuing delays in adopting local plans and, subsequently, altering or replacing those plans adds weight to the recommendations in the planning Green Paper on the need for reform of the planning system to introduce faster and more flexible arrangements.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions which proposals in the planning Green Paper would require *(a)* primary legislation and *(b)* secondary legislation to be implemented. [54448]

Mr. Byers: A number of the proposals will require changes to primary legislation. Among them the proposals to abolish structure plans, local plans and unitary development plans and replace them with the new Local Development Framework, and introducing statutory Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) to replace Regional Planning Guidance. Powers would need to be introduced for major infrastructure projects to be referred to Parliament and any changes to the current system of planning obligations. A number of development control measures such as putting funding for planning aid on a statutory basis and introducing a planning checklist are likely to require primary legislation. While some legislative amendment may be required for the introduction of business planning zones.

Many of the changes in the Green Paper can be made by secondary legislation. In particular those development control measures designed to speed up and made the process more transparent such as the proposals to enable electronic submission of planning applications and appeals, and the requirement on local authorities to make copies of plans and planning applications publicly available at low or no cost. A number of the proposals will requires amendments to be made to the General Development Procedure Order.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the Court of Appeal decision in Newport BC *v.* Secretary of State for Wales on the application of PPG8. [54444]

Mr. Byers: Our revised Planning Policy Guidance Note 8, 'Telecommunications' takes account of this decision and makes reference to it.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions whether the appointment of consultants to advise on the responses to the Planning Green Paper was subject to a competitive tendering process; when expressions of interest were invited; and how many firms tendered. [54446]

Mr. Byers: Smith and Williamson were appointed under a framework agreement under which each work assignment commissioned forms a contract in its own right (in accordance with the terms and conditions of the overarching framework). The framework was let following a competitive tender exercise conducted under the EC Restricted procedure, i. e. service requirement advertised in the Official Journal of the European Communities, Expressions of Internet (EOIs) invited from potential suppliers, EOIs sifted to select those to be invited to tender.

The framework was awarded on 31 October 1997 and ends on 31 October 2002. It is being retendered.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will publish a Planning White Paper. [54447]

Mr. Byers: The Government intend to make a Policy Statement before the summer parliamentary recess.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions which consultants were appointed to analyse the responses to the Planning Green Paper; and what are *(a)* their terms of reference and *(b)* the timetable for completion of their work. [54449]

Mr. Byers: The Department appointed Smith and Williamson management consultants on 5 December 2001. The consultants were appointed to analyse and data process standard responses to the Green Paper. They were asked to produce quantitative data on the overall response and by respondent type. Smith and Williamson delivered their findings on 29 April.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights on the proposals in his Planning Green Paper. [54443]

Mr. Byers: Following the coming into force of the Human Rights Act, all government policy and legislation needs to be considered for its compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights. Should any of the proposals in the Green Paper result in primary legislation, the Ministers responsible will make a statement as to the compatibility of the relevant provisions to both Houses.

Mobile Telephone Masts

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many planning applications for mobile phone masts have been determined under delegated authority in each of the last five years, broken down by local authority. [54445]

Mr. Byers: The Department does not collect such information.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what recent discussions his Department has had with telecom operators on the shared use of mobile phone masts. [54439]

Mr. Byers: The Government's policy is to encourage mast and site sharing where that is the optimum environmental solution in a particular case. Planning Policy Guidance Note 8, "Telecommunications" provides guidance on this.

The Department is currently drawing up, in partnership with representatives of the mobile phone operators and local government, a revised Code of Best Practice, which will include advice and best practice on siting and design of mobile phone mast development. In drawing up the advice, mast sharing has been discussed. I expect the revised Code of Best Practice to include advice and best practice about mast sharing.

Local Public Service Agreements

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions for what reasons district councils are not directly involved in local public service agreements; and what plans he has to extend them to district councils. [54799]

Dr. Whitehead: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mrs. Brooke) on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 557W.

Flood-risk Housing

Mr. Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many houses *(a)* have been built in areas deemed as high risk of flooding in each year since 1997 and *(b)* are planned in such areas. [54235]

Ms Keeble: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) on 7 November 2001, *Official Report*, columns 294–95W. The most recent land-use change statistics will be published shortly.

Assisted Living Units

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many assisted living units per local authority there were in England in each of the last five years. [53767]

Ms Keeble: Prior to the introduction of the Supporting People programme most local authorities were not involved in the practice of mapping supply of assisted living units in their area. It is therefore not possible to provide the information you require. However following the 'supply mapping' deadline for the Supporting People programme, which is the end of May 2002, an accurate picture of the number of units per local authority should be available.

Social Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has to issue guidance to commissioning bodies under the Supporting People scheme on partnerships with social services. [53765]

Ms Keeble: Commissioning Bodies are a partnership of housing, social services, probation and health who will together plan the Supporting People strategy for their local areas. Comprehensive guidance was published in October 2001. It can be found on the website www.spkweb.org.uk under Emerging Policy.

British Red Cross

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what financial support his Department has given since 1 April 2000 to projects in the UK run by the British Red Cross. [52967]

Dr. Whitehead: Since 1 April 2000 an examination of accounting records has revealed that DTLR(C) has made no contributions to the state funding of the British Red Cross or to projects run by the British Red Cross.

Public Services

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that district authorities have the flexibility to fund and deliver high quality public services to local people. [52467]

Dr. Whitehead: The Local Government White Paper "Strong Local Leadership—Quality Public Services", published December 2001, sets out our broad vision for local government. The White Paper contains our commitments to provide local authorities with wider powers and increased financial flexibility, and for Government to decrease unnecessary control over authorities to assist with the delivery of improved public services and better community leadership.

Public Transport Workers (Assaults)

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assistance is given to public transport workers who are assaulted at work. [53642]

Ms Keeble: The Department is very concerned about the number of public transport workers who are assaulted at work. The Department is raising awareness and addressing the issue through research programmes and good practice guidance for public transport operators.

Work-related violence is a health and safety issue, and employers have a legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to protect their staff from the risk of violence in the course of their work. The specific assistance given to public transport workers who are assaulted at work is a matter for the individual transport operator. For example, London Underground staff receive support from their managers in the form of sympathetic treatment, home visits, hospital visits (if applicable), gradual reintroduction to the work place (including move of location if appropriate), assistance in legal proceedings (support at court) and assistance with CICA claims. They may also receive support from in-house Employee Assistance.

Rail Safety

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what his policy is on the installation of a train protection system; if he will make a statement on the recent report from the Commission for Integrated Transport on this subject; and if he will make a statement. [53448]

Mr. Jamieson: The Railway Safety Regulations 1999 require automatic train protection (ATP), where reasonably practical, or otherwise the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS), to be fitted on all trains and throughout the network by the end of 2003. The rail industry estimates that TPWS should mitigate over 80 per cent. of ATP-preventable risk. Mandatory common technical specifications (TSIs) developed under the European rail interoperability directives 96/48/EC and 2001/16/EC will mean that a European form of ATP, known as the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS), should be fitted to all high speed and many conventional rail lines in Great Britain when they are constructed, upgraded or (conventional lines only) renewed.

The public inquiry report into train protection systems, chaired by Professor Uff and Lord Cullen, recommended that ERTMS be adopted as the standard form of train protection in this country. On 25 April the rail industry published a report setting out what it considered a feasible timetable for fitting ERTMS to Britain's railways. I have asked the Health and Safety Commission, as the independent rail safety regulator, to review the industry report. They will want to have a constructive debate on all the issues raised including costs and timing before they report back to me with formal recommendations. I look forward to receiving the Health and Safety Commission's recommendations and then deciding the best way forward.

The report from the Commission for Integrated Transport argued that level 1 of ERTMS would reduce capacity on high speed, high capacity lines, causing travellers to switch to roads, with a much worse safety record than rail, leading to more fatalities overall. The industry report on ERTMS makes a similar point. I would expect the HSC to consider these points when reviewing the report and making their recommendations.

Rail Freight

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) when the contracts resulting from the SRA's freight innovation competition were signed with *(a)* Blue Circle industries, *(b)* Exel and *(c)* Minimodal; [54452]

(2) when the contracts signed by *(a)* Blue Circle Industries, *(b)* Exel and *(c)* Minimodal have been renegotiated; and if he will make a statement; [54454]

(3) what the results were of the mechanical engineering checks that were carried out as part of the SRA's freight innovation competition; [54456]

(4) what the criteria were against which the entrants for the SRA's freight innovation competition were judged; [54451]

(5) if he will place in the Library the Heads of Agreement for the contracts signed by *(a)* Blue Circle Industries, *(b)* Exel and *(c)* Minimodal, following the SRA's freight innovation competition; [54453]

(6) on what date the winners of the SRA's freight innovation competition were announced; [54450]

(7) how much has been spent by *(a)* the Department, *(b)* the SRA and *(c)* other Government bodies as part of the SRA's freight innovation competition. [54455]

Mr. Byers: The winners of the Strategic Rail Authority's (SRA's) freight innovation competition were announced on 13 June 2000. The contracts were signed on 26 January 2001 in all three cases and none of these contracts have been renegotiated. The terms of the contracts are commercially confidential and could not be disclosed without the agreement of all parties to the contracts. The Authority selected projects submitted which scored highest against the published criteria and these were audited by a consultant to assess their deliverability in all areas including vehicle acceptance and operational issues prior to selection. The guidance notes for applicants, which include the criteria used to judge the competition, have been placed in the Libraries of the House. Up to the end of the year 2001–02 the SRA, which is wholly responsible for financing the competition, has spent £4.52 million as a result of it.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 569W, what contractual arrangements exist for access to the network by rail freight operators. [54281]

Mr. Jamieson: Freight train operators need to hold access contracts with Railtrack. These are subject to approval by the Rail Regulator in accordance with the provisions in sections 17 to 22c of the Railways Act 1993 (as amended by the Transport Act 2000).

Deep Sea Ports

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assessment he has made of the average cost to hauliers to transfer freight onto *(a)* the rail network and *(b)* the road network at deep sea ports in the United Kingdom. [54603]

Mr. Byers: The charges are a confidential contractual matter between the port and its customers.

Road Signs

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what his policy is on the use of kilometres on road distance indicator signs in the UK. [53510]

Ms Keeble: The Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions (TSRGD) 1994 do not permit the use of kilometres on directional or road works signs, or on distance plates used with regulatory or warning signs.

Fuel-cell Powered Vehicles

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has to support the development of a hydrogen infrastructure for fuel-cell powered vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [54266]

Mr. Jamieson: The draft of the Government's "Powering Future Vehicles" strategy for encouraging the shift to low-carbon vehicles and fuels highlighted the Government's role of supporting the development of new fuel infrastructures. Hydrogen is likely to be a key component in this shift to low-carbon transport.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Budget announced that the Government intended to exempt hydrogen from fuel duty for a period to encourage it's development and early take-up. He also announced his intention to provide enhanced capital allowances for hydrogen infrastructure. The Government are also providing fiscal support for the pilot trials of fuel-cell buses to be carried out next year by Transport for London, which will include a hydrogen refuelling facility.

Vehicle Registration Documents

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the average time taken to replace lost vehicle registration documents was in the last 12 months. [54876]

Mr. Jamieson: For the year 2001–02 in respect of registration documents issued in response to customers notifying changes to their own or the vehicle's details, the agency processed 95 per cent. of all transactions within 8.4 days.

A1 (Newark)

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) when he expects the carriageway repairs on the A1 south of Newark to be completed; [52608]

(2) what reasons the carriageway repair work being carried out on the A1 south of Newark is not being carried out on a 24 hour basis. [52609]

Mr. Spellar: The carriageway repairs on the A1 south of Newark finished on 29 April 2002, six days earlier than originally expected. Before they began, the Highways Agency consulted Kesteven district council and it was agreed that work would not be done overnight to avoid causing disturbance to nearby residential properties.

Drivers will now benefit from a smoother, quieter ride and the residents of Long Bennington will notice a marked decrease in noise.

Vehicle Ownership

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many households with *(a)* one and *(b)* more than one vehicle there were in (i) St. Helens, (ii) Merseyside, (iii) the north-west, (iv) England and (v) Great Britain in (A) 1990, (B) 1995, (C) 1997, (D) 1998, (E) 1999, (F) 2000 and (G) 2001. [52256]

Mr. Jamieson: Information for St. Helens and Merseyside are only available from the 1991 Census. This is shown in Table 1 together with corresponding data for the north-west Standard Statistical Region (SSR) (comprising Cumbria, Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside), England and Great Britain. 2001 Census data will be available in 2003.

Table 1: Number of households—1991

Thousand

	No cars	*One car*	*Two or more cars*	*All households*
St. Helens	25	30	14	69
Merseyside	248	217	86	551
North-west SSR	935	1,031	501	2,467
England	6,080	8,201	4,485	18,766
Great Britain	7,314	9,525	5,058	21,897

Estimates for the north-west, England and Great Britain for other years are shown in Table 2. Data for the north-west relate to the SSR for 1990 and 1995 and to the Government office region (i.e. north-west SSR less Cumbria) for subsequent years. Data for 2001 will be available in autumn 2002.

Table 2: Number of households

Thousand

	No cars	*One car*	*Two or more cars*	*All households*
North-west				
1990	941	1,096	467	2,504
1995	889	1,160	549	2,598
1997	871	1,256	699	2,826
1998	905	1,246	691	2,842
1999	855	1,265	732	2,852
2000	867	1,295	711	2,874
England				
1990	6,114	8,460	4,446	19,020
1995	5,939	9,074	5,019	20,032
1997	5,955	9,042	5,367	20,364
1998	5,594	9,174	5,772	20,540
1999	5,840	9,208	5,695	20,743
2000	5,577	9,419	5,884	20,972
Great Britain				
1990	7,314	9,827	4,999	22,140
1995	7,080	10,556	5,679	23,315
1997	7,081	10,567	6,046	23,694
1998	6,651	10,621	6,623	23,896
1999	6,862	10,699	6,559	24,120
2000	6,588	10,947	6,839	24,374

Airport Capacity

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what discussions he has had regarding a new airport in the Thames estuary area; and if he will make a statement. [53926]

Mr. Jamieson: Following press speculation in March about the potential location of a new airport on the Hoo peninsula in Kent my right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport agreed to meet a group of local MPs and, separately, the leader of Kent county council. At these meetings he explained that the press articles were speculative and was able to confirm the approach we have taken to identifying and narrowing down options in the south-east airports study.

We hope to publish the public consultation on the shortlisted options next month.

Deep Vein Thrombosis

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the composition is of the Aviation Working Group looking into deep vein thrombosis; and when it will report. [54474]

Mr. Jamieson: The permanent members of the Aviation Health Working Group are the Department for Transport Local Government and the Regions (chair), the Department of Health, the Civil Aviation Authority and the Health and Safety Executive. Representatives from the aviation industry and consumer groups and other interested parties such as medical specialists are invited to participate in selected meetings.

The Aviation Health Working Group was established to advise Ministers on all issues relating to aviation health. This includes, but is not confined to, deep vein thrombosis. The group oversaw the publication of advice on travel-related deep vein thrombosis in November 2001, and is the focal point for the UK's support of the World Health Organisation's research programme into possible links between air travel and deep vein thrombosis. There are no plans for the group to report separately on deep vein thrombosis.

Flight BA 2069

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what progress has been made in reviewing the circumstances of the incident on board flight BA 2069 on 29 December. [54559]

Mr. Spellar: The Civil Aviation Authority has reported to me on the outcome of its review of the incident on 29 December 2000 and I have today placed in the Libraries of both Houses a report of the Authority's findings. I am satisfied that the security and safety lessons from the incident for the travelling public have already been fully taken into account in the actions taken since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

TREASURY

Part-time Workers (Pensions)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the implementation of ECJ decisions concerning the eligibility of part-time public service employees to participate in their public service pension scheme. [53941]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Public service employers will implement in full the European Court of Justice ruling concerning the right of part-time public service employees to gain retrospective access to their pension scheme. All part-timers have had the right to join their occupational pension scheme since 1995, and in many public service schemes from an earlier date. The current ruling on the Preston case concerns the treatment of part-timers' service prior to 1995 (or the relevant date of full admission). The Employment Tribunals are currently considering a number of issues, which will determine the eligibility of part-timers and their entitlements under the ECJ ruling.

Financial Services Authority (Registration)

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many firms of *(a)* solicitors and *(b)* chartered accountants in (i) Scotland and (ii) England and Wales were registered with the Financial Services Authority for the conduct of investment business under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 in (A) 2001 and (B) April 2002. [51965]

Ruth Kelly: The transition to the new regime for professional firms established under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (FSMA) for regulation of professional firms lasted until mid-December 2001. During the transition from the regime established under the Financial Services Act 1986 (FS Act) firms could opt for direct regulation by the FSA if they conducted "mainstream" investment business or opt for oversight by their professional body if their investment business was incidental to their professional services.

At 31 March 2001 the number of these professional firms certified by their recognised professional bodies under the FS Act was as follows:

The Law Society (ie England and Wales)—6,646

The Law Society of Scotland—525

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales—4,718

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland—397.

The number of these professional firms currently regulated by the FSA is as follows:

The Law Society (ie England and Wales)—361

The Law Society of Scotland—151

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales—660

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland—55.

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what subjects and on which dates his Department has consulted organisations representing young people; and if he will list such organisations. [52502]

Ruth Kelly: This information is not held centrally in the form requested and would be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The Treasury is committed to the new core principles for the involvement of children and young people published by the Minister for Young People in November 2001. The Treasury will shortly be publishing an action plan setting out for the first time how it will implement these principles to extend the participation of children and young people in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them.

Milk

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the UK's current balance of trade in *(a)* milk and *(b)* milk products. [52907]

Nigel Griffiths: I have been asked to reply.

According to information compiled by HM Customs and Excise, in 2001 the UK had a crude trade surplus worth £170 million in milk and a crude trade deficit of

£799 million in milk products. Milk products include yoghurt, buttermilk, ice cream, whey, butter, cheese and curds.

UK exports are valued at the cost of goods whereas imports also include the costs of freight and insurance. The difference between exports and imports is referred to as a "crude" trade balance to reflect this difference in valuation.

BCCI

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how much money the Bank of England has spent on legal fees to date in defence of the proceedings against it by the liquidators of BCCI SA; [54125]

(2) if he will estimate the legal costs of the Bank of England defending the proceeds brought by BCCI SA, up to and including trial and subsequent appeals. [54124]

Ruth Kelly: These are questions for the Bank of England, not the Treasury.

United Kingdom GDP

Mr. Allen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the contribution made by immigrants to United Kingdom GDP since 1972; and if he will make a statement. [54513]

Ruth Kelly: There are no direct statistics on the proportion of UK GDP accounted for by immigrants, and the data required to produce indirect estimates do not extend back to 1972. However, in 2001 foreign-born people accounted for around 8 per cent. of total UK employment, and the average gross weekly pay of foreign-born employees was about 16 per cent. above the average for all employees. On this basis, and assuming that relative wage rates proxy relative labour productivity, it can be estimated that the foreign-born population accounted for around 10 per cent. of UK GDP in 2001.

Community Development Venture Capital Fund

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which Department will be administering the new Community Development Venture Capital Fund announced in the Budget; who the intended recipients of this fund are; what guidelines have been drawn up for those wishing to bid for this fund; and if he will place a copy of these guidelines in the Library. [54727]

Ruth Kelly: The Community Development Venture Fund is a private sector venture capital fund in which the Government is investing. The fund will be run by a professional team of venture capital fund managers working for Bridges Community Ventures Limited. The fund will be able to invest in eligible businesses in deprived communities in England, defined as the most deprived 25 per cent. of wards according to the DTLR's Index of Multiple Deprivation. The criteria for eligibility will be published by Bridges Community Ventures Limited under the terms agreed between them and the Small Business Service.

Terrorist Finance

Ross Cranston: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he will take to implement Recommendation VII (information whose originator to be included in funds transfer messages) of the Financial Action Task Force Recommendations on Terrorist Financing. [54683]

Ruth Kelly: The Government will shortly publish a consultation document on this issue.

Employment Statistics

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* men aged over 65 years and *(b)* women aged over 60 years are in full-time employment. [53879]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 7 May 2002:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the numbers of men aged over 65 and women aged over 60 in full-time employment. (53879)

The latest Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimate for the three month period ending in February 2002 are 98,000 men aged 65 and over in full-time employment, and 152,000 women aged 60 and over in full-time employment. These estimates are not seasonally adjusted.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women have benefited from the introduction of the national minimum wage. [53877]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 7 May 2002:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of men and women who have benefited from the introduction of the National Minimum Wage (NMW). (53877)

The table shows the number of jobs held by men and women which were paid below the NMW levels prevailing in the years 1998 to 2001.

Number of UK jobs paid at less than National Minimum Wage rates

000s

	Men	*Women*
Spring 1998[1]	420	1,100
Spring 1999[2]	200	380
Spring 2000[2]	100	200
Spring 2001[3]	110	210

[1] Figures for spring 1998, before the NMW was introduced, are for the number of jobs paid at less than £3.00 per hour (aged 18–21) or £3.60 per hour (aged 22 and over).
[2] NMW rates of £3.00 per hour (aged 18–21) or £3.60 per hour (aged 22 and over).
[3] NMW rates of £3.20 per hour (aged 18–21) or £3.70 per hour (aged 22 and over).

Greater London (Migration)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the level of migration of people into the Greater London area from the rest of the UK was in the last three years. [54188]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 7 May 2002:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your question on the level of migration into Greater London from the rest of the UK. (54188)

The attached table shows the flow of inward, outward and net migration for Greater London during the last three years from 1998 to 2000.

Number of people moving to and from the Greater London area from the rest of the UK during the years ending June 1998, 1999 and 2000

Thousand

	In	*Out*	*Net inflow*
1998	171.2	217.9	–46.7
1999	163.2	218.4	–55.2
2000	163.1	233.0	–69.9

Note:
These data are mid-year estimates
Source:
Figures on migrants within the UK are derived from the re-registration of NHS patients

Departmental Policies

James Purnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what impact his Department's policies have had on the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency since 1997. [54333]

Ruth Kelly: Stalybridge and Hyde, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken since 1997 to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment.

Claimant count unemployment in the constituency, for example, has fallen by over 970, or 42 per cent. since May 1997.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay for lower and middle income families, and to reduce child poverty. The Government are also committed to enabling all persons to share in the country's rising prosperity.

To the end of January 2002, the new deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,117 young people in the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency gain valuable skills and experience—620 (56 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The working families tax credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle-income families. In November 2001, 2,728 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC. 11,566 families in Stalybridge and Hyde are benefiting from increases in child benefit to £15.75 for the first child and £10.55 for subsequent children.

As a result of the 2001 pre-Budget report, all pensioners, including 14,600 in Stalybridge and Hyde, will receive at least a rise of £100 for single pensioners and £160 for couples each year from April 2003. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 6,400 in Stalybridge and Hyde. 3,500 pensioners are also benefiting from the minimum income guarantee being increased in line with earnings for the rest of this Parliament. 15,700 pensioners in Stalybridge are benefiting from £200 a year winter fuel payments for the rest of this Parliament.

These data are all available in the Library of the House of Commons.

Advertising

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the publicity and advertising campaigns run by his Department in each of the last four years, specifying the *(a)* purpose, *(b)* cost to public funds, *(c)* number of staff involved and *(d)* method of evaluation in each case. [39096]

Ruth Kelly: The information is set out in the table, which has been placed in the Library.

VAT Schemes

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many businesses participate in the VAT Annual Accounting Scheme; what his estimate is of the total number of businesses eligible to participate; and if he will make a statement. [54459]

Mr. Boateng: Since 1 April 2001, the VAT annual accounting scheme has been available to some 1 million businesses, but less than 10,000 have so far taken it up. In the consultation document "Easing the impact of VAT", the Government explained that "despite the administrative and cash flow benefits, take up of the scheme is currently very low" and set out plans to reform the scheme to encourage greater take-up. These reforms were introduced on 25 April and are expected to achieve a significant increase in take-up of the scheme.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimates are of *(a)* the number of businesses eligible to participate and *(b)* the revenue that would be forgone in a full year, if the upper turnover limit on the proposed flat-rate VAT scheme were raised to (i) £200,000 and (ii) £250,000. [54457]

Mr. Boateng: In the Budget, the Government announced that—from next April—the flat rate scheme will be available to 700,000 small businesses with turnovers up to £150,000. If the upper turnover limit of the flat-rate scheme was extended to £200,000 or £250,000, approximately 80,000 or 130,000 additional traders would respectively be eligible to join. The costs of such an extension would depend on the details of such proposals, including the rates applicable under the scheme.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many businesses have participated in the farmers flat rate VAT scheme in each of the last three years; what his estimate is of the total number of businesses eligible to participate; if he will make a statement. [54458]

Mr. Boateng: There were 807 businesses using the agricultural flat rate scheme in 1999, 994 in 2000 and 1,062 in 2001. All businesses whose non-farm income does not exceed the VAT registration threshold, and who supply goods, or goods and services (but not services

alone), which qualify for inclusion in the scheme are eligible to join. No estimate has been made of how many businesses in total are eligible to participate in the scheme.

Budget (Responses)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many letters he has received *(a)* in favour of and *(b)* critical of his Budget. [54491]

Dawn Primarolo: Between 17 April and 1 May, HM Treasury received a total of 1,983 pieces of correspondence, many of which will have addressed Budget theme and announcements.

Fuel Smuggling

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the origin was of the motor fuel seized by HM Customs and Excise in November 2001 on the M6; and how much fuel was seized. [54299]

Mr. Boateng: HM Customs and Excise did not make any notable seizures of oil on the M6 during November 2001.

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many vehicles, with what carrying capacity, have been seized by HM Customs for alleged smuggling motor transport fuels into Northern Ireland in each year since 1997. [54296]

Mr. Boateng: Customs seizure records do not disaggregate between smuggling and other types of hydrocarbon oils fraud nor do they record the fuel carrying capacity of vehicles seized. However, the total number of vehicles seized in relation to oils fraud in Northern Ireland since 1998–99 are as follows:

Financial year	*Vehicles seized*
1998–99	39
1999–2000	98
2000–01	312

I regret that information for 1997–98 is not available. Northern Ireland vehicle seizure figures for the financial year 2001–02 are being collated and will be published in due course.

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the origin was of the motor fuel seized by HM Customs and Excise in Basildon in February; and how much fuel was seized. [54300]

Mr. Boateng: HM Customs and Excise broke up a laundering plant near Basildon, Essex in February 2002. They seized a total of 61,000 litres of unlaundered and laundered rebated gas oil (red diesel). The rebated gas oil (red diesel) which was being laundered was purchased on the UK mainland.

It is not Customs general practice to comment publicly about the existence or nature of investigations of individuals or companies not yet accused of criminal offences. To do so could risk prejudicing any ongoing inquiries or future criminal proceedings.

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he is taking to stop cross-border smuggling of motor transport fuels into Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [54297]

Mr. Boateng: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Pre-Budget Report document 'Tackling Indirect Tax Fraud' which sets out the Government's action to date in Northern Ireland to tackle oils fraud and to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) on 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 126W.

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what meetings have been held between Ministers or their officials and their Irish counterparts since 1997 to discuss the smuggling of petroleum products into Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [54298]

Mr. Boateng: UK Customs have long enjoyed good relations with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland including the Revenue Commissioners and the Criminal Assets Bureau.

UK and Republic of Ireland Ministers and officials have met regularly during this period to discuss a wide range of issues including oils fraud. Only last October I visited the Revenue Commissioners in the Republic of Ireland and had a very productive meeting with the chairman of the Revenue Commissioners.

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the evidence submitted to HM Customs and Excise by the fuel retail industry on the smuggling of motor fuel oils into Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [54295]

Mr. Boateng: Customs officials have met with representatives from the fuel retail industry on a regular basis and believe that a constructive dialogue has been established at both operational and strategic levels. Customs pay particular attention to evidence provided by the trade bodies in Northern Ireland in assessing the nature of the Northern Ireland oils fraud problems.

Tax Evasion

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much the Department has spent on encouraging members of the public to report tax evasion in each of the last 10 years. [53750]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue puts considerable resource into tackling non-compliance but does not generally hold financial information in a way that allows them to isolate spending over the last 10 years solely and specifically on encouraging members of the public to report tax evasion.

Energy Efficiency

Sue Doughty: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps are being taken to develop economic instruments which may be used to improve household energy efficiency; and if he will make a statement. [53717]

Mr. Boateng: The Government are considering ways in which economic instruments may be used to improve household energy efficiency, consistent with their objective of eliminating fuel poverty and not introducing new taxes on household energy. This work is being taken forward in

the context of the Government's work to develop a White Paper on energy, following the publication of the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit's report "The Energy Review" in February.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the total cost to the Treasury *(a)* has been at the outset of its introduction and *(b)* is projected to be in the next three years of the enhanced capital allowances for investments in energy saving technologies introduced in April 2001; [53736]

(2) what the total cost to the Treasury *(a)* has been at the outset of its introduction and *(b)* is projected in the next three years of the enhanced capital allowances for investments in (i) heat pumps, (ii) radiant and warm air heaters, (iii) solar heaters, (iv) energy efficient refrigerator equipment, (v) compressor equipment and (vi) energy-saving technology investments in assets for leasing. [53715]

Mr. Boateng: Actual costs of the enhanced capital allowances scheme introduced in April 2001 are not yet available. Estimates were published in the FSBR 2001, Appendix A2, p150. Estimates of the annual costs of extending the scheme to include the further energy-saving technologies from April 2002 are, from 2002–03, £5 million, £15 million, £20 million, with the majority of these costs attributed to refrigeration cabinets, heat pumps, and compressor equipment. These figures exclude the costs of extending the entire scheme to assets for leasing from April 2002: these are estimated to be, from 2002–03, £15 million, £20 million, £15 million. All costs are rounded to the nearest £5 million.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer of 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 127–28W, if he will make a statement on *(a)* the management and *(b)* the funding of the targeted programme of support measures for business investing in energy-saving technologies and practices. [53067]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

(a) The Carbon Trust, an independent body grant funded by my Department and the devolved Administrations, will recycle climate change levy funds to industry through a range of programme activity designed to accelerate the take up of cost-effective low-carbon technologies and measures to the non-domestic sector.

The Carbon Trust will shortly take over the management of the enhanced capital allowance scheme, which enables businesses to claim 100 per cent. first year capital allowances on investments in energy saving equipment.

In addition, the Carbon Trust is developing a Low Carbon Innovation Programme that will support new and emerging low-carbon technologies. The Carbon Trust will also take over management of the non-domestic part of the Government's Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme, which provides energy-efficiency advice and information to organisations in the public and private sectors.

(b) The Carbon Trust is funded by my Department and the devolved Administrations from recycled climate change levy receipts and the Government's Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme. This is expected to be up to £50 million a year for this year and next, subject to relevant parliamentary approvals.

The enhanced capital allowance scheme is funded from recycled climate change levy receipts and is worth an estimated £200 million in its first two years (2001–02 and 2002–03), depending on take-up.

Vehicle Emissions

Sue Doughty: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect of changes announced in Budget 2002 in relation to *(a)* fuel duty, *(b)* vehicle excise duty, *(c)* enhanced capital allowances relating to transport and *(d)* changes relating to income tax and NICs free mileage, on individual and total vehicle emissions; and if he will make a statement. [53725]

Mr. Boateng: The assessment of the impact on vehicle emissions of measures announced in Budget 2002 can be found in Table 7.2 of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report. The impacts of these measures are quantified where possible.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Salter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by how much income tax would have to rise if all local government expenditure currently funded via council tax and business rates was transferred to income tax. [53608]

Dawn Primarolo: Projected receipts from business rates and council tax in 2002–03 are shown in Table C7 of the April 2002 Financial Statement and Budget report (HC 592). The direct effects of illustrative changes in income tax are given in table 4 of the "Tax Ready Reckoner and Tax Reliefs" published in November 2001, a copy of which is held in the Library of the House. This table will be updated in the statistics area of the Inland Revenue website on 31 May.

DEFENCE

Colchester Garrison

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the modifications to the Colchester Garrison are on schedule; if they have remained within his Department's estimated budget; and if he will make a statement. [46866]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 April 2002]:* Financial Close, originally planned for December 2000, is now planned for late 2004. This is due to a number of issues, including planning considerations and problems associated with necessary diversions of footpaths. Consequently the completion of construction work has also been delayed from 1st quarter 2004 to Autumn 2008. The financial impact of this delay is under review but I have every reasonable expectation that the project will remain within budget.

Essential work in many areas of the Project Agreement is nearly complete. We are now in the process of negotiating a risk and cost sharing plan to take the project forward, to ensure that these new timescales are not

delayed further. Part of these negotiations will review the current proposed construction programme to ascertain if it is possible to reconfigure the programme to minimise the impact of delay on the provision of Single Living Accommodation.

Armed Forces (Deployment)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Army, *(b)* navy and *(c)* RAF personnel are (i) assigned to operations but not deployed and (ii) are assigned to or deployed on public duties. [53527]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 23 April 2002 (*Official Report*, column 195W).

Around 1,200 Army and 115 RAF personnel are assigned to public duties, mainly in the London Area.

Manning Control

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many soldiers subject to manning control were subsequently offered short-term (S-type) engagements in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement; [54232]

(2) how many soldiers in *(a)* the Army and *(b)* the 3 Battalion, the Parachute Regiment have been subject to manning control in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [54231]

Mr. Ingram: The number of soldiers in the (a) Army and (b) the 3rd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, who have been discharged in each of the last five calendar years following a Manning and Control Point review, is shown in the following table.

Year	*Army*	*3rd Battalion parachute regiment*	*S-type*
1997	231	2	2
1998	175	0	1
1999	93	0	1
2000	66	0	2
2001	47	1	1
2002	3	0	0
Total	615	3	7

The number of such soldiers subsequently offered S-type engagements is not recorded. However, the number who re-engaged on an S-type engagement is also shown separately in the final column above.

Foreign Personnel

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many foreign military personnel, and from which countries, have been involved in military training in the United Kingdom in the last 12 months. [54630]

Mr. Ingram: During the period 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002, 3,925 overseas military personnel were trained at United Kingdom military establishments. A full breakdown of the numbers trained by country is shown in the table.

Overseas military personnel trained in the UK between 1 April and 31 March 2002

Country	*Students trained*
Albania	13
Algeria	2
Argentina	11
Australia	105
Austria	11
Bahamas	2
Bahrain	29
Bangladesh	3
Barbados	1
Belgium	86
Belize	30
Bermuda	14
Botswana	13
Brazil	15
Brunei	182
Bulgaria	10
Canada	357
Chile	6
China	40
Croatia	8
Czech Republic	29
Denmark	34
Egypt	19
El Salvador	1
Estonia	5
Fiji	2
Finland	12
France	49
Gambia	1
Georgia	6
Germany	120
Ghana	8
Greece	47
Guatemala	4
Guyana	6
Hong Kong	2
Hungary	29
Iceland	1
India	17
Indonesia	1
Ireland	107
Israel	13
Italy	164
Jamaica	33
Japan	7
Jordan	90
Kazakhstan	3
Kenya	9
Korea (South)	10
Kyrghistan	1
Kuwait	312
Latvia	17
Lebanon	2
Lithuania	12
Luxembourg	1
Macedonia	7
Malawi	5
Malaysia	17
Malta	2
Moldova	8
Morocco	5
Mozambique	5
Nepal	34
Netherlands	259
New Zealand	38
Nicaragua	0
Nigeria	31
Norway	202
Oman	184
Pakistan	53
Papua New Guinea	3
Paraguay	3

Overseas military personnel trained in the UK between 1 April and 31 March 2002

Country	*Students trained*
Peru	1
Philippines	10
Poland	24
Portugal	39
Qatar	64
Romania	16
Russia	10
Rwanda	1
Saudi Arabia	55
Senegal	15
Sierra Leone	23
Singapore	125
Slovakia	20
Slovenia	7
South Africa	17
Spain	25
Sri Lanka	6
St. Vincent	2
Swaziland	1
Sweden	25
Switzerland	10
Tanzania	9
Thailand	29
Tonga	5
Trinidad and Tobago	6
Turkey	72
Uganda	2
Ukraine	37
United Arab Emirates	108
United States of America	128
Uruguay	5
Yemen	7
Zimbabwe	1
Total students	3,873
Total countries	104

Royal Navy

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many submarines are operational in the Royal Navy. [54642]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) on 26 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 487–88W.

Service Personnel

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 25 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 425W, on service personnel, how many service personnel *(a)* with children and *(b)* without children in (i) the Army, (ii) the Navy and (iii) the RAF are earning under £92.90 per week after tax and national insurance deductions; and if he will make a statement. [54180]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, columns 966–67W.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what pay, conditions of service and pension rights are offered to recruits from Commonwealth countries that differ from those offered to UK-born recruits; and if he will make a statement. [54315]

Mr. Ingram: Unlike Gurkhas who are recruited in accordance with the 1947 Tri-Partite Agreement (TPA) between the Governments of India, Nepal and the UK, recruits from Commonwealth countries are employed as individuals and fully integrated into the armed forces. With the exception of the following allowances, recruits from Commonwealth countries have the same pay, conditions of service and pension rights as United Kingdom-born recruits. The allowances that are specifically designed to meet the needs of recruits from the Commonwealth are:

Commonwealth Enlisted Compassionate Travel Scheme

Domiciled Collective Leave Scheme.

Gurkhas

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will estimate the additional annual cost to his Department if Gurkhas were offered the same pay, conditions of service and pensions as UK armed forces personnel; and if he will make a statement; [54316]

(2) what plans he has to ensure that the conditions of service, pay and pension right of Gurkha soldiers are commensurate with the pay and conditions and pensions of other UK armed forces personnel; and if he will make a statement; [54314]

(3) what the cost to his Department was of pensions for former Gurkha soldiers in each of the last five financial years; if he will estimate in each case the cost to his Department if Gurkha pensions were paid at the rates paid to UK members of the armed forces; and if he will make a statement; [54318]

(4) if he will estimate the cost to his Department if surviving former Gurkhas who are drawing pensions related to their service in the UK armed forces were paid in a lump sum additional moneys in order to make up the difference between what they have been drawing in pension and what they would have received if they had the same pension rights as UK members of the armed forces; and if he will make a statement. [54317]

Mr. Ingram: Gurkhas are recruited into the Army in accordance with the 1947 Tri-Partite Agreement (TPA) between the Governments of India, Nepal and the UK. This is the basic instrument that enables both the UK and India to raise and maintain formed Gurkha Regiments and aims to ensure that both Armies are able to recruit on an equal basis. As a result Gurkhas Terms and Conditions of Service, including basic pay and pensions, remain linked to those of the Indian Army. We have no plans to review these arrangements.

There have, however, been significant enhancements to Gurkha conditions of service in recent years. Gurkhas are now paid a cost of living allowance known as Universal Addition for service in all theatres outside Nepal. This allowance is uplifted annually to ensure that the combination of Gurkha basic pay at Indian Army rates and Universal Addition brings their remuneration broadly into line with the net pay of comparable British Service personnel. These arrangements have been in place since 1997.

The approximate cost to the Ministry of Defence of the pensions paid to former Gurkha soldiers in each of the last five financial years is as follows:

1997–98: £5.3 million

1998–99: £6 million

1999–2000: £8.2 million

2000–01: £23.9 million

2001–02: £26 million (includes forecasted expenditure).

The significant increase in expenditure for the financial year 2000–01 reflects the outcome of a comprehensive examination of Gurkha pensions conducted by the Ministry of Defence at that time. This led to all Gurkha pensions being at least doubled and they now compare favourably to professional salaries in Nepal, where all Gurkhas are discharged. The vast majority of Gurkha pensioners, who continue to be entitled to an immediate pension after only 15 year's service, welcomed the outcome of the examination. British service personnel discharged at this point of service would receive no pension until they reached the age of 60. We remain of the view that the arguments for an immediate pension on discharge in Nepal are compelling.

Because of the different terms of service and career structures that apply, it is very difficult to make the direct comparisons that are sought. The cost of transposing British service personnel pay and conditions of service to Gurkhas cannot be computed accurately, and not without incurring disproportionate costs.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Gurkhas are in service in the UK armed forces; and if he will make a statement. [54312]

Mr. Ingram: As at 1 April 2002, there are 3,449 Gurkhas serving in the British Army. They serve in a variety of roles, mainly in the infantry but also with significant numbers of engineers, signals and logistics specialists. We expect Gurkha manning to remain at around this level for the foreseeable future.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many former Gurkhas drawing an armed forces pension are resident in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* Nepal and *(c)* elsewhere; and if he will make a statement. [54313]

Mr. Ingram: Residency details for former Gurkhas drawing an armed forces pension are not held. Data regarding the location in which payments are made are set out in the table.

Location from which paid[1]	*Number of pensions paid*[2]
United Kingdom	14
Nepal	26,881
Elsewhere	206

Notes:

[1] Pensioners may reside in a different location.

[2] Includes all types of Gurkha pensions—normal, disability and family.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British armed forces are stationed in Sierra Leone. [54636]

Mr. Ingram: We currently have some 360 shore-based military personnel deployed in Sierra Leone, supported by the Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessel Sir Geraint, and we will maintain our presence at that level over the period of presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2002. We are also contributing 15 military observers and seven headquarters staff to UNAMSIL, the UN operation in Sierra Leone.

RAF Pilots

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many successful applicants for RAF pilot officer have been unable to secure a flying training position in each of the past three years. [54885]

Mr. Ingram: Pilot Officer is a rank and it covers all RAF officer branches not just pilots and navigators. Potential pilots and navigators are selected for the General Duties Branch and applicants are recruited as either a Pilot Officer, Flying Officer or exceptionally as a Flight Lieutenant.

Usually all pilot or navigator applicants that have been successful at Initial Officer Training are offered a flying training place. On rare occasions there may be exceptions. Withdrawal could be for a range of reasons, such as personal, medical or issues of conduct. We do not keep a specific count of these instances because they are infrequent. A trawl of our records for the last three years identified only one officer that was unable to take up flying training. All other officers in the period would have been offered or are in the process of being offered a flying training place.

SCOTLAND

Gaelic Broadcasting

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on the future of Gaelic broadcasting following consultations on the Milne Committee report and the publication of the draft Communications Bill. [55066]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government has published today the draft Communications Bill and an accompanying policy document on a number of matters, including Gaelic broadcasting. We plan to secure improvements in the current delivery of service in various ways. We propose to build on the strengths of the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee by extending its representative base and by giving it a new statutory power to plan strategically for development of the service. The policy document indicates also our intention that I will assume a power of approval for appointments to the new committee as part of improved accountability procedures. We are considering within the Spending Review the scope for some additional investment to support these and other changes. Urgent talks convened by my Department will now begin on the detail of the proposed committee role and on the possibility of creating a more unified structure in the oversight and transmission of Gaelic programmes.

The Milne Committee recommendations have helped to focus on the need for overhaul of the current structures but we do not agree that the scale of change and extra resourcing they proposed is feasible or justified. I believe

our policy intentions represent a constructive response to meeting some of the Gaelic speaking community's aspirations for a better co-ordinated service. We look forward to working with the community's representatives and with the broadcasting interests to make it happen.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

BSE

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has for additional testing of sheep in relation to possible BSE infection; and what representations she has received from the Food Standards Agency regarding the adequacy of present research. [8294]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 18 October 2001]:* Because of the difficulties of collecting sheep brain material that is in a suitable condition for strain typing by conventional bioassay in mice, and because of the length of time it takes to get the results from such studies, work is in hand to develop and evaluate molecular methods of distinguishing BSE from scrapie. SEAC has recently endorsed a programme of work at the Veterinary Laboratory Agency which includes a statistical analysis of the robustness of molecular approaches, retrospective testing of 1,400 sheep brains which were positive for a TSE in the VLA archive and prospective sampling of the brains from all clinically reported suspects which prove to be positive for a TSE.

I received a letter from Sir John Krebs concerning this issue and wrote to him on 24 October 2001 to explain the position.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when copies of *(a)* the report of the Rural Task Force and *(b)* Lord Haskins' report were made available to the media. [9922]

Margaret Beckett: I regret that this reply has been overlooked. Copies of both the report of the Rural Task Force and Lord Haskins' report were made available to the media at a press conference held in my Department on 18 October 2001—the day of publication.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what instructions regarding preparations for foot and mouth were issued to the Meat Hygiene Service between 1 December and 1 February 2001; and if she will make a statement. [52312]

Margaret Beckett: No new or special instructions were issued.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what effect foot and mouth had on the Krebs experiment. [53911]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Field operations associated with the trial were suspended during the foot and mouth disease outbreak because of the disease risk posed by operatives on agricultural land. The Independent Scientific Group (ISG) has considered the impact of FMD on the trial and advised that the delivery of results will only be delayed by three to four months to 2004–05.

Sustainable Development

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps her Department is taking to develop goals and targets to confront negative environmental economic and social impact of development within and outside the European region. [44371]

Mr. Meacher: The Department is engaged in a wide range of regional and international processes to combat the principal threats to sustainable development. Many of these are referred to in recent answers to my hon. Friend. As far as the European Union is concerned, the Government has strongly supported the recent agreement by the European Council on a sustainable development strategy for the EU which sets high-level objectives and targets and aims to provide a more coherent framework for the EU's policies. This strategy is expected to be extended at the Seville European Council to cover the EU's external responsibilities, notably on trade, aid and governance.

Correspondence

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will reply to the letter dated 3 December 2001 from the hon. Member for Leominster on behalf of constituents Mr. and Mrs. Pledge about liquid petroleum gas. [48975]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 15 April 2002]:* I am sorry for the long delay in replying. You will be aware of the difficulties DEFRA faced last year in processing correspondence, following the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak, and the creation of the new Department. Steady progress is being made towards eliminating the backlog of cases, and performance on incoming letters was considerably improved. I can assure you that all efforts will continue to be devoted to this area until the problems have been fully resolved.

Your constituents letter raises issues on the use of liquid petroleum gas, which is a matter for the Department of Trade and Industry. The correspondence was sent to the DTI on 25 April, for them to reply direct.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the Parliamentary Secretary intends to reply to the letter dated 25 January from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan regarding the monitoring of quota uptake. [50071]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 17 April 2002]:* I am sorry for the delay in reply to the hon. Member's letter. A reply was sent on 18 April.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many letters received by her Department since June 2001 received a substantive response in *(a)* less than four weeks, *(b)* between four and six weeks, *(c)* between six weeks and two months and *(d)* over two months; and if she will make a statement. [51468]

Mr. Morley: The Department suffered severe disruption last year due to allocating top priority to defeating the Foot and Mouth epidemic. Furthermore the sheer volume of correspondence following the creation of DEFRA had a major impact on the Department's performance, resulting in a large backlog of letters. Mechanisms are now in place to prevent any further recurrence of the problems experienced, and a range of work is in hand to tighten both quality and the speed of our response to Member's letters. The events of last year were exceptional, and their impact is still being felt across a range of Departmental activity.

Letters answered from 8 June 2001 to 18 April 2002

Number of letters which received a response	
In less than four weeks	2,689
Between four and six weeks	1,078
Between six weeks and two months	1,086
Over two months	2,471

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will reply to the question tabled by the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland on 12 February, Ref. 36001. [51955]

Mr. Morley: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him on 17 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 930W.

National Insurance

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the impact on *(a)* employers in rural areas and *(b)* agricultural and related industries of the increase in national insurance contributions announced in the Budget. [51984]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 23 April 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith) on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 544–45W.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her estimate is of the cost in the next 12 months of the budget changes to employers' national insurance contributions to (1) *(a)* her Department, *(b)* agencies of her Department and *(c)* local government carrying out functions within the responsibility of her Department; [52071]

(2) the *(a)* agriculture, *(b)* food processing businesses, *(c)* retail food outlets and *(d)* horticulture. [52072]

Mr. Morley: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith) on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 544W.

Food Labelling

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to the letter of the Minister for the Environment, Ref. 162822, of 26 March 2002, what the outcome is of the discussions with interested parties on EU food labelling rules requiring a GM presence to be indicated. [51179]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* In my letter to the hon. Member I noted that current EU food labelling rules are based on a 1 per cent. threshold for incidental GM presence. My reference to discussions with interested parties related to the issue of how GM and non-GM crops might co-exist at farm level. My officials have had preliminary talks on this with various stakeholders. These revealed a wide range of views and we are now considering how to take the matter forward. The Food Standards Agency lead on the specific issue of food labelling.

Packaging Waste

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for what reasons the Directive on Packaging and Packaging Waste sets different targets for different materials in the packaging chain; and if she will make a statement. [53212]

Mr. Meacher: The EC Directive on Packaging and Packaging Waste 94/62/EC sets targets for overall recovery, recycling and material-specific recycling of packaging waste. The first targets to be met under this Directive were due in 2001 and were:

Between 50 per cent. and 65 per cent. of packaging waste to be recovered;

Between 25 per cent. and 45 per cent. to be recycled; and

15 per cent. of each packaging material to be recycled.

Material-specific targets for recycling ensure that at least a minimum level of recycling is carried out in each major material and allow those involved in the collection and recovery infrastructure to plan ahead. In the Commission's proposed revision to the Directive, new differentiated material-specific targets are proposed. The levels proposed are based on work for the Commission by the environmental consultancies, RDC and PIRA.

Bovine TB

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will to make a further announcement about a vaccine for bovine TB; and if she will make a statement. [53247]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* TB in cattle is one of the most difficult animal health problems we face and the increase in its incidence is continuing to give considerable concern. The Government have, with advice from the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG), put in place a wide-ranging research programme to tackle the disease. An important element of the programme is vaccine research on which the Government are spending £1.4 million annually. Although the sequencing of the "M. bovis" genome announced recently is an important step forward, the ISG has cautioned that it is likely to be 10 years or so before a successful vaccine is found.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many farms have had animal movement restriction orders placed on them due to bovine TB in each year since 1980. [53760]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Data on the number of herds under restriction each year is available only from 1996. Data from ealier years could not be collated except at disproportionate cost.

	Number of herds under restriction
1996	1,603
1997	1,657
1998	2,109
1999	2,400
2000	2,516
2001	1,731

Notes:

1. Data from 1996 to 2001 taken from DEFRA website www.defra.gov.uk. Figures from 1999 are provisional.

2. Data for 2001 are not comparable with other years. During the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, TB testing was significantly reduced.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the latest research she has commissioned on the linkage between bovine TB and badgers. [53910]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The Government have, with advice from the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG), put in place a wide-ranging research programme into bovine TB. The programme is described in the ISG's reports which are available on DEFRA's website at http://defraweb/animal/tb/.

An important part of the research programme is the badger field trial which recommenced from 1 May 2002. The trial is designed to evaluate, once and for all, the extent to which badgers contribute to cattle TB and the effects of badger culling on the incidence of the disease. It will provide data on the prevalence of TB in badgers and the spatial distribution of infected badgers and social groups, its relationship to population density, social group size and structure, geographical and physical environmental factors and, most importantly, the spatial relationship between TB in cattle and badgers.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the average interval was between tests for TB in dairy cattle over the last 12 months; what the longest time recorded was; and what the optimum is. [53909]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The information requested is not available except at undue cost.

Routine bovine TB test frequencies for cattle herds are set at the parish level. Parishes with historically higher numbers of confirmed incidents of bovine TB are placed on annual or biennial test regimes. Parishes with low or no disclosed incidents of bovine TB have a test frequency set at once every three or four years. Dairy herds in England and Wales retailing raw milk or supplying raw milk for the manufacture of unpasteurised dairy products are subjected to annual TB testing regardless of the default testing interval for the parish in which they are located.

In addition herds disclosed as having incidents of bovine TB undergo more frequent testing to check that infection has been cleared so that movement restrictions can be lifted. Further tests are carried out at 6 and 12 months after the removal of movement restrictions to check for recrudescence. If no further TB incidents are reported during this period, the herds return to the default frequency of testing set for the parish.

TB testing was heavily disrupted during the foot and mouth disease outbreak and a significant backlog of overdue tests has built up, equivalent to a quarter of all GB herds. This is being tackled by the state veterinary service.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many herds of cattle were overdue their six or 12-month test for bovine TB in each of the last 12 months; how many herds are overdue their six or 12-month test for bovine TB; when the backlog of bovine TB testing will be cleared; and if she will make a statement. [54492]

Mr. Morley: Raw data on overdue six and twelve month bovine TB tests are only available from December 2001, when testing resumed after the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak. The figures for December 2001 to March 2002 are set out as follows:

Month	Overdue 6–12 month bovine TB tests
December 2001	1,369
January 2002	1,289
February 2002	1,261
March 2002	1,077

We cannot say yet when the backlog of overdue TB tests will be cleared.

Energy Efficiency

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact on carbon dioxide emissions of the freeze in the rate of the Climate Change Levy announced in the Budget. [53735]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

The environment impact of the freeze in the rates of the climate change levy is set out in table 7.2 of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the *(a)* past and *(b)* future impact on carbon dioxide emissions of the work of the Carbon Trust, broken down into (i) the Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme, (ii) the Environment and Energy Helpline, (iii) Administration of the Enhanced Capital Allowance Scheme for investments in energy-saving technologies, (iv) the Low Carbon Innovation Programme and (v) other programmes or schemes. [53729]

Mr. Meacher: Previous assessments of the Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme (EEBPp) including the Energy Helpline up to 2000 have indicated that carbon savings of around 4 million tonnes of carbon per year were achieved. Work is currently being carried out to assess the impact of the scheme for the last financial year. Management of EEBPp will be transferred to the Carbon Trust.

The Enhanced Capital Allowance scheme to encourage take up of energy saving technologies was set up in April last year and it is too early to estimate the extent to which business has taken advantage of the scheme. The Carbon Trust will shortly take over the administration and promotion of the scheme and propose to carry out an impact assessment of the first year of its operation.

The Carbon Trust is developing a Low Carbon Innovation Programme (LCIP) that will support the development and commercialisation of new and emerging technologies. The Carbon Trust will put into place impact assessment measures to monitor the impact of LCIP and its other programmes.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when her Department will consult on the treatment of waste oil used as a fuel; and if she will make a statement. [53713]

Mr. Meacher: Her Majesty's Customs and Excise will be consulting shortly on the possible ending of the excise duty exemption for waste oil used as a fuel. My officials are working closely with Customs and Treasury colleagues on this issue.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact on carbon dioxide emissions of *(a)* an exemption from the climate change levy of fuel used in dual-use purposes and *(b)* extending relief to certain processes which compete with those benefiting from the dual-use or non-fuel use exemptions; and if she will make a statement. [53730]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

The exemption from the climate change levy for fuel used in dual-use purposes has been part of the design of the levy since it was launched in April 2001. Consequently this exemption has been taken into account in all estimates made of carbon savings from the levy.

The proposal to extend relief to certain processes which compete with those benefiting from the dual-use or non-fuel use exemptions is not expected to have a significant effect on carbon savings. Most of the processes eligible for this further relief are covered by a negotiated agreement with DEFRA, under which the operators have agreed to energy efficiency targets. However, the exemption will give a further incentive to recycling processes which are more environmentally friendly than the alternative primary production processes.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact on carbon dioxide emissions of the extension of the 5 per cent. rate of VAT to apply to the grant-funded installation of *(a)* factory-insulated hot water tanks, *(b)* micro-combined heat and power and *(c)* renewable energy heating systems in the homes of the less well-off. [53722]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

As set out in table 7.2 of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report, the reduced rate of VAT on the installation of energy-saving materials is expected to save around 0.1 million tonnes carbon by 2010. The extension of the reduced rate in Budget 2002 will lead to further small savings of carbon. The reduced rate will enable further installations of the qualifying measures to be made under grant-funded programmes in homes of the less well-off. By improving energy efficiency, the measures will enable householders to improve comfort levels for the same expenditure on energy as well as to reduce carbon emissions.

Coalbed Methane Gas

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact on *(a)* air quality and *(b)* greenhouse gas emission targets of the venting of coalbed methane gas released by drilling and fracturing of the coalseam to the atmosphere; and if she will make a statement. [53793]

Mr. Meacher: Methane vented from working coal mines is included in the UK National Inventory of Greenhouse Gas Emissions. For 2000, methane emissions from working coal mines was 5.04 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, less than one per cent. of the UK's total Greenhouse Gas Emissions. At current atmospheric levels methane does not have adverse air quality impacts.

Deliberate drilling of undisturbed seams, fracturing the coal and pumping can be used to produce methane. Using this gas would be similar to using natural gas, though not absolutely identical because the composition differs slightly. The emissions consequences of natural gas burning are well-understood.

Nitrate

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will *(a)* make a statement on the mg/litre threshold for permissible nitrate levels contained in the Nitrate Vulnerable Zone Directive and *(b)* publish the Environment Agency's data on nitrate levels in rivers located in the Macclesfield parliamentary constituency. [54041]

Mr. Meacher: The information is as follows:

a) The Nitrates Directive requires identification and protection of surface waters that contain, or could contain if action is not taken, 50mg/litre of nitrate. This threshold is based on standards laid down in the Drinking Water Directive (75/440/EEC).

b) The Environment Agency's monitoring data on nitrate concentrations in rivers located in the Macclesfield parliamentary constituency has been made available in the Library of the House.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the Environment Agency's data on nitrate levels in rivers located in the Macclesfield parliamentary constituency; what comparison she has made of these data with the 50mg/litre threshold contained in the Nitrate Vulnerable Zone Directive; for what reason farmland located in the Macclesfield constituency is included in a nitrate vulnerable zone; and if she will make a statement. [54042]

Mr. Meacher: There are currently no existing nitrate vulnerable zones (NVZs) in the Macclesfield parliamentary constituency.

The Nitrates Directive (91/676/EEC) requires action programmes for reduction of agricultural nitrate pollution to waters to be applied either throughout the whole territory (Option 1 in our recent consultation for England) or within specific NVZs (Option 2).

Under Option 1, farmers throughout the whole of Macclesfield parliamentary constituency would need to apply Action Programme measures.

Under Option 2, an indicative map showing the location of possible new NVZ areas, as identified in an initial assessment, was published in the consultation document "How should England implement the 1991 Nitrates Directive", in December 2001. Parts of the Macclesfield parliamentary constituency were included in these areas because they were parts of river catchments which contained one or more monitoring points where nitrate levels have been shown, through statistical analysis of the data, to have exceeded the levels specified in the Nitrates Directive.

We are refining our assessment of these failing monitoring points to take account of data anomalies and long-term nitrate concentration trends. We are also carrying out more accurate mapping work to identify precisely which parts of each catchment would require designation as NVZs. As was explained in the consultation document, such refinements are expected to alter some of the possible NVZ boundaries illustrated in the consultation document.

A decision on how the Government intends to implement the Nitrate Directive will be announced in due course.

GM Crops

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the grid references are of locations in which T-25 genetically modified maize *(a)* has been and *(b)* is the subject of field crop trials; and if she will make a statement. [53815]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Listed are the grid references of the locations in which T-25 maize *(a)* has been grown in the Farm Scale Evaluation (FSE) trials in 1999 (the pilot year of the trials), 2000 and 2001 and *(b)* is proposed for the FSE trials this year. This and further background information on the FSE trials is on our website at www.defra.gov.uk/environment/fse/location/index.

1999

SK 979 911
SU 672 628
TG 090 179
TL 101 999

2000

SE 442 409
SJ 356 692
SJ 570 384
SJ 619 473
SK 971 586
SK 979 907
SO 566 475
ST 587 164
TA 263 382
TL 118 130
TM 051 224
TM 100 879

2001

SE 450 412
SJ 362 678
SJ 570 384
SJ 603 210
SJ 619 473
SJ 680 265
SJ 697 862
SK 959 902
SO 566 478
SO 915 564
SU 377 977
SU 748 692
SY 653 849
SY 675 847
SY 680 822
SY 681 836
TA 018 008
TA 224 374
TG 031 134
TG 089 169
TG 092 175
TM 051 221
TM 056 221
TM 068 897
TM 106 873

2002

NZ 206 363
SE 448 422
SJ 573 381
SJ 602 214
SJ 619 473
SJ 683 254
SJ 714 870
SK 963 898
SO 556 486
SO 561 479
SO 915 565
SP 154 403
ST 587 164
ST 785 091
ST 813 082
SU 362 990
SU 748 692
SY 667 857
SY 669 864
SY 680 822
SY 681 836
SY 764 938
TA 020 010

TA 225 374
TF 040 173
TF 195 974
TF 934 241
TG 090 173
TM 051 221
TM 068 897
TM 106 873
TM 168 215
TQ 985 243.

Marine Stewardship

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will publish the Marine Stewardship Report. [54868]

Mr. Meacher: The first Marine Stewardship Report—Safeguarding Our Seas: A Strategy for the Conservation and Sustainable Development of our Marine Environment—was published on 1 May. Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

Aggregates Levy

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she *(a)* has made and *(b)* plans to make of the impact of the aggregates levy on (i) the development and use of alternative materials and (ii) efficiency in the use of virgin aggregate; and if she will make a statement. [53723]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

The higher price of aggregates will provide an incentive to develop and use alternative materials and make more efficient use of primary aggregate.

The levy will be subject to environmental evaluation in due course. Given that the levy was only introduced on 1 April 2002 it is currently too early to assess its impact.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Equipment Leasing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the equipment leasing arrangements entered into by his Department in each of the last four years; and what the cost is to public funds in each case. [39087]

Jane Kennedy: The information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Television Sets

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* analogue and *(b)* integrated digital television sets his Department has purchased in each of the last 24 months; and if he will make a statement. [38175]

Jane Kennedy: As the information requested is not held centrally, I could provide an answer only at disproportionate cost.

All officials in the Northern Ireland Office are aware that they are expected to find the most cost-effective solution to meet the desired needs in regards to the purchase of television sets as with all other procurements.

Volunteers

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many members of his staff in each of the past two years have been granted a day's paid leave to work as a volunteer; and if he will make a statement. [39738]

Jane Kennedy: The Northern Ireland Office has a special leave policy that allows for paid leave for voluntary work. We do not record centrally the numbers of staff on this kind of leave, as it is a matter dealt with by local management.

All staff in the Northern Ireland Office are encouraged to undertake voluntary work, training and learning opportunities as part of their personal and career development.

Departmental Functions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the functions of his Department that have been *(a)* market tested and *(b)* outsourced in each of the last five years, specifying the (i) money saving and (ii) percentage saving in each case. [43002]

Jane Kennedy: No functions of the Northern Ireland Office have been market tested or outsourced to which you refer.

New Deal

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people employed by his Department under the New Deal for Young People in each of the last four years have subsequently *(a)* found unsubsidised employment for more than 13 weeks and *(b)* returned to jobseeker's allowance or other benefits. [45080]

Jane Kennedy: The NIO (and its agencies) have employed seven people under the New Deal for Young People scheme in the last four years and of these seven, six have found unsubsidised employment. We are unable to confirm the position with the other appointee.

Police Ombudsman

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the breakdown is by outcome of cases dealt with by the police ombudsman. [43892]

Jane Kennedy: The police ombudsman advises that the outcome of cases received since the opening of the Police Ombudsman's Office on 6 November 2000 until 1 May 2002 is as follows:

Closed complaint outcomes

Outcome	*Number*	*Per cent.*
Non-cooperation by complainant	2,193	53
Withdrawn by complainant	359	9
Not substantiated after investigation	245	6
Closed for other reason[1]	962	23
Informal resolution[2]	379	9
Total	4,138	100

Status of complaints still open

Status	*Number*	*Per cent.*
Under investigation	848	67
Further inquiries being made[1]	243	19
Sent for informal resolution[2]	120	10
With DPP or at disciplinary proceedings	44	4
Total	1,255	100

[1] Other reasons for closure include complaints being repetitive, vexatious, incapable of investigation, outside remit, ill-founded, etc.
[2] Complaints settled by informal resolution are minor non-criminal and non-disciplinary matters. They are settled by a meeting between the complainant and the police.
[3] Complaints which are subject to further inquiries by police ombudsman's staff so that appropriate means of dealing with them can be identified.
[4] Complaints sent to the police to arrange a meeting with the complainant so that a resolution may be achieved.

Criminal Damage

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the cost has been of criminal damage to his Department's buildings in each of the last four years. [44824]

Jane Kennedy: The information you have requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the *(a)* Police Authority and *(b)* Royal Ulster Constabulary targets for reducing sickness absence by police officers and civilians were met by March 2001. [45986]

Jane Kennedy: The targets for the financial year 2000–01 for police and civilian staff were 16 days and 12 days respectively. These targets were not met as the average sickness absences were 23.11 days and 15.40 days respectively.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he estimates the target for reducing average sickness absence rates for departmental staff in 2001–02 will be achieved. [45993]

Jane Kennedy: I am confident that measures are in place to meet the target for reducing average sickness absence rates for departmental staff in 2001–02.

Saville Inquiry

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the staff serving the Saville Inquiry and give *(a)* the annual full cost of their employment to his Department, *(b)* their salaries, *(c)* their daily expense allowance and *(d)* the collective costs of their travel to date. [46022]

Mr. Browne: As at 9 April 2002, 35 staff serve the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. This figure includes administrative staff, solicitors and paralegals, but excludes Counsel to the Inquiry.

Thirty-one of these staff are paid as civil servants according to the NIO pay scales as follows.

Grade	*Number*	*Salary range (£)*
SCS	3	Covers three pay bands: 44,038—69,178 48,552—77,869 53,534—87,598
A	1	30,250—48,750
B1	1	22,750—34,325
B2	8	18,500—27,750
C	8	14,000—23,750
D1	5	11,000—15,250
D2	5	10,000—13,000
Total	31	

[1] 2001–02 rates

In addition to those listed previously, there are currently two Grade C and two Grade D1 temporary staff who have been employed through an agency.

The total salary costs, including agency costs, to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry Secretariat was £3,493,332 as at 9 April 2002. This can be broken down for each year as follows:

	£
1997–98	5,479
1998–99	452,362
1999–2000	738,758
2000–01	1,067,206
2001–02	1,229,527

These costs are inclusive of employer's national insurance and pensions contributions and, in the case of agency staff, VAT.

Staff expenses are essentially subsistence allowances. These are calculated in line with the rates paid to NIO civil servants and differ according to the individual's circumstances. Listing each would be possible only at disproportionate cost. The sum of subsistence allowances paid to Inquiry staff was £241,410 as at 9 April 2002.

The total travel costs of Inquiry staff was £712,913 to 9 April 2002. Most of this sum relates to travel between London and Northern Ireland.

The cost of providing accommodation for these individuals was £363,586 to 9 April 2002. Most of this sum relates to accommodation in Londonderry.

Prisoner Costs

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by what percentage the differential between the cost per prisoner place in Northern Ireland and that in England and Wales has changed in 2001–02. [45992]

Jane Kennedy: The cost per prisoner place for 2001–02 will not be available for either Northern Ireland or England and Wales until the figures are collated after the completion of the financial year.

However it is expected that NIPS will achieve its key performance target "to reduce the differential in cost per prisoner place between N. Ireland and England and Wales by 5.7 per cent by March 2002".

Civil Servants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the 2001 target for women's participation in the Northern Ireland Civil Service was met on time. [45987]

Jane Kennedy: In its 2001 Departmental Report, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) declared its continued commitment to progressing Home Civil Service (HCS) and Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) service-wide targets for increased representation of women in the Senior Civil Service.

The 2001 target of 15 per cent. for NICs staff has already been surpassed since females currently make up 16.7 per cent. of the Senior Civil Service within the NICS group. Women presently make up 13 per cent. of the NCS Senior Civil Service group and, taking account of current trends, we would anticipate reaching the 2002 target of 15 per cent. by the end of the year.

Women are well represented in the NIO and currently make up 58.6 per cent of the organisation but, as with other Government departments, they are under-represented at the senior grades. The NIO wishes women to be fairly represented at *all* levels within the organisation and, as an indication of our commitment to this aim, we have actively progressed targets for HCS and NICS staff in the Department.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he expects the 2002 target for women's participation in the Home Civil Service to be met on time. [45989]

Dr. John Reid: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I provided to Question ref. 45987.

Code of Practice (Victims)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the review of the Code of Practice for victims was conducted in 2001 as undertaken in the 2001 Departmental report; and what the outcome was. [45996]

Mr. Browne: The performance of the commitments incorporated in the Code have been monitored against the standards set out in the Code. A revised version of the Code has recently been made available including information on the new arrangements for getting compensation.

Performance Targets

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what new initiatives his Department has taken in 2001–02 to assist in achieving its Public Service Agreement targets. [47185]

Jane Kennedy: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 12 April 2002.

Motor Fuel

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many UK-duty paid litres of motor fuel products have been sold in Northern Ireland in each year since 1997. [54293]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

HM Customs and Excise does not collect information on the destination of diesel or petrol after it passes the duty point, which is normally a refinery or storage facility.

Estimates of the volumes of oils delivered in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom are published by the Department of Trade and Industry in the Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics Table 3.9.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Appointments

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will list all the outstanding appointments that *(a)* she and *(b)* Ministers in her Department have to make, stating for each one (i) the date on which her Department became aware of the vacancy and (ii) when she expects an appointment to be made. [48377]

Tessa Jowell *[holding answer 9 April 2002]:* Details of outstanding appointments are set out in the table, indicating current vacant posts. These do not include appointments which have been left open for operational reasons. For the majority of outstanding appointments, my Department would have been aware of the possibility of a vacancy occurring when the decision was made not to reappoint the existing post holder. This is usually six months before their term of appointment ends and we aim to complete the process to identify a successor within four months. In some instances, however, post holders have unexpectedly chosen to stand down before their terms are due to end.

DCMS outstanding board appointments as at 31 March 2002

Body	*Vacant position*	*Date vacancy arose*	*Expected date of appointment 2002*
Advisory Committee on Historic Wreck Sites	Chair	5 October 2001	June
	Member	31 March 2002	July
Alcohol Education and Research Council	Member	31 March 2001	June
British Broadcasting Corporation	Member	19 December 2001	July
The Community Fund	Member	17 January 2002	July
Horserace Totalisator	Member	31 March 2002	July
Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester	Member	8 February 2001	May

DCMS outstanding board appointments as at 31 March 2002

Body	*Vacant position*	*Date vacancy arose*	*Expected date of appointment 2002*
National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside	Member	New post	May
Resource	Member	30 September 2001	July
	Member	New post	July
Theatres Trust	Member	5 April 2001	June

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on what subjects and on which dates her Department has recently consulted organisations representing young people; and if she will list such organisations. [52506]

Mr. Caborn: Many of the Department's sponsored bodies with which DCMS regularly liaise and consult represent, among other groups, the interests of young people. The information requested is not held centrally and can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The Department is committed to the new Core Principles for the Involvement of Children and Young People, published by the Minister for Young People in November 2001. The Department will shortly be publishing an action plan setting out for the first time how it will implement these principles to extend the participation of children and young people in the design, delivery and evaluation of policies and services that affect them.

National Insurance

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the cost to *(a)* community and amateur sports clubs and *(b)* the fitness industry of the proposed increase in national insurance contributions. [52759]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* It is estimated that the changes to employers national insurance contributions announced in the Budget will increase the wages costs of community amateur sports clubs and the fitness industry by 0.7 per cent. on average next year.

Tourism

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what her estimate is of the changes that took place in real terms in income of the British tourism industry in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [54014]

Dr. Howells: The estimated value of tourism expenditure for the UK in real terms (1999 prices) is:

(a) 1999: £73.1 billion

(b) 2000: £73.3 billion

(c) 2001: £72.1 billion.

Information is not available in the form requested because the basis of calculation for the UK Tourism Survey was changed in 2000 and not all figures for January to March 2002 are yet available.

Commonwealth Games

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what has been the total public expenditure for each financial stage, by *(a)* Government, *(b)* Sport England, *(c)* the National Lottery and *(d)* central Government funding bodies, to build the stadium and infrastructure required to host the Commonwealth games in Manchester. [53796]

Mr. Caborn: Sport England's capital expenditure is detailed in the table, all of which is lottery funding.

£ million

Capital facilities (lottery)	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*[1]	*Sport England grant*[1]
City of Manchester Stadium	0	0	10	56.1	10.9	77
Sportcity non stadium facilities—English Institute of Sport	0	0	0	9.4	5.6	15
Belle Vue	0	0	0	0	2.9	2.9
Bisley	0	0	4.6	1.3	0.1	6
Manchester Aquatics Centre	6.4	8.9	6.7	0	0	21.9
Bolton Arena	1.2	1.4	7.2	1.8	0.2	11.7
Total	—	—	—	—	—	134.5

[1] Expected

In terms of the wider infrastructure necessary for the games, the Northwest Development Agency has contributed £10.66 million and English Partnerships £0.3 million, for the regeneration of the Ashton Canal Corridor, highways and footways reconstruction, and works on the station to stadium shuttle route.

In addition there are plans for spending a further £0.7 million on the physical infrastructure at the games' village, and at a number of other venues. This money will come from the additional £105 million in games' funding from Sport England, Government and Manchester city council that was announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 2 July 2001.

Football League Clubs

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the economic contribution of Football League clubs to the *(a)* local and *(b)* national economy. [53884]

Mr. Caborn: Nationwide football league clubs make significant contributions to their local economies, both directly by providing employment and indirectly by stimulating the activities of local businesses. The wider contribution of the Nationwide League, and football more generally, to the national economy cannot be quantified but should be considered alongside football's substantial non-financial contribution to society.

Sports Clubs

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what help she is giving community and amateur sports clubs in applying for the tax reliefs announced in the Budget. [54121]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a package of tax reliefs for community amateur sports clubs in his Budget statement on 17 April. This is included in the Finance Bill.

Community amateur sports clubs are now able to apply for the tax and other financial benefits of charitable status, which include mandatory 80 per cent. tax relief. I announced the publication of improved Charity Commission guidance for sport on 17 April. Clubs considering applying for registered charity status will be able to receive guidance and information from a regional Sport England advice network, to be established very shortly.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how the money from the Capital Modernisation Fund to provide new or refurbished community sports facilities will be allocated. [54122]

Mr. Caborn: The money allocated from the Capital Modernisation Fund is excellent news for sport. The Government will use it in partnership with Sport England and the governing bodies of sport to enhance community sports facilities across the country. Detailed allocation plans will be developed over the next few weeks.

Olympic Games

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions she has held with UK Sport and the Greater London Authority regarding a future London Olympic bid. [54123]

Mr. Caborn: The decision on whether or not to launch a bid for the Olympic games is a matter principally for the British Olympic Association which has yet to decide whether to make a bid for the 2012 games. I have not discussed a bid with UK Sport, the Greater London authority or the BOA. My Department, together with the BOA, GLA and UK Sport, is sponsoring a cost-benefit analysis of a possible London Olympic bid, and we will take decisions once that work is complete.

National Lottery

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money from the National Lottery has been distributed to projects related to ethnic minorities in each of the last five years. [54466]

Mr. Caborn: This information is not held by this Department nor across distributors. In October 1999, however, distributors signed up to a Statement of Principle on Minority Ethnic Group Access to Lottery Funding Opportunities which included an agreement to monitor in appropriate funding programmes the number of applications from, and the number and value of awards made to projects directed at, or of particular relevance to, minority ethnic communities. Distributors have since put the necessary monitoring systems in place and are now collecting data.

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will take steps to increase the share of lottery proceeds given to the Community Fund for distribution; and if she will make a statement. [54468]

Mr. Caborn: I have no plans to increase the current share of lottery income going to the Community Fund.

National Stadium

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement about the National Stadium project. [54914]

Tessa Jowell: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement I made to the House earlier today.

Departmental Policies

James Purnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what impact her Department's policies have had on the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency since 1997. [54334]

Mr. Caborn: According to information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the National Lottery awards database, there have been 73 National Lottery awards to Stalybridge and Hyde totalling £1,935,708 from 1 January 1997 to 2 May 2002.

Thirteen Millennium Award winners have been identified from Stalybridge and Hyde at a commitment of £31,005.

Information on the number of beneficiaries of free television licences by constituency is not available, but estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 5,600 people aged 75 or over living in the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency.

Artsmark Schools

Last year Longdendale High School in Hollingworth was among the first schools in the county to apply successfully for an Artsmark award.

There are of course other initiatives in the wider context of the region which may have an effect on the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency. These include:

Sport England

The Greater Manchester Active Sports Partnership which includes the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency has been awarded £2,399,957 from the lottery programme.

Libraries

Tameside library service has been awarded grants of £457,102.80 for People's Network ICT infrastructure and £65,415 for librarian ICT training by the New Opportunities Fund (NOF). According to Resource, the body responsible for monitoring implementation of the People's Network, all 10 public libraries in Tameside offer public internet access through the People's Network.

Museums

Residents in the Stalybridge and Hyde Constituency can benefit from the Government's policy of free admission to all, introduced at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester (MSIM) on 1 December 2001 (and prior to that the introduction of free admission for children and over 60s). In the first four months of free admission, MSIM has welcomed more than 180,000 visitors—a 114 per cent. increase on the same period in 2000–01.

English Heritage

One grant offered on the 12 December 2000 to St. Michael and all Angels Church, Mottram in Longdendale for repairs totalling £62,591.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Access to Information

Tony Wright: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the administrative manuals and internal guidance which his Department has made public as required by Part 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information; and which of these were first made available after May 1997. [45402]

Mr. Wills: Administrative manuals and internal guidance are listed in the Department's Information Asset Register (www.inforoute.hmso.gov.uk). They will form part of our forthcoming publication scheme, as required under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The following administrative manuals and internal guidance are either currently publicly available or are open to public inspection on request.

Adoption Proceedings—A New Approach

Approval procedures for PPP schemes to provide serviced courthouse and related accommodation

Certificated Bailiffs—A Guide

Checklist for LCD policy makers

Complaints Handling Guide—Court Service

Complaints procedures—Lord Chancellor's Department Headquarters

County Court Index of Place Name

Court Business

Court Funds Office—A Guide for Staff

Court Service Programme Management Guidance

Court Service Project Management Guidance

Court Service Project Management Guidance for Minor Projects

Court Service Welsh Language Scheme

Court Users Guide to the Civil Justice Reforms

Crown Court Manual

Directions for Determining Officers

Disability Discrimination Act and the service we provide

Employee Handbook (Court Service)

Energy Management Manual

Estates Management Manual

Finance Manual (subject to deletion of sensitive sections)

Graduated Fee Guidance Manual

Guidance on outside activities and interests

Guide to County Court Fees

Guide to Family Proceedings Fees

Guide to proceedings in the Court of Appeal Criminal Division

Guide to Supreme Court Fees

Guide to the Summary Assessment of Costs

Guidelines on written consultation

LCD Guide to Parliamentary Business

LCD guidelines on the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information

LCD staff handbook

London County Court Directory

Ministers cases—LCD guidance

Quality Audit Manual

Record Management Service User Guide

Risk to the public—a framework for identifying and managing risks resulting from or requiring Government intervention

Sex Offenders Act 1997—requirement to register

Speech preparation in LCD

Supreme Court Costs Office Guide

Taxing Compendium

Taxing Officers' Notes for Guidance

The Accounts And Investments Practice Manual

The Administrative Court—Notes for Guidance on applying for Judicial Review

The Clerical Procedures Manual

The Investments Manual

Wider Markets Initiative—Opportunities in the Lord Chancellor's Department, its Agencies and NDPBs.

Information on when they were first made available is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Legal Aid (Asylum Seekers)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much money has been spent on legal aid for asylum seekers in each of the last three years; how much of this was for the initial application; how much of this was for fighting appeals; how many asylum seekers were involved in legal aid procedures in both categories; and if she will make a statement. [46673]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Legal Services Commission is not able to provide the information in the format requested. The commission is able to provide figures relating to legal aid for all immigration and asylum work from April 1999.

Total payments for all immigration and asylum advice, assistance and representation are as follows:

Financial year	*Expenditure (£ million)*
1999–2000	61.4
2000–01	88.3
2001–02[1]	129.7

[1] The figures provided for 2001–02 are provisional estimates

The commission's systems do not record expenditure according to the stage a case has reached, so figures cannot be provided for expenditure on initial applications or fighting appeals. Neither can figures be split between

asylum immigration work and non-asylum immigration work. However, it is known that asylum currently accounts for over 90 per cent. of expenditure in the immigration and asylum category.

Since August 2000, the commission has recorded the number of matters started in asylum immigration as distinct from non-asylum immigration. In the 18 month period from August 2000 to January 2002 132,800 asylum matters were started. Each matter is an act of assistance not a client assisted so the figure is not necessarily reflective of the number of individuals involved.

Mr. Soames: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the costs have been for legal aid granted to the Afghans who landed at Stansted in February 2000 in a hijacked aircraft; and what the other costs have been of the judicial and quasi-judicial proceedings concerning their cases. [52771]

Ms Rosie Winterton: It is not possible to provide the information requested. For legal aid, a number of claims have yet to be determined and therefore it is not possible at this stage to say what the total costs have been. Nor is it possible to provide the costs for the judicial proceedings. That information, which will include among other things, judicial costs; the costs to the prosecution, witnesses and juror expenses, is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate costs.

Census (1901)

Ms Walley: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what contingency plans exist in the Public Records Office to keep the 1901 census online in the event of financial failure at QinetiQ. [50532]

Ms Rosie Winterton: As is standard in PPP arrangements of this kind, the PRO's contract with QinetiQ includes a clause which would allow it to terminate in the event of contractor default and to acquire the contractor's interests in the services infrastructure. In the highly unlikely event of a default because of financial failure at QinetiQ. the activation of this clause would provide the basis for an alternative way of delivering the 1901 online census service.

Ministerial Training

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much has been spent by his Department on voice coaching for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52697]

Mr. Wills: The Lord Chancellor's Department has spent £2,700 on voice coaching in 2001–02 for five senior officials. No specific spending on voice coaching was made in the previous years.

	£
1997–98	0
1998–99	0
1999–2000	0
2000–01	0
2001–02	2,700

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much has been spent by his Department on training by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52736]

Mr. Wills: The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts has not provided any training to the Lord Chancellor's Department in the last five years.

Census Online

Mr. Brady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what value of pre-payment vouchers for 1901 Census Online sold by the Public Record Office *(a)* has been refunded, *(b)* is eligible for refund and *(c)* is ineligible for refund by virtue of having been opened. [52753]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The answers to the hon. Member's questions are as follows:

(a) It is estimated that vouchers to a total value of £1,380 have been refunded, of which the PRO has refunded £560 and QinetiQ the remainder.

(b) Total sales of vouchers to date amount to £285,000, some of which have been completely used or opened and partially used. All vouchers that remain intact may be returned by the purchaser to the point of purchase for a refund.

The value of vouchers which have been opened and are therefore ineligible for a refund is not known. However, their validity has been extended for a further six months, starting from the date when the online census service resumes.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when internet access will be restored for 1901 Census Online. [52921]

Ms Rosie Winterton: General online searches over the internet will be available as soon as practicable following the completion of the testing programme, which will include availability of the online census at the service centres.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much revenue the Public Record Office has received from the sale of pre-payment vouchers in connection with the 1901 Census Online service. [52752]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Under the terms of the PRO's PPP arrangements with QinetiQ Ltd., the latter is responsible for the sale of pre-payment vouchers. To date QinetiQ has received a total of £278,019 from the sale of these vouchers.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will instruct the Public Record Office to consult their counterparts in Scotland on lessons to be learned from the launch of an Online Census service in Scotland. [52751]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The two sites are very different in character—the Scottish census site manages 4.5 million names as opposed to 32.5 million names on the 1901 Census for England and Wales, and the present population of Scotland is approximately a tenth of that in England and Wales. The payment model chosen for the online sensus in Scotland imposes an initial £6 charge for access to the site and units of £6 thereafter. The 1901 Census for England and Wales has an entirely free index search facility, which can be used without any restriction; the

minimum fee for access to transcriptions or record images is £5, in return for which the user can obtain between six and ten copies. The PRO undertook extensive consultations with users who indicated that, out of a range of possible payment models, their preference was for a payment system based on the delivery of record images.

Families of Murder Victims

Tim Loughton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what financial assistance for legal action is available to families of murder victims where the convicted murderer is related to the victim and has a claim as a beneficiary of the deceased estate. [53264]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Matters of probate are included within the scope of public funding under the Legal Services Commission's (LSC's) Funding Code which is approved by Parliament under the Access to Justice Act 1999. As a result, public funding for Legal Help or Legal Representation (formerly legal aid) could be available in such a case to individual family members who could demonstrate their financial eligibility, subject to a funding assessment of the merits of the case by the LSC.

Financial eligibility is determined by assessing the gross income, disposable income and capital of the applicant; a funding assessment is carried out to establish whether it is reasonable, taking all the circumstances into account, for public funding to be granted.

Access to Information

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much his Department is planning to spend on advertising the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information to the general public in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* 2003. [53372]

Mr. Wills: None. Information about the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information is available on the websites of the Lord Chancellor's Department (www.lcd.gov.uk) and the parliamentary ombudsman (www.ombudsman.org.uk).

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on what subjects and on which dates her Department has consulted organisations representing young people; and if she will list such organisations. [52497]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The information requested is not held centrally and a comprehensive reply can be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, it is the practice of this Department to consult organisations, including those representing young people, both in the circulation of formal consultation papers and by way of on-going discussion. For example, in March 2002, the consultation paper 'Promoting Inter-agency Working in the Family Justice system' was sent to the National Council for Voluntary Child Care Organisations and the Association of Lawyers for Children, while the Connexions service is consulted regularly on a whole range of operational issues.

In addition, this Department is committed to the new core principles for the involvement of children and young people published by the Minister for Young People in November 2001. The Department will shortly be publishing an actin plan setting out for the first time how it will implement these principles to extend the participation of children and young people in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them.

Immigration Advice

Lynne Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will provide a breakdown of the number of *(a)* solicitors' firms and *(b)* not-for-profit advice providers holding a Legal Services Commission contract in immigration and the number of matter starts for each such contract in each of the National Asylum Support Service-designated asylum dispersal areas. [54062]

Ms Rosie Winterton: As at 30 April 2002, the Legal Services Commission (LSC) had issued 492 solicitor immigration contracts and 78 not-for-profit agency immigration contracts.

The commission cannot at the present time provide a breakdown of the contract figures by National Asylum Support Service designated asylum dispersal areas. Figures can be provided by the Legal Service Commission regions. The table shows the number of contracts issued, and the contract awards by LSC region. Not-for-profit contractors are awarded 'hours' rather than 'matter starts'.

LSC region	*Number of solicitor contracts*	*Matter starts allocated*	*Number of Not-for-profit contracts*	*Number of hours allocated*
London	312	103,711	38	68,347
South-east	24	5,864	3	21,340
South-west	13	1,250	4	7,700
Wales	9	2,034	3	4,290
West Midlands	31	9,272	5	15,326
North-west	23	3,652	9	20,364
North-east	14	4,114	1	0
Yorkshire	28	7,628	4	21,450
East Midlands	19	6,738	5	6,186
Eastern	16	3,416	4	3,520
Merseyside	3	1,420	2	4,400
All regions	492	149,099	78	172,923

Television Licences

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will list the *(a)* number and *(b)* total cost of television licences paid for by her Department. [54072]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Information on television licenses purchased by courts is not held centrally and total figures for the Lord Chancellor's Department could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Digital Television

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many subscriptions to *(a)* digital terrestrial, *(b)* digital satellite and *(c)* digital cable are held by her Department for services in departmental buildings from which Ministers work, stating for each subscription its (i) cost and (ii) purpose. [54071]

Ms Rosie Winterton: None.

Registered Enduring Powers of Attorney

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many registered enduring powers of attorney there were in each year since 2000. [53781]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The total number of registered enduring powers of attorney was 55,710 in the year 2000 and 61,163 in the year 2001. The number of new applications for registered received was 12,340 in the year 2000 and 13,110 in the year 2001.

Digital Radios

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many digital radios are owned by her Department for use in departmental buildings from which Ministers work; and what the *(a)* cost and *(b)* date of purchase of each radio was. [54073]

Ms Rosie Winterton: None.

Sex Offenders

Norman Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department under what circumstances schedule 1 sex offenders are allowed unsupervised contact with children. [41974]

Mr. Keith Bradley *[holding answer 11 March 2002]:* I have been asked to reply.

Schedule 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 is a list of cruelty, violent and sexual offences against children. This list has been used by various agencies as a way of identifying those committing these offences as posing a risk to children, although not all necessarily do so or do so currently. Some of those guilty of offences on the list, for example, may have committed the offence many years previously, may themselves have been children at the time and the offence may have, for example, involved a fight with another child of a similar age. Others convicted of offences on the list may have been engaged in mutually agreed sexual activity, albeit with someone under the age of legal consent, to whom they were relatively close in age. There are no specified requirements flowing from commission of an offence on Schedule 1 of this Act that prohibit offenders from having unsupervised contact with children. There are, however, other more recent means of achieving this and of protecting children from the risk that violent and sexual offenders pose.

Those offenders sentenced to more than 12 months imprisonment are released subject to a licence which can include, in relevant cases, a requirement not to have unsupervised contact with children. Breach of these conditions can result in a return to prison. Moreover, a similar prohibition can be included in a Sex Offender Order, for which the police can apply to magistrates' court with respect to a convicted sex offender whose current behaviour indicates they pose a risk of serious harm. Breaching the terms of the order may result in a maximum sentence of up to five years imprisonment.

Part 2 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 provides for certain of those convicted of offences against children to be disqualified from seeking or taking employment, whether paid or unpaid, with children in the future.

The Criminal Justice and Court Services Act also placed a statutory duty jointly on the policy and probation services to put arrangements in place for assessing and managing the risk posed by sexual and violent offenders. These arrangements enable a risk assessment to be undertaken and plans to be devised for managing the risk that such offenders pose.

Despite these measures, it nonetheless remains important for parents to be vigilant about those to whom they entrust the care of their children, particularly when they are not present to ensure their safety.

PRIVY COUNCIL

Members' Pensions

Chris Ruane: To ask the President of the Council if he will make a statement on progress made on hon. Members' pensions. [55068]

Mr. Robin Cook: On 5 July 2001 the House considered the latest report of the SSRB on the parliamentary pension scheme. The House agreed to four of the eight recommendations of the SSRB and invited the trustees of the scheme to consider the remaining recommendations. The trustees are now reaching agreement on how to implement all eight recommendations, including extension of entitlement to unmarried partners and continuation of entitlement to surviving partners who have subsequently remarried. The trustees will be able to fund these improvements with no additional charge to Members.

The House also voted to increase the accrual rate from 1/50th to 1/40th. The Government do not accept the proposal in the resolution that all the cost should fall on the Treasury. It has therefore referred the cost of this improvement to the SSRB and invited their advice on how it should be funded.

The SSRB has been asked to report by 1 July. Thereafter the Government will table a statutory instrument giving effect to all recommendations of the SSRB.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Whitehall Refurbishment

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) if outstanding orders of sapele timber for the refurbishment of 22 Whitehall have been cancelled; [54351]

(2) if he will set out the steps which he took to ensure that all timber for the refurbishment of 22 Whitehall derived from legally certified and sustainable sources; [54352]

(3) when, by whom, and on what basis, it was agreed that sapele timber would be used in the refurbishment of 22 Whitehall. [54353]

Mr. Leslie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) on 19 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1251.

My Department is currently, with Balfour Beatty, undertaking a full investigation and will report back to the House.

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Lawrie Quinn: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list those regulatory impact assessments published during the latest six-month period. [55067]

Mr. Leslie: The Government are committed to ensuring that regulations are necessary, give effective protection, balance cost and risk, are fair and command public confidence. In accordance with this, we require Departments to produce and publish RIAs for all regulatory proposals likely to have an impact on business.

I have presented to Parliament today a Command Paper listing RIAs published between 1 July and 31 December 2001. Copies of those listed have been placed in the House Libraries. This is the sixteenth such Command Paper.

Public Servants

Mr. Allen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what his definition is of the term "wider public servants" used in the Cabinet Office publication Taskforces and the Advisory Groups and Reviews published in October 2001; and whether it includes hon. Members. [53010]

Mr. Leslie: The definition "wider public servant" in the context of membership of taskforces refers to public sector employees who are not civil servants.

There is nothing to prevent hon. Members being appointed to taskforces and other ad hoc advisory groups. Should that be the case, it would be recorded in the Taskforces, Ad Hoc Advisory Groups and Reviews: Annual Report, under the heading of "wider public servant".

Public Bodies

Tony Wright: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which public bodies have been *(a)* set up, *(b)* abolished, *(c)* announced but not yet established and *(d)* targeted for future abolition since 1997. [54242]

Mr. Leslie: Information on all public bodies is set out in the annual 'Public Bodies' publication. The most recent edition gave the position as of 31 March 2001, copies of this and earlier editions are in the Library of the House. Individual entries in 'Public Bodies' are qualified, where necessary, with a footnote indicating if the body, though announced, has not yet been set up or if it has been targeted for abolition.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pensions

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what are the levels of pensions as a proportion of average weekly earnings in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* each other EU member state. [19956]

Mr. McCartney: The most recent figures available date from 1994–95 (except those for Italy where they are from 1993–94). They do not take account of the fact that since 1997 this Department has taken a number of measures to improve the income of pensioners, particularly the poorest of this group. Over 2 million pensioners benefit from the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG), currently £98.15 for a single pensioner and over 10 million pensioners benefited from the above inflation increases in basic Retirement Pension. Over 11 million Winter Fuel Payments, at a cost of around £1.7 billion, were sent out last winter.

Since 1997 single pensioners in receipt of MIG, Winter Fuel Payments and free TV licences are at least £18.00 a week better off and pensioner couples have gained by more than £27.

A further step is the Government's intention to introduce Pension Credit in October 2003. Around half of all pensioner households will be eligible for the Pension Credit—5.1 million individual pensioners or 3.9 million pensioner households stand to gain (excludes those living in residential care and nursing homes). On average, they will gain £400 a year, with some getting up to £1,000 a year.

It will get more money into pensioner's pockets and ensure that no single pensioner need live on less than £100 a week (£154 a week for couples).

The level of average UK pension income from all sources of income as a proportion of average weekly earnings is not available. The level as a proportion of population net income is 78 per cent.

Information for other EU member states is available on the same basis. This is in the table.

Percentage

Country	*Pension Income as Proportion of Population Income*
France	90
Sweden	89
Austria	87
Netherlands	86
Germany	86
Italy	84
Finland	79
Belgium	78
UK	78
Greece	77
Ireland	75
Norway	74
Denmark	73

Notes:
Data is for 1994 and 1995 except Italy, 1993.
Quoted in 'Cross-country comparisons of pensioner's incomes'. Research report No. 142, DSS, p22.
Source:
Labour Market and Social Policy—Occasional Papers No. 42, OECD.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what action he is taking in conjunction with the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority to monitor and control pension liberation schemes. [52254]

Mr. McCartney: The Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority and the Inland Revenue are working closely together to investigate a number of such cases that have been reported to them. It is important that any malpractice is identified quickly and eliminated. Meetings including officials from the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority, the Inland Revenue, the Financial Services Authority and my Department are being held, and my officials are keeping in close touch with the investigations.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) if he will list the countries in which UK recipients of the state retirement pension do not receive regular upratings; and what the estimated annual cost is of extension of upratings to each such country; [52122]

(2) for what reasons United Kingdom recipients of the state retirement pension resident abroad receive upratings in some countries and not others. [52123]

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in which countries British pensioners living abroad *(a)* have and *(b)* do not have their pensions increased in line with inflation. [54473]

Mr. McCartney: Annual upratings have never been generally paid abroad. Exceptions apply under the EC's Social Security Regulations, which apply to pensioners who have a UK pension living in the European Economic Area, and under reciprocal social security agreements with other countries, which allow for increases to be paid there. The countries with which the UK has reciprocal agreements which allow pension upratings to be paid are: Barbados, Bermuda, the Channel Islands, Cyprus, Israel, Jamaica, Malta, Mauritius, the Philippines, Switzerland, Turkey, the USA and the now separate republics of the former Federal Peoples Republic of Yugoslavia (the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia Montenegro, Bosnia Herzegovina), Croatia, Slovenia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). Pensions are not uprated in any other country.

To bring everyone up to the current rate they would receive if they had remained in the UK, but not to pay arrears, would cost around £400 million in 2002–03.

Uprating is paid in some countries because the Government are either legally required to do so or have previously entered into reciprocal agreements to do so. However, the underlying intention of uprating is that it is meant to cover increases in the cost of living in this country.

Child Maintenance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the percentage difference in maintenance between the new child maintenance formula and the formula currently operated on standardised assumptions excluding departures and variations for the convenient steps of net income up to £104,000 per annum. [44263]

Malcolm Wicks *[holding answer 20 March 2002]:* The information is in the table.

Percentage change in average maintenance assessment under new scheme, by net income

Net income (£)	*Change in average maintenance assessment (percentage)*
Under 10,000[1]	16.6
10,000 to 20,000	–23.0
20,000 to 30,000	–18.2
30,000 to 40,000	–7.6
Above 40,000	5.6
All	–11.2

[1] Includes non-resident parents on benefit who pay nothing in the current scheme.

Source:

5 per cent. scan of the Child Support Computer System, August 1998 so may not reflect current average assessments.

Correspondence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the target time will be in 2002–03 for *(a)* Ministers to reply to letters from hon. Members and *(b)* officials in his Department to reply to letters received directly from members of the public. [44954]

Maria Eagle: Our aim is to reply as soon as possible to hon. Members who write to Ministers and members of the public who write to Ministers or the senior official with responsibility for operational issues within a maximum of 20 working days. We aim to reply as soon as possible to other letters received directly from members of the public within a maximum of 10 working days or 15 working days in the case of the Appeals Service.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he will reply to the letters dated 28 February and 3 April from the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West. [53770]

Maria Eagle: I replied to the hon. Member on 29 April.

Digital Television

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the number of subscriptions to *(a)* digital terrestrial, *(b)* digital satellite and *(c)* digital cable television held by his Department for services in any departmental building from which Ministers work, stating for each subscription its (i) cost and (ii) purpose. [48355]

Mr. McCartney *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* The Department for Work and Pensions' access to television services in Richmond House is maintained by the Department of Health, as the major occupier for this building. I therefore refer you to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health [Ms Hazel Blears], on 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 272W.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many times Ministers in his Department have travelled abroad at taxpayers' expense since March 2001; what countries they visited; and what the total cost of each visit was. [47101]

Mr. McCartney *[holding answer 9 April 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 11 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 552W.

Efficiency Savings

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the target has been in each of the last five years for efficiency savings as a percentage of total running costs for each of the non-departmental public bodies for which he is responsible; and if the target was met. [49633]

Maria Eagle: The Department sponsors four executive non-departmental public bodies: the Disability Rights Commission; Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority; Pensions Compensation Board; and Remploy. Value for money is a key principle and overarching theme when the Department is agreeing targets on the efficiency and effectiveness of individual bodies' operations. Each body listed above produces an Annual Report which provides details of the organisation's operational and financial performance. Copies of these reports are available in the Library.

Jobcentres

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what proportion of time is spent by personal advisers *(a)* on advising on benefits claims and *(b)* advising job seekers. [50691]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The administration of Jobcentre Plus is a matter for the Chief Executive, Leigh Lewis. I have asked him to reply to the hon. Member.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Miss Anne McIntosh dated April 2002:

As Jobcentre Plus is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning the proportion of time spent by personal advisers on a) advising on benefits claims and b) advising job seekers. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The main purpose of personal advisers is to help people move into or closer to work. Advisers therefore spend the majority of their time at interviews discussing jobs, training and other opportunities that are available to help people into work. As part of this, they will often provide information about Tax Credits and those benefits that people may receive when in work. More generally, depending on the circumstances of the person they are interviewing, personal advisers will seek to ensure that any questions or issues relating to benefits are satisfactorily resolved either by providing information or help themselves or by ensuring that it is provided by colleagues with the appropriate knowledge.

I hope this is helpful.

Rent Service

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, (1) pursuant to his answer of 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 888W, if he will place in the Library the information received from the Rent Service in support of its estimate of the likely increase in the number of localities following the Court of Appeal judgment on local reference rents in Stockport; [53014]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 888W, what organisations he consulted on the impact on the number of localities of the Court of Appeal judgment on local reference rents in Stockport; and if he will publish details of that advice. [53015]

Malcolm Wicks: We did not request a formal report from the Rent Service and none was provided. The likely increase in the number of localities was an informal estimate for England provided by the Rent Service at that time in the light of the Court of Appeal judgment.

We did not consult any organisations about the impact on the number of localities following the Court of Appeal judgment. There was no need for such consultation because it was clear that had we not put new legislation in place, the increase in the number of localities following the Court of Appeal judgment would have proved unworkable for the Rent Service. Such an increase would have run counter to our policy that local reference rents should reflect the generality of the market and thus be based on broad geographical areas.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many localities the Rent Service has used to determine local reference rents in each year since their introduction. [53016]

Malcolm Wicks: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire on 24 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 340W.

Access to Work Scheme

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many applications have been made to the Access to Work scheme in the last five years; and whether the scheme will be open to those small employers who will be required to make adjustments prior to the extension of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in 2004. [53032]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* Between April 1996 and March 2001 37,236 disabled people have applied for and received Access to Work help'.

Access to Work is available to disabled people in paid employment, whatever size of employer they work for, where they have additional employment needs resulting from disability. Focusing eligibility on the individual, rather than the employer, allows Access to Work to tailor help to meet the needs of the disabled person and to help an increasing number of disabled people to enter or remain in paid work each year.

' Source: DWP Access to Work Management Information.

Disability Discrimination Act

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what adjustments have been made to her Department's premises following the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; and what the cost of these adjustments was as a proportion of the Department's budget. [53028]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* Since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 adjustments carried out to premises occupied by this department include installation of door bells, installation of induction loops, installation of some signage, marking

of disabled parking bays, adjustments to counters, reconfiguration of public waiting areas to accommodate wheelchair access, improvements to external lighting and installation of access ramps.

These works have been carried out as part of a planned programme to ensure that all buildings occupied under the PRIME contract comply with the requirements of DDA in advance of 2004. Under the terms of the PRIME PFI agreement, the costs of these adjustments are the responsibility of our private sector partner, Land Securities Trillium.

For those buildings in the DWP estate not covered by the PRIME contract it has been recommended that work to ensure DDA compliance should be incorporated into existing and future refurbishment plans. Also, the department will require that all new property acquisitions are fully compliant with the Act.

The costs of adjustments carried out solely in relation to the introduction of DDA are not recorded separately. The information could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Benefits Decision Makers

David Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will remove the overall responsibility from decision makers on benefit entitlement to more senior officials; and if he will make a statement. [54152]

Maria Eagle: No. Decisions on benefit claims and applications are made by the Secretary of State. In practice he delegates this function to decision makers who are suitably trained and experienced. The seniority of the decision maker is not pertinent. The important point is whether the decision maker has the requisite skills to do the job to the required standard.

Income Support

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the ratio of income support and its precursor to basic retirement pension for a single person was in each of the last 30 calendar years. [53942]

Mr. McCartney: The benefit system has undergone radical changes in the last 30 years. For this reason, it is not possible to compare like with like. From 1972 until 1988, supplementary benefit was in payment. The assessment of entitlement for supplementary benefit was complex, and the introduction of income support addressed and simplified this assessment. Income support continues to be paid through the minimum income guarantee. There were considerable differences between the benefits, for example, on some occasions, supplementary benefit was uprated twice a year. The figures quoted are based on benefit years (April to March) rather than calendar years—rates may be different to published rates as they represent an average over the benefit year, eg in 2002 MIG was uprated on 9 April therefore we have assumed there were eight days when MIG was still at the old rate.

For the purposes of this question, all figures quoted are in nominal terms for the appropriate year, eg 1972 rates are quoted in 1972 price terms and reflect the basic entitlement of a single pensioner aged 65 to 75.

The information requested is in the table.

Benefit rates by year from 1 April to 31 March

	Supplementary benefit/MIG (£)	*Basic state pension (BSP) (£)*	*Ratio MIG/BSP*
1972	6.72	6.37	1.05
1973	7.65	7.25	1.06
1974	9.71	9.31	1.04
1975	12.61	12.21	1.03
1976	14.45	14.05	1.03
1977	16.53	16.13	1.02
1978	18.66	18.26	1.02
1979	21.36	20.96	1.02
1980	24.91	24.65	1.01
1981	28.02	28.02	1.00
1982	30.70	30.76	1.00
1983	33.20	33.28	1.00
1984	34.65	34.65	1.00
1985	36.31	36.65	0.99
1986	37.77	38.57	0.98
1987	38.64	39.49	0.98
1988	43.90	41.10	1.07
1989	46.05	43.54	1.06
1990	48.45	46.83	1.03
1991	53.31	51.90	1.03
1992	57.10	54.12	1.06
1993	61.17	56.04	1.09
1994	63.88	57.56	1.11
1995	65.07	58.82	1.11
1996	67.01	61.11	1.10
1997	68.77	62.43	1.10
1998	70.43	64.67	1.09
1999	74.86	66.69	1.12
2000	78.36	67.48	1.16
2001	91.85	72.39	1.27
2002	98.15	75.50	1.30

Pension-related Benefits

James Purnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of how much money would be accrued by the delay in payment of pension-related benefits by two years at age 67 years. [54338]

Mr. McCartney: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him on 26 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 1011W.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Under-fives Provision (Liverpool)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what funding she has made available for provision for under- fives in Liverpool in each year since 1997; and how much she plans to make available in 2002–03. [51942]

Margaret Hodge: We have made a number of direct grant funding streams available to Liverpool local education for under fives' provision:

early years education funding which will increase the number of free early education places available for three and four- year-olds and enhance the quality of the education provided;

funding for the National Childcare Strategy. While this funding is not specifically targeted at under fives (the age range is 0 to 14) they will benefit from the increase in child care places that are being created. £3.4 million has also been made available for the provision of neighbourhood nurseries across the 2001–04 financial years;

revenue funding for children under four in Liverpool through the Sure Start programme. Further revenue funding will be available in 2002–03 once the four fifth wave programmes receive approval. In addition, each of the eight Sure Start programmes in the city will receive up to £1 million of capital funding over its first five years.

The table shows the amount of central Government funding made available to Liverpool local education authority for the provision of early years education, the National Childcare Strategy and Sure Start between the 1997–98 and 2001–02 financial years as well as estimates of the funding that will be available in the 2002–03 financial years.

£

	Early years education funding	*National childcare strategy*	*Sure start revenue funding*
1997–98	5,629,524	N/A	N/A
1998–99	497,129	N/A	N/A
1999–2000	953,110	577,600	224,681
2000–01	2,123,107	774,460	929,203
2001–02	1,590,711	1,646,374	1,569,594
2002–03[1]	1,965,548	1,032,650	2,409,882

[1] Allocation.

Notes:

In 1997–98, all four-year-old nursery education places were funded through specific grant. In 1998–99 only four-year-old places in the private, voluntary and independent sectors and new places in the maintained sector were funded through specific grant. Existing maintained places are funded by local authorities from their resources.

Since 2001–02 four-year-old nursery education places have been funded by local education authorities from their resources.

Specific funding for the provision of free early education places for three year olds was introduced in September 1999.

Head Teachers

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will list the new requirements *(a)* placed on and *(b)* removed from head teachers in the last year for which information is available. [52120]

Mr. Timms: The main changes to requirements on head teachers made during 2001–02 are as follows:

During 2001–02, the right to mainstream education for children with special educational needs was strengthened. Where particular mainstream schools do not wish to educate children with statements of SEN, they will have to show that the education of such children is incompatible with the provision of efficient education for other children, and that there are no reasonable steps they can take to prevent this incompatibility. The revised SEN Code of Practice has been designed to decrease bureaucracy while improving the SEN framework. The Code includes guidance on the new duty for head teachers to ensure that a Transition Plan is drawn up for pupils with statements of SEN in year nine of their schooling.

In 2001–02, head teachers prepared for the introduction of Consistent Financial Reporting, which will benefit all schools by improving the framework for benchmarking, as well as streamlining financial administration. Head teachers had to implement modest changes to target setting for Key Stage 4. They also had to process claims for the Welcome Back Bonus, an incentive to encourage teachers returning to the profession.

Administration of the Standards Fund was considerably simplified last year, so that head teachers and others had much less paperwork to contend with in securing additional funds for their schools. Moreover, for the first time it was possible to merge schools' annual reports with prospectuses, again freeing up valuable head teacher time.

Wanless Report

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what estimate she has made of the costs to further and higher education of the expansion of the NHS set out in the Wanless report. [52442]

Margaret Hodge: Following a review of the medical workforce, published in December 1997, and the commitments made in the NHS Plan in July 2000, the number of places available to study medicine in England will increase to almost 6,000 in 2005–06. Of the additional places, over 45 per cent. will be at new medical schools or centres of medical education. The report "Securing Our Future Health: Taking A Long-Term View" (the Wanless report) makes no recommendation for further increasing the number of students entering medical training. The cost of training nurses, midwives, health visitors and other health professionals is met by the NHS.

Sixth Forms

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what formula the Learning and Skills Council uses to determine future funding for school sixth forms. [52510]

Margaret Hodge: The formula for funding school sixth forms is the responsibility of the Learning and Skills Council. I have therefore asked John Harwood, the Council's chief executive, to write to the hon. Member providing the information requested and to place a copy of his reply in the Library.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many sixth forms the LSC expects to experience budget reductions in the current financial year. [52511]

Margaret Hodge: The LSC calculated two figures for each school sixth form—what it would receive under the real terms guarantee which protects funding relative to the baseline year of 2000–01, depending on changes in pupil

numbers; and what it would receive under the LSC's own funding formula, which reflects the nature and number of programmes being studied. The LSC allocation for the school is the higher of these two figures. Almost two thirds of schools are being funded under the LSC's formula in 2002–03, so are receiving more than they would under the real terms guarantee.

The LSC notified LEAs of the sixth form funding allocations for their schools in early March. It was for LEAs to set overall budgets for all their schools by the end of March, incorporating the LSC allocations. Schools receive the funds from the LEA as one pot of money and are not required to account separately for the LSC allocation. However, LEAs are required under the rules of fair funding to ensure that schools receive for their sixth forms at least the real terms guarantee and one third of any difference between that and the LSC formula allocation, rising to the full amount by 2004.

Employers' National Insurance Contributions

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what representations she has received from British universities about the impact of the increase in employers' national insurance contributions. [52526]

Margaret Hodge: None.

Graduates

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what information she collates on the average earnings of *(a)* graduates and *(b)* non-graduates with equivalent A-level or similar qualifications. [52919]

Margaret Hodge: Estimates of average gross weekly earnings by level of qualification are regularly obtained from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). On average, people with a first degree or higher qualification earn over 40 per cent. more than those whose highest qualification is two or more A-levels or another Level 3 qualification. The table shows that in spring 2001, average gross weekly earnings for all graduates with at least a first degree were around £580, compared to £410 for non-graduates with a Level 3 qualification.

Estimated average gross weekly earnings of graduates and non-graduates of working age in full-time employment

Highest qualification	*Average gross weekly earnings £*
First degree or higher qualification	580
2+ A-levels or another Level 3 qualification	410

Source:
Labour Force Survey, spring 2001, GB figures

Work-based Learning

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what steps she is taking to ensure that the Learning and Skills Council has adequate funds to widen successful participation in work-based learning. [53087]

Margaret Hodge: The LSC's budget for 2002–03 is £7.3 billion, a 5.9 per cent. real terms increase on the previous year. This will enable the LSC to make progress towards its key targets. These include increasing the participation and achievement of young people in learning (including work based learning) and increasing the demand for learning by adults and employers. We have also increased the flexibility available to the LSC to meet its priorities by simplifying the budget structure and removing unnecessary restrictions on how the grant is spent. We have worked with the LSC to agree clear outcomes which include promoting equality by highlighting outcomes for under-represented groups in work-based learning.

The Government have contributed substantial financial support for Modern Apprenticeships (MAs). Between 1997 and 2002 over £3.7 billion has been allocated to Government-supported work-based learning, of which it is estimated that in excess of £1 billion has been used to support MAs. As a result of this investment, the number of young people on MAs has risen from 75,000 in 1997 to over 220,000 today. We are investing an additional £180 million over three years 2001–04 to support and further develop MAs, a clear sign of the importance we attach to their role in raising skills levels in the workplace, and in offering young people high quality vocational and work-related options for post-16 learning. The Government and the LSC recently agreed a target of over a quarter of young people between the age of 16 and 21 entering MAs by 2004 and the LSC will have sufficient funds to meet this target.

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what discussions she has had with the Adult Learning Inspectorate on the use of unpublished benchmarks to measure achievement in work-based learning. [53096]

Margaret Hodge: There have been no discussions between the Secretary of State and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (the ALI) about benchmarks. In her January 2002 grant letter to the chair of the ALI the Secretary of State expressed concern about the downward trend in inspection grades awarded to providers for work-based learning. To investigate the reasons the Department commissioned the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) to carry out a research study. When finalised, we will consider the evidence and take appropriate action. This will include reviewing how we measure achievement in work based learning.

Work Force Development

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when she expects the Learning and Skills Council to publish its work force development strategy; and which organisations have been consulted in the preparation of the strategy. [53090]

Margaret Hodge: This is a matter for the Learning and Skills Council. I have therefore asked John Harwood, the council's chief executive, to write to my hon. Friend with the information requested and to place a copy of his reply in the Library.

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment she has made of referrals from Business Links to local learning and skills councils in respect of work force development requirements of small and medium sized enterprises. [53099]

Margaret Hodge: This is a matter for the Learning and Skills Council. I have therefore asked John Harwood, the council's chief executive, to write to my hon. Friend with the information requested and to place a copy of his reply in the Library.

Learning and Skills Council

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much on average the Learning and Skills Council will allocate in 2002–03 to each member of its staff for personal development purposes. [53094]

Margaret Hodge: This is a matter for the Learning and Skills Council. I have therefore asked John Harwood, the council's chief executive, to write to my hon. Friend with the information requested and to place a copy of his reply in the Library.

Child Care

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans the Learning and Skills Council has to support the training of child carers for 2002–03. [53095]

Margaret Hodge: This is a matter for the Learning and Skills Council. I have therefore asked John Harwood, the council's chief executive, to write to my hon. Friend with the information requested and to place a copy of his reply in the Library.

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what steps her Department is taking to support National Childcare Month. [53110]

Margaret Hodge: My Department is making available over £200,000 of sponsorship which is being channelled through the five major national child care and early years education organisations'. This will enable children, parents, staff including child minders and volunteers in local playgroups, out of school clubs and nurseries to highlight and celebrate the valuable services they provide in their communities.

' Daycare Trust, Kids' Clubs Network, National Childminding Association, National Day Nurseries Association and the Pre-School Learning Alliance.

Teachers' Salaries

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the average annual increase in teachers' salaries has been in each of the last 10 years. [53347]

Mr. Timms: Annual increases in teachers' salaries to March of each of the years shown are as follows.

	Increases
1993	7.5
1994	0.2
1995	2.5
1996	2.4
1997	2.3
1998	2.8
1999	3.8
2000	3.9
2001	9.8
2002	5.4

These figures reflect the effects of annual pay awards in April each year; of incremental drift caused by progression up pay scales and the recruitment of newly qualified teachers to replace teachers who retire; and of performance-related pay progression. The increases in the years to March 2000 are actual increases; those for 2001 and 2002 are estimates. Occasional and unqualified teachers are not included.

Citizenship Education

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures are being taken to improve education for international understanding, as part of the UK programme of citizenship education. [53588]

Margaret Hodge: From September 2002, when citizenship becomes statutory in secondary schools, pupils will be taught about the world as a global community, and the political economic, environmental and social implications of this. Pupils will learn about the United Kingdom's relations in Europe, including the European Union, Commonwealth and the United Nations and the wider issues and challenges of global interdependence and responsibility.

The DFES is funding organisations to produce resource materials to support schools. For example, we worked with Department for International Development (DfID) and the Development Education Association (DEA) to produce a guide "Developing a Global Dimension in the school curriculum". In addition, detailed guidance produced by the QCA, sent to all secondary schools, include a unit—"Debating a global issue" which encourages pupils to develop international understanding. The guidance is available at www.dfes.gov.uk/citizenship.

Higher Education

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures she has introduced since 1997 to aid recruitment and retention of lecturers in higher education. [53628]

Margaret Hodge: The recruitment and retention of staff is the responsibility of higher education institutions. However, our spending plans for the English higher education sector include £50 million in 2001–02, rising to £110 million in 2002–03 and £170 million in 2003–04, to underpin the human resource strategies which institutions have drawn up, and which address recruitment and retention as well as the modernisation of reward systems.

School Budgets

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what estimate she has made of the proportion of a school's budget in the current financial year which is available as discretionary spending for the head teacher. [54273]

Mr. Timms: In general, it is for the governing body of each school to determine the extent to which authority to spend the public funds available to the school should be delegated to the head teacher. The proportion of a school's budget which is under the head's control will accordingly vary from school to school, and no statistical information on this point is collected by the Department.

Teachers

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment she has made of the reason for the change in the number of retirements due to ill-health by teachers since 1997. [54277]

Mr. Timms: The criteria governing entitlement to ill health retirement benefits were amended in 1997 to require that, despite appropriate treatment, applicants have a medical condition that would render them permanently incapable of undertaking any further teaching. In this context, permanent is defined as lasting at least up to the scheme's normal retirement age of 60. This replaced the previous less stringent criteria that required the presence of a medical condition that would prevent teaching only for the foreseeable future (defined as lasting at least 3–4 years).

The Department also commissioned the Faculty of Occupational Medicine to produce occupational health guidance specifically aimed at the employers of teachers. This guidance was published in December 2000. The reduction in the number of ill health retirements since 1997 is therefore a consequence of a greater awareness among teachers' employers of the benefits of effective occupational health provision, including consideration of alternatives to ill-health retirement such as part-time working or redeployment to less demanding duties, and the more rigorous criteria governing entitlement to ill health retirement benefits.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, pursuant to her written answer of 29 April, *Official Report*, column 572W, where such assets are held if the scheme is unfunded. [54275]

Mr. Timms: The valuation of the Teachers' Pension Scheme is conducted on a notional basis. There are no tangible assets, but in carrying out the valuation the Government Actuary calculates what the assets of the scheme would have been if a real fund had been in existence.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what happens to the money paid by teachers and employers as pension contributions if their pension fund is unfunded. [54274]

Mr. Timms: Contributions to the Teachers' Pension Scheme by teachers and their employers are paid into the Exchequer and used to defray the cost of paying benefits under the scheme.

School Attendance

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many prosecutions have taken place for non-attendance at school in each year since 1997; how many have resulted in convictions; and what sentences were passed. [53890]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Information on prosecutions brought under Education Act 1996, section 444 "failing to secure regular attendance at school", will be available for the first time in 'Criminal Statistics for England & Wales 2001' which will be published by the Home Office in September of this year. This section of the Act has only come onto the criminal statistics code book for 2001; previously it was grouped within all prosecutions under the Education Act 1996 and it is not possible to separate the different sections of the Act.

School Provision

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills in what circumstances the obligations under education legislation *(a)* to provide schooling and *(b)* for parents to ensure school attendance may be disapplied for children of compulsory school age resident in the United Kingdom. [53943]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Local Education authorities are obligated to provide suitable education for all children of compulsory school age at school or otherwise than at school under the Education Act 1996 (sections 13, 14 and 19 as amended).

The parent of every child of compulsory school age is obligated to cause him to receive suitable full-time education either by regular attendance at school or otherwise (Education Act 1996 section 7). If a child of compulsory school age who is a registered pupil at a school fails to attend regularly at the school, his parent is guilty of an offence. However the child shall not be taken to have failed to attend regularly under the circumstances outlined in the Education Act 1996 section 444 subsections (3) to (6).

Local Education Authority Funding

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, pursuant to her answer of 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 163–67W, on LEA funding, what the comparable figures are for each of the last five years. [54357]

Mr. Timms: The information requested in respect of the financial years 1999–2000 and 2000–01 has been placed in the Library. Because of the changes in the structure of the school funding system which took effect in April 1999, it is not possible to provide corresponding figures for previous years.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what post-16 budget support grant is payable to each local education authority in England; and in each case what the category is under which the grant is payable. [54327]

Mr. Timms: The table shows the post-16 budget support grant payable to each local education authority in categories 1a, 1b and 2. Because Category 3 grant depends on adjustments to be made to Learning and Skills Council grant during the course of 2002–03, the amount of that grant cannot be given. (The information given on

categories 1 and 2 supersedes that given to the Second Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation on 30 April).

Post-16 budget support grant

£ million

LEA	Category 1a	1b	2	Total
201 City of London	0	0	0	0
202 Camden	0	0	0	0
203 Greenwich	0	0	0.451	0.451
204 Hackney	0	0	0	0
205 Hammersmith and Fulham	0	0	0	0
206 Islington	0	0	0	0
207 Kensington and Chelsea	0.075	0	0	0.075
208 Lambeth	0	0	0	0
209 Lewisham	0	0	0	0
210 Southwark	0	0	0	0
211 Tower Hamlets	0	0	0	0
212 Wandsworth	0	0	0	0
213 Westminster	0	0	0	0
301 Barking and Dagenham	0	0	0	0
302 Barnet	0.800	0	0	0.800
303 Bexley	0	0	0	0
304 Brent	0	0	0	0
305 Bromley	0.457	0	0.064	0.522
306 Croydon	0	0	0	0
307 Ealing	0	0.146	0.228	0.374
308 Enfield	0	0	0	0
309 Haringey	0	0	0	0
310 Harrow	0	0	0	0
311 Havering	0	0	0	0
312 Hillingdon	0	0	0	0
313 Hounslow	0	0	0	0
314 Kingston upon Thames	0.129	0	0.008	0.137
315 Merton	0	0.110	0	0.110
316 Newham	0	0	0	0
317 Redbridge	0	0	0	0
318 Richmond upon Thames	0	0	0	0
319 Sutton	0	0	0	0
320 Waltham Forest	0	0	0	0
330 Birmingham	0	0	0.223	0.223
331 Coventry	0	0	0.656	0.656
332 Dudley	0	0	0	0
333 Sandwell	0	0	0.044	0.044
334 Solihull	0	0	0	0
335 Walsall	0	0	0	0.000
336 Wolverhampton	0	0.060	0.180	0.240
340 Knowsley	0	0	0	0
341 Liverpool	0	0	0	0
342 St. Helens	0	0	0	0
343 Sefton	0.561	0	0	0.561
344 Wirral	0	0.208	0	0.208
350 Bolton	0	0	0	0
351 Bury	0	0	0	0
352 Manchester	0	0	0	0
353 Oldham	0	0	0	0
354 Rochdale	0	0	0	0
355 Salford	0	0	0	0
356 Stockport	0	0	0	0
357 Tameside	0	0	0	0
358 Trafford	0	0	0	0
395 Wigan	0	0	0	0
370 Barnsley	0	0	0	0
371 Doncaster	0.111	0	0	0.111
372 Rotherham	0	0	0.116	0.116
373 Sheffield	0	0	0	0
380 Bradford	0	0	0	0
381 Calderdale	0	0.457	0	0.457
382 Kirklees	0	0	0	0
383 Leeds	0	0	0	0
384 Wakefield	0	0	0	0
390 Gateshead	0	0.109	0	0.109
391 Newcastle upon Tyne	0	0	0.282	0.282
392 North Tyneside	0.223	0	0	0.223

Post-16 budget support grant

£ million

LEA	Category 1a	1b	2	Total
393 South Tyneside	0	0	0	0
394 Sunderland	0	0.029	0	0.029
420 Isles of Scilly	0	0	0	0
800 Bath and North East Somerset	0.426	0	0	0.426
801 Bristol, city of	0	0	0	0
802 North Somerset	0	0	0	0
803 South Gloucestershire	0.931	0.505	0	1.437
805 Hartlepool	0	0	0	0
806 Middlesbrough	0	0	0	0
807 Redcar and Cleveland	0	0	0	0
808 Stockton-on-Tees	0	0	0	0
810 Kingston upon Hill, city of	0	0	0	0
811 East Riding of Yorkshire	0.575	0	0	0.575
812 North East Lincolnshire	0	0	0	0
813 North Lincolnshire	0	0	0	0
815 North Yorkshire	1.093	0	0	1.093
816 York	0.316	0	0	0.316
820 Bedfordshire	0	0	0.190	0.190
821 Luton	0	0	0	0
825 Buckinghamshire	0	0	0.080	0.080
826 Milton Keynes	0	0	0	0
830 Derbyshire	0	0	0	0
831 Derby	0	0	0	0
835 Dorset	1.222	0	0	1.222
836 Poole	0.301	0	0	0.301
837 Bournemouth	0	0	0	0
840 Durham	0	0	0	0
841 Darlington	0	0	0	0
845 East Sussex	0	0	0.149	0.149
846 Brighton and Hove	0	0	0	0
850 Hampshire	0	0	0.010	0.010
851 Portsmouth	—	—	0	0
852 Southampton	0	0	0	0
855 Leicestershire	1.731	0.114	0	1.844
856 Leicester	0	0	0	0
857 Rutland	0	0	0	0
860 Staffordshire	0	0	0	0.000
861 Stoke-on-Trent	0	0	0	0
865 Wiltshire	0	0	0	0
866 Swindon	0	0	0	0
867 Bracknell Forest	0	0	0	0
868 Windsor and Maidenhead	0	0	0.010	0.010
869 West Berkshire	0	0.254	0.042	0.297
870 Reading	0	0	0	0
871 Slough	0	0	0	0
872 Wokingham	0	0	0	0
873 Cambridgeshire	0	0	0.094	0.094
874 Peterborough	0.428	0	0	0.428
875 Cheshire	0.387	0	0	0.387
876 Halton	0	0	0	0
877 Warrington	0	0	0	0
878 Devon	0.625	0	0	0.625
879 Plymouth	0	0	0	0
880 Torbay	0	0	0	0
881 Essex	0	0	0.243	0.243
882 Southend-on-Sea	0	0	0	0
883 Thurrock	0	0	0	0
884 Herefordshire	0	0	0	0
885 Worcestershire	0.536	0.242	0	0.778
886 Kent	0	0	0.479	0.479
887 Medway	0.041	0	0.138	0.179
888 Lancashire	0	0	0	0
889 Blackburn with Darwen	0	0	0	0
890 Blackpool	0	0	0	0
891 Nottinghamshire	0	0	0	0
892 Nottingham	0	0	0	0
893 Shropshire	0	0	0	0
894 Telford and Wrekin	0	0	0	0
908 Cornwall	0	0	0	0
909 Cumbria	0.470	0	0.009	0.478
916 Gloucestershire	0	0.397	0	0.397
919 Hertfordshire	0	0	0	0

Post-16 budget support grant

£ million

LEA	Category 1a	1b	2	Total
921 Isle of Wight	0	0	0	0
925 Lincolnshire	0	0	0.041	0.041
926 Norfolk	0	0	0.159	0.159
928 Northamptonshire	0	0	0.081	0.081
929 Northumberland	0.568	0.300	0.010	0.877
931 Oxfordshire	0	0	0.014	0.014
933 Somerset	0	0	0	0
935 Suffolk	0.466	0	0	0.466
936 Surrey	0	0	0	0
937 Warwickshire	0.672	9	0.024	0.696
938 West Sussex	0	0	0	0
Grand total	13.144	2.930	4.025	20.099

Truancy (Surrey)

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the truancy figures are for secondary schools in Surrey for each year since 1997; and how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* convictions for non-attendance at these schools there have been since 1997. [54325]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Unauthorised absence for maintained secondary schools in Surrey is as follows:

Percentage of half days missed due to unauthorised absences

Year	Percentage
1996–97	0.4
1997–98	0.4
1998–99	0.5
1999–2000	0.7
2000–01	1.0

As part of their local public service agreement, agreed with the Government in April 2001, Surrey local authority have chosen to have a target to reduce the percentage of half days missed due to unauthorised absence in primary and secondary schools.

Information on prosecutions brought under Education Act 1996, section 444 "failing to secure regular attendance at school", will be available for the first time in 'Criminal Statistics for England and Wales 2001' which will be published by the Home Office in September of this year. This section of the Act has only come on to the criminal statistics code book for 2001; previously it was grouped within all prosecutions under the Education Act 1996 and it is not possible to separate the different sections of the Act.

Selection (Schools)

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what recent assessment she has made of the relative performance of non-selective schools in areas with grammar schools, by comparison with comprehensives. [54893]

Mr. Timms: None. An assessment carried out two years ago comparing the performance at GCSE of pupils at grammar schools and their equivalent ability cohort in comprehensive schools showed a modest advantage to the latter.

HEALTH

NHS Pay

10. **Mr. Mullin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had with the *(a)* Royal College of Surgeons, *(b)* BMA and *(c)* Royal College of Nursing over pay; and if he will make a statement. [52781]

Mr. Hutton: The Department of Health is currently negotiating new contracts for consultants and other NHS staff involving the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing. A framework agreement for the new General Medical Services contract was negotiated between the NHS Confederation and the BMA's GP Committee and was published for consultation on 19 April 2002.

NHS Consultants

11. **Mr. Lyons:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many consultants were working in the NHS in 1997; and what the latest available figure is. [52782]

Yvette Cooper: In 1997, there were 21,370 consultants working in the national health service. The latest census figures (September 2001) show that there are now 25,690 working in the NHS, an increase of 20 per cent.

Harassment

12. **Richard Younger-Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many incidents of sexual abuse and harassment have been reported since the NHS guidance "Safety, privacy and dignity in mental health units" was issued in June 2000. [52783]

Jacqui Smith: The Department does not hold this information centrally, but in line with the Department's guidance issued in June 2000, there should be monitoring and recording of all incidents of violence or threatening behaviour at trust level and the board will monitor all complaints to enable identification of problems relating to the safety and dignity of patients.

Patient Lists

13. **Tony Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the right of GPs to remove patients from their list. [52784]

Mr. Hutton: General practitioners have the right to remove patients from their list but in so doing they should comply with the guidance provided by the General Medical Council. Patients should be removed only as a last resort and GPs should as far as possible give reasons for the removal. Changes to the procedures for removing patients from GP lists are being renegotiated as part of the new contract for GPs.

Child Protection

15. **Mr. Bailey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals are in place to develop the roles of Area Child Protection Committees. [52786]

Jacqui Smith: The role of Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs) is set out in Government guidance, "Working Together to Safeguard Children" published in December 1999. We are aware that the Victoria Climbie

Inquiry is discussing the role of ACPCs as part of phase two of the inquiry and we await the report of the inquiry, later this year, with interest.

Anti-smoking Measures

16. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to promote the use of laser therapy to assist smoking cessation. [52787]

Yvette Cooper: This Government are committed to promoting effective interventions that are proven to help people stop smoking. At present we are not aware of robust scientific evidence which shows that laser therapy helps people to quit.

NHS Management

17. **Mr. Todd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will reduce the number of management priorities set for the NHS. [52788]

Mr. Hutton: Yes. The Planning and Priorities Framework issued for 2002–03 contained a reduced number of priorities compared with previous years.

NHS Staff

18. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he will take to increase recruitment and retention of NHS staff. [52789]

Yvette Cooper: The Government are implementing a range of measures to improve recruitment and retention of all staff. These include improved pay, support for flexible working and child care, increasing training commissions and reducing student attrition. This work is being supported by national and local recruitment and return to practice campaigns.

21. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to encourage more people to become nurses and doctors. [52792]

Mr. Hutton: Annual national recruitment campaigns have succeeded in raising the profile of careers in the NHS and promote the NHS as an employer of choice.

Trusts and Workforce Development Confederations build on national advertisement material targeting people of all ages.

NHS careers provides information on careers and flexible entry routes.

Pharmacists

19. **Mr. Simmonds:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on dispensing fees for pharmacists. [52790]

Ms Blears: The current basic dispensing fee is 94.6 pence per prescription item.

Residential Homes

20. **Chris Grayling:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds for elderly people there were in residential homes in *(a)* May 1997 and *(b)* April 2002. [52791]

Jacqui Smith: On 31 March 1997 there were some 261,600 places for older people in residential care homes. The number of places on 31 March 2001 was 260,100, a reduction of 0.5 per cent.

Haemophiliacs

22. **Paul Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the availability of recombinant treatment to adults with haemophilia. [52793]

Yvette Cooper: Recombinant clotting factors are provided in England for new haemophilia patients and children under 16 (from April 1998). The United Kingdom Haemophilia Centre Doctor's Organisation has advised that recombinant clotting factors are available to those who are eligible to receive them.

Small Pharmacies Scheme

23. **Mr. Djanogly:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on future funding levels for the essential small pharmacies scheme. [52794]

Ms Blears: The Essential Small Pharmacy Scheme supports pharmacies providing NHS pharmaceutical services in areas which might otherwise not be well served. We review regularly the terms and conditions and levels of allowances for the Scheme.

Looked-after Children

24. **Dr. Ladyman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the Government plan to ensure more stability for looked-after children. [52795]

Jacqui Smith: Improving placement stability will be achieved by better assessment of need using the Government guidance "Framework for Assessment of Children In Need and their Families", and by placing children in appropriate well-supported placements.

In addition to the current work to maximise permanence through adoption, the Government is now carrying out 'Choice Protects', a review of commissioning placements and fostering services. This review aims to help councils deliver improved services for their looked after children.

Waiting Times

25. **Patrick Mercer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have been waiting 13 weeks or more to see a consultant; and what the figure was on 31 March 1997. [52796]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham) earlier today.

NHS Dental Services (Lancashire)

26. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received on NHS dental service provision in Lancashire. [52797]

Jacqui Smith:

Since the beginning of October last year, Ministers have replied to three Parliamentary Questions and one letter from an hon. Member on this subject.

NHS Debt

27. **Mr. Hunter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the increase in funding for the NHS announced in the Budget will be used to write off the debts of those health authorities and NHS trusts that are in debt. [52798]

Mr. Hutton: No.

Resources will continue to be allocated on the basis of the relative needs of Primary Care Trust populations.

It will be used to build capacity to allow more patients to be treated and more people cared for more quickly and to higher standards.

Hospital-acquired Infections

28. **Mr. Mark Field:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress towards a reduction in hospital-acquired infections. [52799]

Yvette Cooper: For the first time this February we published methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus rates for all English acute hospital trusts. This will provide a baseline to measure improvements in hospital acquired infection. A range of actions to reduce HAI is under way and a targeted action plan is being developed as part of the infectious disease strategy.

Patient Referral

29. **Mr. Lilley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will restore patients' rights to seek referral by their general practitioners for publicly funded treatment in any NHS hospital. [52800]

Mr. Hutton: Previous arrangements only gave some general practitioners, not patients, choice over where patients were treated. We are committed to giving all patients choice, for the first time, over where and when they are treated. By 2005, all patients, together with their GPs, will be able to choose the date, time and place of their treatment.

Through the additional resources made available to the national health service each year, we are demonstrating our commitment by piloting patient choice from July 2002. Funding for the NHS announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer further demonstrates this commitment.

Hospices

31. **Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will increase funding for hospices to compensate for higher national insurance contributions. [52802]

Yvette Cooper: The Government are making an extra £50 million available for specialist palliative care, including hospices by 2004. This investment must be based on locally agreed strategic plans for palliative care. We are monitoring progress in providing this extra investment. We would expect the national health service to take all matters including national insurance contributions into consideration when deciding the level of funding for hospices.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of in-patient hospice services are provided by the independent charitable sector. [48722]

Yvette Cooper: About 80 per cent. of all in-patient specialist palliative care beds are provided in voluntary hospices.

NHS Dentistry

32. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what incentives are given to dentists to practise within the NHS in socially deprived areas. [52803]

Ms Blears: Health authorities have the power to commission local personal dental services contracts with dentists. This provides for the occasional treatment of non-registered patients and is particularly useful in making up shortfalls in urgent treatment. The Government supported this scheme with over £1 million funding in 2001–02 and we are currently considering ways of building on this provision during 2002–03.

This is an especially valuable service to patients in deprived areas where registrations with dentists are particularly low. In addition, dental access centres are increasing opportunities for employment of salaried dentists in a number of socially deprived areas.

37. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of *(a)* children and *(b)* adults in England are registered with an NHS dentist. [52808]

Ms Blears: 60 per cent. of children and 43 per cent. of adults were registered with a General Dental Service (GDS) dentist in England at 28 February 2002.

38. **Charlotte Atkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on NHS dental services. [52809]

Ms Blears: Arrangements are now in place to ensure that patients can gain access to National Health Services simply by calling NHS Direct. This means that even if a patient chooses not to register with a dentist it will still be possible for that patient to access all forms of dentistry that are provided by the NHS.

Over the last 18 months we have spent £100 million on modernising NHS dentistry. £10 million of this was for the dental care development fund and the dentistry action plan fund to support local plans to improve access. This money enables health authorities to assist dentists seeking to set up new practices and to expand and modernise existing ones.

The modernising project "Options for Change" is looking at all aspects of the delivery of dental care, and has involved the profession at a high level throughout.

Officials have developed a positive relationship with the profession, and are continuing to work with them to improve the remuneration system, and provide incentives for dentists to remain in the NHS. This year the commitment payment scheme, which has been well received by the profession, was extended to include dentists with five years of service in the NHS.

Senior Health Managers

33. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to establish an international centre of excellence for the training of senior health managers. [52804]

Mr. Hutton: The NHS Modernisation Agency and NHS Leadership Centre provide leading edge training for senior health managers and clinicians drawing on national and international experts in the fields of leadership development, strategic change management and service redesign. Close links are being made with the National Health Service University as it develops its curriculum.

Property Prices

34. **Hugh Bayley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of rising property prices on the number of private nursing and residential care homes. [52805]

Jacqui Smith: The Department is funding the personal social services research unit to examine the reasons behind home closures. The most commonly cited cause was found to be business failure. Among the other factors identified was the high value of property, making it attractive for care home owners to cash in their investments.

As announced on 17 April by my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, we are increasing the resources for personal social services by an annual average of 6 per cent. in real terms from 2003–04 to 2005–06. Local authorities will be able to use these substantial extra resources to stabilise the care home market and to enable them to pay fair and realistic fee levels.

Alcohol Abuse

35. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the costs to the national health service in this financial year of alcohol abuse; and if he will make a statement. [52806]

Ms Blears: Three independent studies have been undertaken looking at the costs of alcohol abuse.

In 1987 a study by Godfrey and Maynard estimated the cost to the National Health Service was £400 million. A further study by Godfrey and Hardman in 1994 estimated the cost to the NHS in 1992 was around £200 million. The most recent study by the Royal College of Physician published in 2001 estimated the cost as £3 billion.

39. **Rev. Martin Smyth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on steps he is taking to deal with alcohol abuse and its impact on health services. [52810]

Ms Blears: We are undertaking a number of initiatives to reduce alcohol misuse, for the benefit of both patients and public services. These include work on health promotion and education, the piloting of a new alcohol training course for general practitioners and practice nurses to help them to support patients who need to cut down on their alcohol consumption, the funding of nearly 500 alcohol treatment services in England and cracking down on violence towards NHS staff through the NHS zero tolerance zone campaign. The national strategy to tackle alcohol misuse, which the Department will be implementing by 2004, will also consider the impact of alcohol misuse on the public services and wider society.

40. **Ross Cranston:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the availability of alcohol care services. [52811]

Ms Blears: A recent study carried out for the Department indicated that there were nearly 500 alcohol treatment services in England. The provision of alcohol treatment services is principally a local matter. Primary care trusts carry out assessments of local need and commission services to meet that need.

Dispensing Fees

36. **Angela Watkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on dispensing fees for pharmacists. [52807]

Ms Blears: The current basic dispensing fee is 94.6 pence per prescription item.

Maternity Statistics

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what maternity statistics the Government plan to publish; and by what means and when user organisations will be involved in discussions on this. [38776]

Yvette Cooper: The third in the series of statistical bulletins "NHS Maternity Statistics, England", covering data for the years 1998–99 to 2000–01, was published in April 2002. This contained similar information to that in the second bulletin, "NHS Maternity Statistics, England", 1995–96 to 1997–98, which is available in the Library and also on the website at http://www.doh.gov.uk/public/sb0114.htm.

Following publication it is planned to consult the health statistics users' group regarding the content of future bulletins.

The NHS Maternity Statistics bulletin is produced by the Department and summarises information from the Hospital Episodes (HES) System relating to NHS maternities in England. It contains information such as labour onset method and delivery method, including caesarean rates, at hospital/trust level. It also has regional information about the place of delivery, length of stay in hospital, use of episiotomy, type of anaesthetic used, and national information for numbers of singleton and multiple deliveries by birthweight and gestation and day of week of delivery. Tables also show percentages of pregnancies and deliveries with antenatal and postnatal problems by diagnosis and delivery method and similar tables for problems with the newborn.

The first bulletin was published in December 1997 and covered the first six years of maternity HES 1989–90 to 1994–95. The second bulletin published in June 2001 covered data for the next three years 1995–96 to 1997–98. Data for 1998–99 to 2000–01 was published in April 2002. It is expected that the bulletin will then be published annually.

Variant CJD

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he has assessed the costs to the NHS of instruments destroyed following the CJD incident panel consultation report. [41803]

Ms Blears: The CJD Incident Panel consultation is not yet complete. An open meeting is planned on 17 April 2002 to discuss the results of the public consultation process.

Information on national health service instruments destroyed or removed from general circulation is not routinely collected. Nevertheless, based on Panel advice to date, the Department is aware of the destruction of three pairs of NHS forceps, together valued at approximately £100. This does not take account of action taken by individual trusts on their own initiative in cases where the panel's advice has not been formally sought.

Health Checks (Over-75s)

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve take-up of over-75 health checks. [42087]

Jacqui Smith: The Department will review the effectiveness of the over-75 health check, and the relationship to the single assessment process for older people, in the light of results from comprehensive research commissioned by the Department and the Medical Research Council. Findings will be reported in 2003.

Cataract Operations

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what reduction in waiting times for cataract operations there has been in South Staffordshire since 1997. [42509]

Yvette Cooper: The table shows information on ophthalmology in-patient waiting times for South Staffordshire health authority. (Ophthalmology data include cataract operations).

Ophthalmology waiting lists for South Staffordshire health authority

	Over 18 months	*Over 15 months*	*Over 12 months*
1997–98	0	0	31
1998–99	0	0	29
1999–2000	0	0	107
2000–01	0	0	23
2001–02	0	0	0
Reduction on 1997 (percentage)	—	—	100

Source:
Department of Health

Medical Services

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to improve access to medical services for individuals whose first language is not English. [42406]

Ms Blears: The NHS Plan recognises that we live in a diverse society and sets out as core principles that the national health service will shape its services around the needs of the patient, be responsive to the needs of different groups and individuals within society and challenge discrimination on the grounds of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability and sexuality.

The NHS Plan sets out a target of having translation and interpreting services available throughout the country by 2003. The Department has designated NHS Direct as the gateway to the whole NHS for those whose first language is not English by 2003. These services will be a pivotal building block in achieving the patient-centred services envisaged in the NHS Plan and the targets set in the national service frameworks. The development of telephone based support via NHS Direct and organisations such as language line (used in the NHS walk-in centres) offer alternatives to help with the delivery of languages needed in a co-ordinated way.

The vital connection also sets out the need for local health and other organisations to develop integrated communication strategies as part of the health improvement and modernisation plans.

Also, the NHS Plan includes a commitment that from 2002 it will be a pre-condition of qualification to delivering care in the NHS, that an individual has demonstrated competence in communications with patients. Plans to deliver on this target include the development of core curriculum in communication skills.

It is the responsibility of primary care trusts to ensure that the local health service reflects the needs of local communities.

Accident Response Times

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average response times were for the medical services to reach an accident on *(a)* a motorway and *(b)* an A-road in each of the last three years. [42785]

Ms Blears: I refer the hon. Member to the response I gave her on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 456W.

Departmental Functions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the functions of his Department that have been *(a)* market tested and *(b)* outsourced in each of the last five years, specifying the (i) money saving and (ii) percentage saving in each case. [42998]

Ms Blears: The Department ran market-testing programmes in 1995 and 1997, which generated substantial savings.

Market testing was subsequently replaced by Better Quality Services (BQS) initiative in July 1998, which was introduced to ensure that all services provided by central Government are regularly reviewed and that action is taken to achieve improvements.

Hospital Admissions

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many in-patient admissions there were to Shropshire hospitals in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000 and *(d)* 2000–01. [44679]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 March 2002]:* The information requested is shown in the table.

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Royal Shrewsbury Hospital NHS Trust	50,947	53,611	53,845	54,489
Princess Royal Hospital NHS Trust	23,288	24,311	25,660	26,418
Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Trust	7,148	8,431	8,832	9,307
Shropshire Community and Mental Health Services NHS Trust	1,680	4,449	4,297	4,304

Child and Family Support Service

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people are employed in the Child and Family Support Service. [45486]

Jacqui Smith: Information on the whole-time equivalent number of staff employed by councils with social services responsibilities in England in relation to child and family support services at 30 September 2001 is shown in the table. These figures exclude central and strategic staff and certain other categories of staff who provide more generic services across the range of council responsibilities. No information is available centrally on the numbers of people in the private and voluntary sectors who are providing services to children and families on behalf of councils with social services responsibilities.

Staff employed by councils with social services responsibilities in England on child and family support services—whole time equivalent at 30 September 2001

Type of staff	*Number*
Area office staff (including social work staff)	21,380
Day care staff	
Family centres	3,715
Nurseries and play groups	2,260
Residential care staff	
Children with learning disabilities	2,045
Community homes for children looked after	8,685
Occupational therapists	105

Source:
Form SSDS001, annual return of staff employed in social services departments made by local authorities to the Department of Health.

Hospitals (Shropshire)

Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the budgets for *(a)* the Royal Shrewsbury hospital, *(b)* the Princess Royal hospital, Telford and *(c)* the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt hospital in each year since 1995. [45732]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 25 March 2002]:* Budgets for the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital NHS Trust, the Princess Royal Hospital NHS Trust and the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt NHS Trust from 1998 to 2001.

£000

	Trust			
Financial year	*Princess Royal*	*Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt*	*Royal Shrewsbury*	*Total*
1998–99	36,212	25,723	69,406	131,341
1999–2000	40,216	30,447	84,600	155,263
2000–01	43,770	32,077	80,280	156,127

Source:
Annual accounts of the Princess Royal Hospital NHS Trust, the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Hospital NHS Trust and the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital Trust.

The budgets have been assumed to be the total income of the trusts during the financial years for which information is readily available.

Smoking

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of adults smoked in each year since 1992 *(a)* in total and *(b)* by social class. [45781]

Yvette Cooper: Smoking prevalence among the adult population (persons aged 16 and over) in England is measured by the General Household Survey; figures are available by manual and non-manual socio-economic group.

The latest results available are from the 2000 survey. In surveys prior to 2000, the results have been presented as unweighted data to compensate for under-representation of people in some groups. Therefore, 1998 data have been presented in the table as both weighted and unweighted to allow for comparisons between 1992 to 1998 (unweighted) and 1998 to 2000 (weighted).

Prevalence of cigarette smoking since 1992—All persons, and by whether household reference person is in a non-manual or manual socio-economic group[1]: 1992 to 2000, England

Percentage

	Unweighted				*Weighted*	
Persons aged 16 and over	*1992*[3]	*1994*[3]	*1996*[3]	*1998*	*1998*	*2000*
Non-manual	23	21	22	21	22	23
Manual	33	32	34	32	33	31
All persons	28	26	28	27	28	27

[1] Head of household in years before 2000. Persons whose head of household/household reference person was in the armed forces or a full-time student are not shown as separate categories, but are included in the totals.
[2] Trend tables show unweighted and weighted figures for 1998 to allow for direct comparison between 1998 and 2000 and to give an indication of the effect of the weighting.
[3] Figures for 1992 to 1996 are taken from the Department of Health Statistical Bulletin "Statistics on Smoking: England, 1978 onwards".
Source:
Office for National Statistics "Living in Britian: results from the 2000 General Household Survey"
London Stationery Office

Whistleblowers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures are in place to ensure that district general nurses have protection if they blow the whistle on care homes that are suspected of failing standards. [45699]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 26 March 2002]:* We expect a climate of openness and dialogue in the national health service and a culture and environment that encourages staff to feel able to raise concerns about healthcare matters sensibly and responsibly without fear of victimisation.

Guidance issued in Health Service Circular (HSC) 1999/198 on 27 August 1999 reinforced the above message. The HSC stated that all NHS trusts and health authorities are expected to issue guidance to staff so that they know how to raise concerns in a reasonable and responsible way. The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (PIDA) gives significant statutory protection to employees who disclose information reasonably and responsibly in the public interest and are victimised as a result.

All employees would be protected for raising concerns with their employees under PIDA. District general nurses who may be employed either by the NHS, a local authority or the private sector can now raise concerns with the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC) who is responsible for inspecting the quality of service provided in a variety of care establishments.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Energy Management Scheme for the North Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative. [49514]

Ms Blears: The business case justifying the individual schemes estimated the net savings in present value terms (ie all future costs and benefits discounted to their present values) compared with publicly funding the scheme as follows:

Net present costs of PSC v PFI option

£000s

Trust	PFI	Public	[1]Savings	Difference
North Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust	3,914	4,340	426	11%

[1] In net present value terms.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Graylingwell hospital reprovision for the Sussex Weald and Downs NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative. [49542]

Ms Blears: The business case justifying the individual schemes estimated the net savings in present value terms (ie future costs and benefits discounted to their present values) compared with publicly funding the scheme as follows:

Net present costs of PSC v PFI option

£000s

Trust	PFI	Public	[1]Savings	Difference
West Sussex Health and Social Care NHS Trust	3,772	3,491	281	7.45%

[1] In net present value terms.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Patient Management Centre for the North Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative. [49523]

Ms Blears: The business case justifying the individual schemes estimated the net savings in present value terms (ie all future costs and benefits discounted to their present values) compared with publicly funding the scheme as follows:

Net present costs of PSC v PFI option

£000s

Trust	PFI	Public	[1]Savings	Difference
North Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust	2,081	2,289	208	10%

[1] In net present value terms.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the private finance initiative contract for the MRI Scanner for the North Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust by comparison with a non-private finance initiative alternative. [49527]

Ms Blears: The business case justifying the individual schemes estimated the net savings in present value terms (ie all future costs and benefits discounted to their present values) compared with publicly funding the scheme as follows:

North Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust

	Net present costs of PSC v. PFI option
PFI (£000)	2,487
Public (£000)	3,130
Savings in net present value terms (£000)	643
Percentage difference	26

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many staff were involved in each of the last three years in preparing draft answers to written parliamentary questions; [49140]

(2) what the cost was to his Department of answering written parliamentary questions in 2001; and how that cost was calculated. [49098]

Ms Blears: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council on 17 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 929W.

Correspondence

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter of 11 March from the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West enclosing correspondence from Mrs. Galloway. [48732]

Ms Blears: A reply was sent to the hon. Member on 22 April.

NHS (Adverse Incidents)

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to issue guidance to implement a new system for independent investigations and inquiries into adverse incidents in the NHS; and whether this will replace HSG (94) 27. [49776]

Ms Blears: In the report "Building a safer NHS for patients" published in June 2000, the Department set out its proposals for a new system for managing and reporting adverse events in the national health service which involved patients. This guidance will be issued within the next 12 months.

Health service guidelines (HSG) (94) 27 provides guidance for the health service on investigations into the care and circumstances of people in contact with specialist mental health services who commit homicide. "Building a safer NHS for patients" stated that such investigations would be covered in the new guidance; further guidance will be issued over the next year. In the meantime HSG (94) 27 remains in force.

Marfan Syndrome

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been invested in research into Marfan syndrome since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [48845]

Ms Blears: The main Government agency for research into the causes of and treatments for disease is the Medical Research Council (MRC) which receives its funding via the Department of Trade and Industry. The MRC's total spend on Marfan syndrome since 1997 is approximately £3.5 million.

The Department funds research to support policy and the delivery of effective practice in health and social care. The Department also provides national health service support funding for research commissioned by the research councils and charities that takes place in the NHS. Management of much of the research supported by national health service research and development funding is devolved and expenditure at project level is not held centrally by the Department.

Details of ongoing and recently completed research projects funded by, or of interest to, the NHS are available on the National Research Register (NRR) at www.doh.gov.uk/research/nrr.htm. The NRR projects database show that there are currently two ongoing and 23 completed research projects related to Marfan syndrome.

Strokes and Dysphasia

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what speech therapy treatment is available to patients recovering from strokes and sufferers from dysphasia who are under 65 years of age in the New Forest; and if he will make a statement. [49016]

Ms Blears: Information on the location of local services is not collected centrally.

We recognise that there is a need nationally for additional speech and language therapists. The NHS Plan, published in 2000, announced an increase in the number of training places for therapists and other health professionals, including speech and language therapists. By 2004 we intend to have established 4,450 more training places.

Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy

Mr. Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total level of Government funding for research specifically related to Duchenne muscular dystrophy in the last six years has been; and what percentage this represents of the Government's total commitment to medical research in the last six years. [51141]

Jacqui Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon (Dr. Hywel Francis) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones) today.

Dr. Francis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how much funding went into research that is directly related to finding a cure for Duchenne muscular dystrophy in the last 12 months; [51830]

(2) what percentage of the Government's annual medical research budget research on finding a cure for Duchenne muscular dystrophy represented in the last 12 months; [51831]

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information he has collated on total funding in each of the past three years for research on Duchenne's muscular dystrophy. [52050]

Jacqui Smith: The main agency through which the Government supports medical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council (MRC). The MRC is an independent body which receives its grant-in-aid from the Office of Science and Technology.

In the last six years the Medical Research Council (MRC) has spent around £3.8 million on muscular dystrophy as a whole. It is not possible to pull out Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy spending from this total, as much of the work is basic in nature and could apply to all forms of the disease. This represents 0.2 per cent. of the MRC's gross expenditure over this period.

MRC spending on muscular dystrophy research for 2001–02 is an estimated £950,000 which represents 0.24 per cent. of the total £394 million gross expenditure.

MRC spend in muscular dystrophy research for the last three years is in the table:

£

	MRC spend
1999–2000	587,000
2000–01	1,108,000
2001–02	950,000

Note:

Figures for 2001–02 are estimates only. The figure for 2000–01 is higher than the £920,000 previously notified in parliamentary questions, UIN numbers 37124 and 37125 which we replied to on 26 February 2002. The MRC has now been able to produce a revised figure for spending on muscular dystrophy.

Clinical and laboratory services for Duchenne muscular dystrophy are available through existing networks of regional genetics centres. There has been an increased level of investment in genetic services in general. In his speech in April 2001 my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a £30 million investment aimed at improving national health service genetics services, which families of people suffering from Duchenne muscular dystrophy will benefit from.

The Department has provided support over the last decade to the umbrella charity the genetic interest group, of which the Duchenne family support group is a member organisation. This funding has been targeted to a range of initiatives intended to raise awareness of all inherited diseases.

Alcohol Awareness

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to raise awareness of the issue of alcohol consumption among children of primary school age. [51557]

Ms Blears: Drug education, including alcohol education, in maintained schools is statutory part of the national curriculum. At Key Stage 2, 7 to 11-year-olds should learn that tobacco, alcohol and other drugs can have harmful effects.

In addition to this, three years of focused effort has increased awareness among teachers and pupils of the dangers of alcohol misuse by:

the production of guidance for schools;

the launch of the joint Department of Health and Department of Education and Skills National Healthy School Standard (NHSS) in October 1999, of which drug, alcohol and tobacco education is a key component; and

the publication of the Personal, Social and Health Education Framework (PSHE) in November 1999.

Miss Begg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the Government's alcohol strategy will include a framework for raising awareness of the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption when pregnant. [51825]

Ms Blears: We believe that it is important to ensure that women are aware of the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption during pregnancy and we will certainly consider ways in which the national strategy to tackle alcohol misuse could be used to raise awareness.

Alcohol Consumption (Students)

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had regarding binge drinking and excessive alcohol consumption among the UK student population; and what plans he has to limit the form and content of alcohol advertising. [51555]

Ms Blears: The Government work closely with the alcohol industry and regularly conducts meetings with a wide range of organisations within the industry. The Portman Group, which represents a range of bodies, is closely involved in meetings with Ministers and departmental officials and is consulted on policy developments along with other interested bodies and individuals. Alcohol advertising is governed by a voluntary code of practise which works well and there are no current plans to limit the form or content of alcohol advertising. The code of practise ensures alcohol advertising is socially responsible, and does not specifically target young people. All authorities operate complaints procedures.

Student Doctors

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer given to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham on 8 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 674W, on student doctors, how many students who registered to study medicine degree courses, subsequently dropped out of their courses before completion. [53322]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* I have been asked to reply.

The available information on non-completion rates is contained in "Performance Indicators in Higher Education in the UK" published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This gives an overall non-completion rate for all full-time first degree courses of 17 per cent., but this figure is not available for individual subjects. The UK has the second lowest dropout rate among OECD comparator courses.

Personal Allowances

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on augmenting the personal allowances from pensions payable in care homes to take into account the level of savings of the individual pensioner. [53940]

Jacqui Smith: We intend that pensioners in residential care and nursing homes will gain from pension credit as other pensioners do. The Department is currently considering the details for achieving this.

Ambulances

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many ambulances there are in *(a)* England, *(b)* the West Midlands and *(c)* Coventry; and how many on average have been operational at any one time in the last 12 months; [53936]

(2) what measures he has taken since 1997 to increase the number of available ambulances. [53937]

Ms Blears: Information on the number of ambulance vehicles, and the number that are operational at any one time, is not collected centrally.

In 1999–2000, an additional £21 million was invested recurrently in additional frontline ambulance staff and vehicles.

Health Services (Solihull)

Mr. John Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate *(a)* the additional revenues accruing to Her Majesty's Government in national insurance contributions from the constituency of Solihull and *(b)* the additional resources which will be available to improve health services in Solihull as a result of the Budget. [52488]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested in regard to national insurance contributions is not available. However, I can confirm that as a result of the Budget, the national health service in England will receive an annual average real terms growth in resources of 7.4 per cent. for the five years from 2003–04 to 2007–08. Local allocations to primary care trusts will be announced later this year.

Capital Allocations

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will set out for each *(a)* NHS region, *(b)* health authority and *(c)* NHS trust for each quarter of each of the last four years the (i) monetary value of approvals to use capital for revenue purposes, (ii) the number of approvals and (iii) the total capital allocation. [41846]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 12 March 2002]:* The majority of the information requested is contained in the tables which have been placed in the Library. Data is only readily available in the format requested for the last two financial years. Information about the number of approvals is not collected by the Department in the format requested.

Food Standards Agency

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to page 37 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency, what are the wider enforcement issues of relevance to the agency and its stakeholders that have been considered by the local authority enforcement liaison group. [49223]

Yvette Cooper: The local authority enforcement liaison group, which in November 2001 became the enforcement liaison group, has considered a number of issues that are not specifically covered by the framework agreement on local authority food law enforcement. These include: food surveillance mechanisms; sampling of imported foods; the Food Standard Agency's (FSA) communications strategy; schemes to increase the transparency of hygiene standards in food businesses; support for local authority food law enforcement work; traceability in the food chain; issues arising form the FSA's monitoring and audit of local authorities; and funding arrangements for local authority enforcement services.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the quality of the website of the Food Standards Agency. [49072]

Yvette Cooper: The structure of the Food Standards Agency's (FSA) new website, launched on 10 December 2001, reflects the FSA's core values of independence, openness and accessibility and has been well received by consumers and stakeholders. This is reflected in the considerable rise in traffic to the site.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the new cross-cutting arrangements for dealing with food incidents referred to on page 34 of the 2001 Food Standards Agency report were in place to coincide with the move of the Food Standards Agency to Aviation house. [49212]

Yvette Cooper: The arrangements for dealing with food incidents were reviewed prior to the move to Aviation house in spring 2001, and a new incidents room was established within the new office building. Subsequently a Food Standards Agency (FSA) wide food incidents committee has been established to monitor the FSA's handling of incidents.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action has been taken by his Department further to the Service Delivery Agreement target of the Food Standards Agency to publish a consultation document on future labelling policy. [49251]

Yvette Cooper: The Food Standards Agency (FSA) published a wide-ranging action plan on food labelling in September 2000 based upon issues identified as priorities in public consultation and consumer research. The FSA is consulting stakeholders on each individual initiative in the action plan as it is taken forward.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many open fora of the Food Standards Agency have been held since 31 May 2000. [49254]

Yvette Cooper: The Food Standards Agency held an open forum at Villa Park, Birmingham on 31 May 2000, where members of the public were invited to give their views on how the agency should operate and what they saw as its priorities. Since then, the agency has held six similarly wide ranging open fora on food issues in Cardiff (May 2001), Dundee (June 2001), Bristol (September 2001), London (November 2001), Orkney (November 2001), and Inverness (November 2001). The agency has also held numerous public meetings across the UK dealing with specific issues such as the agency's review of BSE controls, BSE and sheep, food labelling, nutrition, genetic modification and folic acid fortification.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the agreed recommendations of the Pooley report which are within the remit of the Food Standards Agency have been implemented. [49244]

Yvette Cooper: There were originally 29 recommendations in the Pooley report for the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to take forward, including those relating to meat inspection and the work of the meat hygiene service. One of these recommendations was subsequently transferred by agreement to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Of the remaining current 28 recommendations for the FSA, six require EU approval, and these are being worked on; 11 have been completed; 10 are being acted on; and one requires action this year.

Progress on all these matters is detailed on the FSA website at http://www.food.gov.uk/foodindustry/meat/redtapegroup and is updated monthly.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the result was of the discussions referred to on page 42 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency, between the Food Standards Agency and the trade unions about reviewing the FSA's pay arrangements; [49209]

(2) if he will make a statement on the result of the approach by the Food Standards Agency to the Cabinet Office, referred to on page 42 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency, in pursuit of pay delegation. [49233]

Yvette Cooper: Pay delegation approval was obtained from the Cabinet Office in 2001 for the Food Standards Agency to develop and negotiate agency-specific pay arrangements. A two-year pay agreement was reached with the trade unions, effective from 1 August 2001.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action has been taken following the publication in February 2001 of the final report on the consumer surveys of attitudes towards food issues and the Food Standards Agency. [49252]

Yvette Cooper: The results of the Food Standards Agency's annual consumer attitudes survey are used to track changes in consumer preferences, attitudes and behaviour and to inform agency priorities and activities. Since the publication of the first survey in February 2001, the second survey has been published and key changes noted. Consumer priorities, behaviours and concerns continue to be reflected in agency priorities and activities. These include meat safety including BSE, food poisoning, food hygiene in catering outlets, feed given to livestock, pesticides, food labelling and healthy eating.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the extent to which the Food Standards Agency has met its service delivery agreement to increase the availability of its research results. [49075]

Yvette Cooper: The Food Standards Agency has improved the availability of its research results through publishing reports on its website, press releases, information leaflets and articles in popular and specialist publications. In addition, the agency encourages its research contractors to publish research results in the scientific press.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if the target date of April 2001 for the development of the IiP action plan for the Food Standards Agency was met; [49226]

(2) if he will make a statement on the deferral of the IiP website, referred to on page 41 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency. [49230]

Yvette Cooper: Since the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency was prepared, the criteria in the assessment method for obtaining IiP accreditation have changed. Given the cyclical nature of some of the key processes, such as business planning and performance appraisal, the target date of April 2001 was deferred. The FSA now plans to begin to seek accreditation by the end of 2002. In support of this an action plan has been developed. The IiP website for the agency has also been established and is available to all staff.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the consultation *(a)* began and *(b)* ended on the hazard analysis and critical control points strategy prepared by the Food Standards Agency; [49239]

(2) with reference to the 2000 spending review service delivery agreement targets, what percentage of food premises have implemented HACCP food safety management systems; [49235]

(3) when the Food Standards Agency strategy was implemented for the promotion of hazard analysis and critical control points throughout the food chain. [49238]

Yvette Cooper: The paper on the hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP) strategy, which was submitted to the board of the Food Standards Agency in November 2001, was produced following consultation with a range of organisations and relevant stakeholders.

On the basis of a questionnaire sent to UK local authorities in September 2001, the FSA estimates that about 20 per cent. of food businesses operate HACCP based controls.

The FSA is now considering detailed measures to take forward the HACCP action plan to implement the HACCP strategy.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what action has been taken following the Research Review Group chaired by Sir John Arbuthnot review of the Food Standards Agency's future strategy for research; [49224]

(2) if he will make a statement on the outcome of the review of the Food Standards Agency's research programme. [49253]

Yvette Cooper: The agency's board has accepted all 34 recommendations of the review of the Food Standards Agency's research portfolio and research management system. Thirteen of these recommendations have been implemented already in the 10 months since the report of the review was published, in July 2001. The agency aims to complete the remaining 21 recommendations over the next four years.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what improvements have been made by the Food Standards Agency to hygiene assessment scores, as referred to on page 28 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency. [49242]

Yvette Cooper: Information on the performance of the meat hygiene service (MHS) against its targets for the year ended 31 March 2001, including that in relation to the improvement in hygiene standards in plants with low hygiene assessment system (HAS) scores, is currently being assembled in order for an assessment to be carried out and reported to the board of the Food Standards Agency. The outcome will be reported in the MHS's annual report and accounts which will be laid before Parliament before the House rises for the summer.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on development work around diversity issues, referred to on page 41 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency; [49228]

(2) if he will make a statement on the preparation of the Food Standards Agency's diversity strategy. [49232]

Yvette Cooper: Development work has covered a range of diversity issues including the recruitment and development of agency staff, diversity training and the setting of agency-specific targets. A diversity action plan has been produced.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the introduction of 360-degree feedback for the senior civil service, referred to on page 41 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency. [49214]

Yvette Cooper: The first 360-degree feedback programme for members of the senior civil service in the Food Standards Agency has been completed.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what unannounced State Veterinary Service audits have been conducted by the Food Standards Agency in fresh meat establishments as referred to on page 28 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency. [49243]

Yvette Cooper: In the period 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 the State Veterinary Service made 173 unannounced visits to fresh meat premises. The purpose of these visits was to audit the Meat Hygiene Service enforcement of the controls on specified risk material.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to the service delivery agreement referred to on page 26 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency, what new approaches that harness recent developments in e-technology have been published to provide advice for consumers. [49074]

Yvette Cooper: The Food Standards Agency website www.food.gov.uk provides an e-mail subscription facility which updates consumers and other stakeholders with food-related news and advice, including food hazard warnings, as they are published. The website is also available as a wireless application protocol facility.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which outside specialists, referred to on page 26 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency, have been appointed to carry out qualitative consumer market research on food safety and standards; and at what cost. [49071]

Yvette Cooper: The reference on page 26 is to quantitative market research. The Food Standards Agency annual consumer attitudes survey is conducted by Taylor Nelson Sofres under Central Office of Information management. The research agency was appointed following a competitive tendering process.

Costs for the most recent survey (conducted in autumn 2001 and published in February 2002) totalled £150,000.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many and what proportion of local authorities have been covered by the Food Standards Agency's targeted audit programme encompassing law reforming local authorities. [49240]

Yvette Cooper: In line with the targets published in the 2000 spending review service delivery agreement, the Food Standards Agency audited 10 per cent. of local authority food law enforcement services during 2001–02. Local authorities were selected for audit to represent a cross section of authority types, which included low performing local authorities. During 2001–02, 40 local authorities in England, 32 local authorities in Scotland and two in Wales were audited. In Northern Ireland, all five authorities scheduled for audit this year will have been audited by May 2002.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if electronic transmissions of the quarterly returns of local authorities to the Food Standards Agency is undertaken by all local authorities. [49217]

Yvette Cooper: The vast majority of UK local authorities have submitted their final returns for 2001–02 in an electronic format and others are in the process of doing so. A small number of local authorities are, due to local IT difficulties, unable to make their return electronically. The agency has agreed these local authorities can submit data clerically, and is giving advice on resolving the IT difficulties.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the pieces of independent advice to Ministers which have been published by the Food Standards Agency since its inception. [49076]

Yvette Cooper: The agency routinely publishes advice to Ministers on issues of public importance and interest.

Since its inception the Food Standards Agency has published, for example, significant advice to Ministers on:

The public health implications of the contamination of certain crops with GM seeds

The proposed MAFF strategy for Scrapie in sheep

The immediate implications of the report of the BSE inquiry

Its review of BSE controls

The need for measures relating to BSE in French beef

Implementation of EU maximum residue levels for pesticides.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the outcome was of the national programme of Food Standards Agency seminars arranged for January to March 2001 to improve the quality of local authority monitoring returns. [49210]

Yvette Cooper: 12 seminars were conducted in the UK during the period, with a thirteenth in Northern Ireland in July. Some 650 local authority officers received half a day's training and guidance from agency officials on the new monitoring arrangements to be implemented with the introduction of the framework agreement.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the results of the baseline survey by the Food Standards Agency of salmonella in UK retail poultry. [49219]

Yvette Cooper: The Food Standards Agency survey of fresh and frozen raw chicken on retail sale was carried out between April and June 2001. The overall salmonella contamination level was 5.8 per cent. and these preliminary findings were announced on 16 August 2001.

The level of salmonella contamination is markedly lower than in previous surveys of retail chicken in the UK. The findings from the 2001 survey indicate that substantial progress has been made in tackling this problem in the UK and, as a result, the agency's target of reducing salmonella contamination of UK retail chicken by 50 per cent. in five years has been met ahead of schedule.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to the 2000 spending review service delivery agreement targets, if an audit unit within the Food Standards Agency in Scotland and an agreed local authority audit scheme were in place by April 2001. [49236]

Yvette Cooper: From 1 April 2001, The Food Standards Agency Scotland have had permanent staff appointed to carry out programmed audits of local authorities in Scotland.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action has *(a)* been taken and *(b)* is planned, following the informal consultations by the Food Standards Agency on a proposal for an agency register of food business convictions. [49211]

Yvette Cooper: The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is not proposing to proceed with the establishment of a national register of food business convictions at this time as this would not provide the most effective means for increasing the transparency of standards in food businesses. The FSA is, however, considering other options for achieving increased transparency.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the latest annual survey of consumer attitudes towards food issues and the Food Standards Agency published by the Food Standards Agency. [49047]

Yvette Cooper: The 2001 study is the second annual survey of over 3,100 people across the UK. As in 2000, food poisoning (59 per cent.) and BSE (55 per cent.) remained the major issues of concern. Nearly half of those questioned felt that food safety standards had improved in the last year. The survey revealed a significant increase in awareness of and confidence in the Food Standards Agency between 2000 and 2001.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the Welsh translation of the Food Standards Agency teaching packs "Aliens in our Food", and "The Adventures of Safe-T and the H-Squad" has been prepared. [49220]

Yvette Cooper: Welsh language versions of these resources have been developed and copies were distributed by Food Standards Agency Wales to all primary and secondary schools in Wales, as appropriate, during 2000.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to 2000 spending review service delivery agreement targets referred to on page 28 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency, what audits of local authorities targeting specific policy issues are to be undertaken by the Food Standards Agency in 2002–03. [49237]

Yvette Cooper: The audit programme for the first quarter of 2002–03 has been announced and is under way. The audit programme for the remainder of 2002–03 is currently being considered by the Food Standards Agency and a paper is to be presented at the next board meeting in May. This will address whether the future audit programme should include audits targeting specific enforcement policy issues.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the service delivery agreement target of the Food Standards Agency to develop a new framework agreement with local authorities by 1 April 2001 to promote high and consistent standards of enforcement throughout the UK was met by 1 April 2001. [49245]

Yvette Cooper: Yes. The framework agreement on local authority food law enforcement was published on 29 September 2000. The agreement came fully into effect from 1 April 2001 with the launch of the agency's programme of audits. The agreement includes a standard for enforcement which local authorities are expected to achieve and are audited against.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the upgrade of the Food Standards Agency website, referred to on page 40 of the 2001 Food Standards Agency report, has been completed. [49218]

Yvette Cooper: The upgrade to the Food Standards Agency website was completed on 10 December 2001 when the site relaunched as www.food.gov.uk.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the performance of the Food Standards Agency in encouraging local authorities to publish local information about hygiene standards in food premises. [49080]

Yvette Cooper: This is a matter for the Food Standards Agency.

The Food Standards Agency's framework agreement on local authority food law enforcement which came fully into effect from 1 April 2001 requires that local authorities publish local service plans to provide transparency about local food law enforcement services. Local authorities are required to set out in the service plan information about their planned food inspection programme based on the number, type and level of risk of food premises in their area. Service plans are inspected and assessed as part of the agency's audit of local authority food law enforcement services.

On 1 March 2002 the Food Standards Agency Wales joined forces with Welsh local authorities to launch a national food hygiene award scheme which aims to raise food hygiene standards and consumer confidence by providing public recognition for food businesses that have excellent hygiene procedures in place. Subject to the success of this scheme, it may be used as a model to help improve transparency of standards more widely.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many board meetings of the Food Standards Agency have been held in public. [49077]

Yvette Cooper: Since its establishment in April 2000, the board of the Food Standards Agency has held 17 meetings in public.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Local Authority Enforcement Liaison Group in reviewing the operation of the framework agreement developed by the Food Standards Agency for the promotion of high and consistent standards of food safety enforcement throughout the United Kingdom. [49222]

Yvette Cooper: This is a matter for the Food Standards Agency. The framework agreement on local authority food law enforcement came fully into effect in April 2001 and is subject to an annual review by the Local Authority Enforcement Liaison Group, which in November 2001 was renamed the Enforcement Liaison Group. The Enforcement Liaison Group has completed its first annual review of the framework agreement and changes were issued to local authorities and other relevant bodies on 2 April 2002. The agency believe that the Enforcement Liaison Group is making a major contribution to food safety enforcement.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the NHS spent on respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) immunisations (synergis) in the last three years for which figures are available. [41476]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not available. We have no central information on prescribing in hospitals, where this drug is primarily used.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he provides to hospitals and health authorities on *(a)* whether to immunise at risk infants against RSV and *(b)* which infants would benefit from RSV immunisations. [41475]

Yvette Cooper: Palivizumab is a monoclonal antibody indicated for prevention of serious lower respiratory tract infection caused by respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) requiring hospitalisation in children born at 35 weeks gestation or less and who are less than six months old at onset of the RSV season, or in children less than two years old who have received treatment for bronchopulmonary dysplasia within the last six months. It is given monthly during the RSV season. This information is published in the British National Formulary.

Teenage Pregnancy

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 7 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1153W, on teenage pregnancy, which of the recommendations in the Social Exclusion Unit's report on teenage pregnancy have been completed; and which of the rest have target completion dates. [42551]

Yvette Cooper: The following action points have been completed, as set out in the Social Exclusion Unit's report on teenage pregnancy:

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30.

Implementation of all the remaining action points is under way. It is expected that action points 10, 11, and 20 will be completed by the end of 2002.

Action point 13 was to deliver guidance on the circumstances in which different health professionals may prescribe, supply and administer contraceptives to under 16s. Research is being commissioned to identify the extent and nature of confusion among health professionals to inform whether further guidance is needed.

The target completion date for action point 29 is 2003.

While the bulk of the original action plan has now been implemented, considerable further work is needed to ensure that activity is sustained and monitored, and to assess the impact of pilot programmes. Our focus remains delivery of the headline goals of halving under 18 conception rates by 2010 and increasing the participation of teenage parents in education, training and employment. The Independent Advisory Group on Teenage Pregnancy published their first annual report in November 2001 which set out 49 recommendations of further action to underpin delivery of these goals. The Government will publish its response to this report later this year.

Patient Advocacy and Liaison

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those trusts which have not established patient advocacy and liaison services. [47859]

Ms Blears: Chapter 10 of the NHS Plan states that Patient Advice and Liaison Services (PALS) will be available in all NHS trusts from April 2002. To underpin this commitment £10 million has been made available to health authorities for PALS development this year. A large number of trusts already have PALS in operation and others are actively developing their service, appointing staff and are expecting to be operational in the near future. A number of primary care trusts are in the process of being set up, and therefore will need to look at incorporating PALS as part of their establishment. At this stage, therefore, there is no full list of those trusts which do not currently have PALS. However, we are in the process of setting up a system for monitoring PALS implementation.

Staff Magazines

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the magazine publications aimed at staff produced during the last year, and the cost of producing each one. [47025]

Ms Blears: The Department produced 50 separate publications for the national health service and social care staff last year. A list with details of the target audience, method of publication, frequency and cost will be placed in the Library.

Mental Health

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to deliver a world class mental health service as described on page 115 of "Securing Our Future Health: Taking a Long-Term View". [47433]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* My right hon. Friend the Chancellor's Budget statement outlined substantial additional resources to ensure a modern health service. There is no doubt that the increase in national health service expenditure over the next decade will see substantial increases in spending on mental health. The Department is studying the Wanless report with great interest and it will be an important source of analysis and information in the allocation of resources to the service.

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children were on the waiting list for Tier 3 child and adolescent mental health services in each locality team in Birmingham at the end of the 2001–02 financial year; what the year end average waiting time was for such services in each locality; and what the total number of referrals per 1,000 child population was in the year for each locality. [52576]

Jacqui Smith: Official child and adolescent mental health services waiting list data for March 2002 will not be published until mid-May 2002.

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total expenditure was on child and adolescent mental health services in *(a)* Birmingham, *(b)* West Midlands and *(c)* England in each of the last six years at current prices. [52577]

Yvette Cooper: The table shows central funding in support of the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) development strategy for Birmingham, West Midlands and England from 1999 to 2002.

	Birmingham	*West Midlands*	*England*
CAMHS mental health grant for local authorities for latest available years			
1999–2000	99,559	724,642	10,000,000
2000–01	97,559	832,642	10,000,000
2001–02	256,559	1,227,642	15,000,000
NHS modernisation funding for latest available years			
1999–2000	114,000	1,099,000	10,000,000
2000–01	800,000	2,197,000	20,000,000
2001–02	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

[1] 2000–01 funding now in HA baseline

Source:

Department of Health

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost in 2001–02 was of the pay increase to staff in his Department, agencies and the non-departmental public bodies for which he is responsible; and what the cost of the forthcoming increase will be in 2002–03. [50409]

Ms Blears: The estimated cost of the Department's pay increase to staff was at the time of settlement £4,167,200 in 2001–02 and £5,446,998 in 2002–03. These figures are for the civil service staff in the Department and agencies.

Figures for non-departmental public bodies cannot be provided as these organisations are not included in the Department's pay settlement.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what have been the total salary costs of each of the non-departmental public bodies for which he is responsible in each of the last five years. [50296]

Ms Blears: The information on salary costs for the Department's non-departmental public bodies is shown in the table. Unless shown, the information requested is not yet available for 2001–02.

£

	Total salary costs
Commission for Health Improvement (CHI)	
2000–01	4,791,000
1999–2000	[1]592,000
1998–99	n/a
1997–98	n/a
General Social Care Council (GSCC)	
2001–02	[2]1,311,298
2000–01	n/a
1999–2000	n/a
1998–99	n/a
1997–98	n/a
Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA)	
2000–01	701,958
1999–2000	699,268
1998–99	622,889
1997–98	556,767
National Biological Standards Board (UK)	
2000–01	8,299,000
1999–2000	8,095,000
1998–99	7,639,000
1997–98	7,298,000
National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB)	
2000–01	8,102,000
1999–2000	7,694,000
1998–99	7,652,000
1997–98	8,019,000
Public Health Laboratory Service Board (PHLS)	
2000–01	79,286,000
1999–2000	77,524,000
1998–99	74,771,000
1997–98	72,547,000

[1] Part-year costs. CHI was established on 1 November 1999.

[2] Part-year costs. GSCC was operational from 1 October 2001.

The National Care Standards Commission is excluded from the table since it was not in operation before April 2002.

Empty Properties

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 6 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1046W, regarding the cost and value of empty properties, if the property that has been empty since July 2000 is now occupied and being used by the national health service. [50337]

Yvette Cooper: The property referred to by the hon. Member is the Glenthorne Youth Treatment Centre, at Erdington in Birmingham. Following closure in July 2000, a feasibility study has been completed to adapt the centre for reuse by the South Birmingham Mental Health NHS Trust and the capital funding bid is awaiting imminent approval by the Department. It is currently unoccupied and being managed on a cost-effective, care and maintenance basis.

Care Homes

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer on 26 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 943W, regarding the National Care Standards Commission, how many applications had been *(a)* received and *(b)* not received by the National Care Standards Commission by the 31 March, how many statements of purpose were (i) received and (ii) not received by 31 March; how many care homes should have completed the (a) statement of purpose and (b) applications; and what steps he is taking to ensure all care homes which should have completed their statement of purpose and application form but have not, will comply with the Care Standards Act 2000 Part 11, section (1) as soon as possible. [50563]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 17 April 2002]:* As of the 1 April 2002 the National Care Standards Commission had received approximately 2,500 applications from providers and managers who were required to apply for registration by that date. It is not possible to say how many of these applications are from care homes since the commission is still assessing from which service areas the applications originated and the associated documentation sent with them. It is probable that once the commission has processed all of the applications sent to it prior to 1 April 2002 there will be significantly more than 2,500 applications.

All care homes are required to produce statements of purpose from 1 April. The NCSC will take copies of the statement of purpose from existing providers at the time of the first inspection this year in the spring and summer. New care homes seeking registration and those previously exempt providers required to apply before the 31 March should attach their statement of purpose with their application for registration. The NCSC has indicated that it will work with providers during the registration process to ensure that statements are drawn up appropriately by providers.

Providers required to apply for registration by 31 March are given protection from section 11(1) of the Care Standards Act as long as they have submitted their application forms and until a decision to grant or refuse registration is made by the commission. When registration is granted by the commission a provider is automatically deemed as complying with section 11(1). Where a

provider deliberately seeks to evade registration under the Act the commission will take appropriate enforcement action.

Town/Village Greens

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those sites which are part of NHS hospitals on which applications have been made to be registered as town or village greens; which of these have been successful; which are outstanding; and if he will make a statement. [51180]

Ms Blears: The following hospitals have sites that have been subject of applications for registration as town or village greens:

Hospital	*Outcome*
St. James Hospital, Portsmouth	Successful
Northowram Hospital, Halifax	Outstanding
Newton Hill, Wakefield	Outstanding
Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham	Unsuccessful
Second application, same site	Unsuccessful
Monyhull Hospital, Birmingham	Unsuccessful
Second application, similar site	Successful

National Patient Survey

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the cost of the National Survey of NHS Patients being carried out by the National Centre for Social Research. [51285]

Ms Blears: The cost of the current survey of GP services, which the National Centre for Social Research began on behalf of the Department in January this year, is expected to be £1.6 million.

Reporting this summer, the survey will enable the Government to find out what people think of the care and treatment they receive when visiting their GP. Its coverage will consist of a sample size of 261,000 people drawn from the electoral registers.

It is designed to produce a minimum of 375 returned questionnaires from each of the primary care organisations in England, that is 150,000 completed questionnaires. The findings will inform both the national 'star' ratings and provide feedback to primary care trusts, so that where appropriate, service improvements can be initiated.

Alcohol Consumption

Miss Begg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what statistics the Government collect on alcohol consumption *(a)* by gender, *(b)* by age and *(c)* by region. [51827]

Ms Blears: Data on alcohol consumption are collected in a number of surveys. For adults aged 16 and over, these include:

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) General Household Survey, published as "Living in Britain—Results from the 2000 General Household Survey". This includes analyses by gender, age group and region and is available on the internet at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/lib.index.html.

The Department of Health: Health Survey for England; published as (for example) "Health Survey for England 1998—Cardiovascular Disease". This includes analyses by age group and gender and data from 1993 to 2000 is available on the internet at: http://www.doh.gov.uk/stats/trends1.htm.

For young people aged 11 to 15, the Department of Health commissions a school survey from the National Centre for Social Research and the National Foundation for Educational Research. Data for 2000 was published as "Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2000" and is available on the internet at: http://www.doh.gov.uk/stats/trends1.htm.

Preliminary findings from the 2001 survey were published as a Department of Health Statistical Press Notice: "Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2001: Preliminary Results" in March 2002. The press notice is available on the internet at: http://www.doh.gov.uk/public/press15march02.htm. Both surveys include analysis by gender and age group.

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if the Food Standards Agency has met its service delivery agreement target to set new targets for the Meat Hygiene Service; [49478]

(2) with reference to the 2000 spending review service delivery agreement targets, what annual targets have been set for the Meat Hygiene Service to ensure the application of clean livestock policy, health marking and strict enforcement of specified risk material controls. [49234]

Yvette Cooper: Performance targets for the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) for the year 2001–02 were agreed by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) board in May 2001. The targets were placed in the Libraries of the House, announced by FSA press release and put onto the FSA website, on 15 May 2001. Among others, the targets required the MHS:

to fully apply the Clean Livestock Policy;

not to apply the health mark stamp to any meat showing visible faecal or alimentary tract contents contamination;

to strictly enforce the specified risk material controls in licensed meat plants.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if the new targets for the Meat Hygiene Service, referred to on page 36 of the 2001 Food Standards Agency report, have been met; [49221]

(2) if the service delivery agreement target of the Food Standards Agency to ensure that specified risk material controls are fully enforced, and to improve ante- and post-mortem inspections, has been met. [49248]

Yvette Cooper: Information on the performance of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) against its targets for the year ended 31 March 2001, including that in relation to the enforcement of specified risk material controls, is currently being assembled in order for an assessment to be carried out and reported to the board of the Food Standards Agency. The outcome will be published in the MHS's annual report and accounts which will be laid before Parliament before the House rises for the summer.

As regards improving ante- and post-mortem inspections, the FSA confirms that the MHS achieved full-time veterinary supervision in all full throughput abattoirs in line with EU requirements as from November 2001. This subject was dealt with in more detail in an answer given to the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) on 8 January 2002. *Official Report*, columns 634–35.

Natural Health Therapies

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to include natural health research and therapies in policies aimed at tackling cardiovascular disease and cancer. [53352]

Yvette Cooper: Decisions on what specific services and treatments to use are mostly made at a local level, so that national health service organisations may fund some natural health therapies, particularly in the care of cancer patients.

The National Institute of Clinical Excellence has been commissioned to produce guidelines on supportive and palliative care for cancer patients, which will be published in 2003. These guidelines will include the role that complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) might play. The Department funds some research into CAM. A programme to build capacity in research into CAM will be launched shortly, and the Department is also planning to commission new work on the use of CAM techniques in the care of patients with cancer.

Bovine TB

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of mycobacterium bovis (bovine TB) there have been in humans in each year since 1987; and how many fatalities there have been. [53758]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Information provided by the Public Health Laboratory Service show the number of cases of mycobacterium bovis (bovine TB) in humans for each year since 1987 as follows:

Year	*Cases*
1987	50
1988	53
1989	40
1990	31
1993	47
1994	49
1995	32
1996	37
1997	45
1998	40
1999	40
2000	28

Data was not produced by laboratories in 1991 and 1992 and is therefore not available.

Reports of deaths from tuberculosis do not include details of the infecting organism. Therefore the number of deaths from M. Bovis is not available.

Salt

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition reviewing the available evidence in relation to salt in the diets of adults and children plans to report; and whether its report will be published. [49811]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 17 April 2002]:* The subgroup of the Committee has recently started its work. I am advised that at this stage it is not possible to be definite about a publication date, but the Committee hopes to produce a report before the end of the year.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations have been presented to the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition's sub-group on salt, other than the submissions sent to the secretariat in response to the call for evidence. [53198]

Yvette Cooper: All of the representations presented to the committee arose from the call for evidence.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition's sub-group on salt plans to produce an interim report of its review on the evidence on salt. [53200]

Yvette Cooper: At present there are no plans for the committee to produce an interim report. Papers relating to the activities of the sub-group on salt can be found on the SACN website at www.sacn.gov.uk.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Mobile Telephones

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for 1997–98 and for each subsequent financial year, the amount spent *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* abroad by (i) his Department, (ii) its agencies and (iii) its non-departmental public bodies on (1) providing mobile telephone equipment, including handsets and other associated equipment, (2) telephone calls made using such equipment and (3) telephone calls made using privately owned mobile telephones but subsequently reclaimed by (x) Ministers and (y) staff. [34416]

Angela Eagle: Full detailed information is not available in the format requested. To provide the hon. Member with a full answer will incur disproportionate cost. I can, however, provide information on mobile phones and associated equipment purchased via our central procurement unit since 1997, which is as follows:

Total expenditure, mobile phones and associated equipment

	£
1997	175.00
1998	5,516.16
1999	163,933.83
2000	146,201.48
2001	46,491.25

The increase in the number of phones and associated equipment purchased mirrors trends set nationally by private consumers.

Yarl's Wood

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will install a warning signal for use in the event of escapes from detention and remand centres; if he received representations to install a warning siren during the construction of the Yarl's Wood remand centre; and if he will make a statement. [38781]

Angela Eagle: The decision not to install a siren was taken as part of the process of consultation between Group 4 Amey Immigration Ltd. and the local emergency services in the drawing up of contingency plans.

Court Transcripts

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to whom court transcripts are provided free of charge; and what the cost of purchasing court transcripts is. [53439]

Mr. Wills: I have been asked to reply.

A transcript of both civil and criminal trials will normally be produced where one of the parties to the action wishes to lodge an appeal. In civil cases, an unrepresented appellant in poor financial state can request that the cost of the transcript be borne at public expense. It is for the judge to decide whether to grant that request. In criminal cases, where the appellant has a representation order, the cost of the transcript will also be borne at public expense. The cost of the transcript depends on its length as transcribers charge per folio (72 words) and will therefore vary from case to case.

Sexual Abuse

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of sexual abuse were heard by the Court of Appeal; of these how many were *(a)* upheld and *(b)* discharged in each year since 1996; and if he will make a statement on the (i) reasons for discharge and (ii) classification of the cases discharged. [53415]

Mr. Wills: I have been asked to reply.

The records kept by the Court of Appeal do not record, electronically or in manual form, this type of information. The only means available to extract this data would be to resort to manual scrutiny of every case dealt with since 1996 and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Overtime Payments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is on overtime payments for staff in his Department. [49124]

Angela Eagle: Non-industrial staff in the core Home Office work conditioned hours of 41 in the London area and 42 in the national area. Any authorised hours in excess of these conditioned hours worked by staff below the senior civil service will be paid as overtime as follows:

Staff up to and including executive officer (EO) level and equivalents

Weekday: Time and a half

Saturday: Time and a half plus a half time premium payment (this represents a total payment of double time)

Sunday and bank holidays: Payment at double time

Privilege holidays: Time off in lieu

Higher executive officers (HEOs) and senior executive officers (SEOs) and equivalents

Weekday: Plain time rate

Saturday: Plain time rate plus a half time premium payment (this represents a total payment of time and a half)

Sunday and bank holidays: Payment at double time

Privilege holidays: Time off in lieu

Grades 7s and 6s

Generally Grades 7 and 6 do not receive overtime payments. However, they can receive discretionary payments for the hours they work in excess of conditioned hours, subject to a qualifying period. For work at weekends Grade 7s (but not Grade 6s) receive the following premium payments:

Saturday: Half time

Sunday: Plain time

Staff who work as part of a shift roster, depending on the incidence of night duties, receive in addition to their normal salary shift disturbance allowance between 12.5 per cent. and 20 per cent. Higher rates may be paid in very exceptional circumstances.

All overtime, premia and shift disturbance payments are subject to a ceiling. Overtime payments are not pensionable but premium payments are.

Agencies

In our Agencies, the arrangements are exactly as set out above except as follows:

United Kingdom Passport Agency

Saturday overtime for HEOs and SEOs is paid at plain time rate, there is no additional premium payment.

Forensic Science Service

All overtime premia and shift disturbance payments are paid at individual hourly rates, they are not subject to a ceiling. Shift disturbance allowance is paid between 10 per cent. and 25 per cent.

Overtime has to be approved by managers in response to a business need and within budget limits and having regard to welfare and work life balance considerations.

Staff (Locally Elected Representatives)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many members of staff at his Department are locally elected democratic representatives; and if he has a strategy for his Department to encourage members of staff to become locally elected democratic representatives. [44537]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not held centrally.

Staff in the Home Office (including the Prison Service) who are elected members of a local authority are allowed up to 18 days special leave with pay to perform their duties. This total may be increased to 24 days if the Department is satisfied that the duties equate to those of a Lord Mayor. Consideration will be given to granting paid special leave to other locally elected democratic representatives on an individual basis.

The Home Office is the lead Government Department for the active community initiative. Staff can take paid leave for volunteering in certain public capacities (e.g. school governors up to six days, magistrates up to 18 days). Staff in the non-agency Home Office can also take up to five days paid leave a year for any other voluntary activity.

A volunteering manager has recently been appointed, seconded from the voluntary sector, to actively promote volunteering among Home Office staff, ensure that a wide range of opportunities are available, monitor participation and evaluate the benefits to the individual and the Department.

Justices of the Peace

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many members of staff at his Department are justices of the peace; and if he has a strategy for his Department to encourage members of staff to become justices of the peace. [44552]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not held centrally.

Staff in the Home Office (including the Prison Service) who are justices of the peace are allowed up to 18 days special leave with pay to perform their duties plus reasonable travelling time, to permit up to 26 attendances.

The Home Office is the lead Government Department for the active community initiative. Staff can take paid leave for volunteering in certain public capacities (e.g. school governors up to six days, magistrates up to 18 days). Staff in the non-agency Home Office can also take up to five days paid leave a year for any other voluntary activity.

A volunteering manager has recently been appointed, seconded from the voluntary sector, to actively promote volunteering among Home Office staff, ensure that a wide range of opportunities are available, monitor participation and evaluate the benefits to the individual and the Department.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which public service agreement targets that are scheduled to be met in 2002 will not be achieved by the due date. [44842]

Angela Eagle: Information about progress on public service agreement targets will be published in the Department's 2002 Department report in mid-May.

New Deal

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people employed by the non-departmental public bodies for which he is responsible under the New Deal for Young People in each of the last four years have subsequently *(a)* found unsubsidised employment for more than 13 weeks and *(b)* returned to jobseekers' allowance or other benefits. [49596]

Angela Eagle: Information on the New Deal programme has never been collected centrally for non-departmental public bodies, and those Home Office non-departmental public bodies that employ their own staff do not monitor new dealers who have left their employment.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many private finance initiative projects have been subject to refinancing after the contracts have been signed; and what has been the financial effect in each case. [50285]

Angela Eagle: The following Private Finance Initiative projects have been subject to post contract refinancing;

Her Majesty's Prison Altcourse (Fazakerley) Prison Service Effect of refinancing;

Prison Service subject to increase of liability to £1 million in the event of premature termination of contract.

Year: 1999

Her Majesty's Prison Parc (Bridgend) Prison Service;

Refinancing subject to ongoing negotiation between contractor and Prison Service.

Year: 1996

Hassockfield Secure Training Centre Youth Justice Board (YJB);

The contract allows for re-financing but, does not allow YJB to share in benefits of re-financing or obtain details of benefits that may accrue to the contractor.

Year: 1999.

Asylum Seekers

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) whether the running of accommodation centres for asylum seekers will be contracted out to the private sector; [48941]

(2) who will be responsible for the administration and management of each accommodation centre for asylum seekers. [48940]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 15 April 2002]:* Our intention is to identify the most cost effective option which delivers the required standards of design, build and operation.

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people he expects to be employed at each accommodation centre for asylum seekers; and what estimate he has made of the salary costs of each centre. [48942]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 15 April 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) on 26 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 895W. Estimates for staffing costs have not been made.

Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many sites are under consideration for the provision of the pilot asylum seeker accommodation centres. [52351]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* They are as follows:

Qinetiq (formerly Defence Evaluation Research Agency (DERA)) Pershore, Worcestershire (Mid Worcestershire).

Royal Air Force (RAF) Hemswell, West Lindsey, Lincolnshire (Gainsborough).

Sully Hospital, Barry, South Glamorgan (Vale of Glamorgan).

Hooton Park, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire (Ellesmere Port and Neston).

Land vacated by Ministry of Defence (MOD) Logistics, Bicester, Oxfordshire (Banbury).

Air West Edinburgh (formerly RAF Turnhouse), Edinburgh (Edinburgh, West).

RAF Newton, West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire (Rushcliffe).

National Energy Site Killinghome, near Grimsby, North Lincolnshire (Cleethorpes).

Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assistance will be provided to local authorities and other providers of public services in whose areas asylum seeker accommodation centres are developed. [52354]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 360W, we expect that, nationally, accommodation centres will reduce the burden on local authorities due to the range of facilities provided on site. This includes education for children and adults, and primary health care facilities. We will, however, take funding considerations into account as we continue to develop our policy.

Street Robberies

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many street robberies there have been in each of the London boroughs in the last three years. [50877]

Mr. Denham: The table contains figures for total recorded robberies (including robberies of personal property and business property) in London boroughs for 1999–2000 and 2000–01. The Home Office did not collect borough figures prior to April 1999. The Home Office will publish national statistics for 2001–02 in the summer in its crime bulletin. The Metropolitan police have already published figures for this period, which are available on its web site.

The Metropolitan police force area is one of the 10 areas included in the Government's wider street crime initiative, which involves a concerted response to street crime across all the criminal justice and social agencies.

The 10 Force Street Crime Initiative began in April 2002 across the 10 force areas with the biggest robbery problem. The police and criminal justice agencies are working together in these areas to target and fast-track all street crime offenders. The initiative also brings together the resources and expertise of non-criminal justice system agencies to help tackle the causes of street crime and take preventative action.

Metropolitan police—total robbery offences by basic command unit (BCU), financial years 1999–2000 to 2000–01[1]

BCU	Year ending March 2000	Year ending March 2001
Barking and Dagenham	514	731
Barnet	876	1,041
Bexley	289	417
Brent	2,014	1,941
Bromley	518	685
Camden	1,645	1,906
Croydon	1,094	1,568
Ealing	1,702	1,510
Enfield	1,013	1,163
Greenwich	471	469
Hackney	2,437	2,275
Hammersmith and Fulham	853	911
Haringey	2,008	2,340
Harrow	607	559
Havering	240	392
Heathrow airport	6	6
Hillingdon	401	472
Hounslow	574	717
Islington	1,761	1,511
Kensington and Chelsea	828	991
Kingston-upon-Thames	175	245
Lambeth	3,390	4,691
Lewisham	1,277	1,547
Merton	321	397
Newham	1,736	2,106
Redbridge	652	900
Richmond-upon-Thames	160	236
Southwark	2,008	2,162
Sutton	228	240
Tower Hamlets	1,589	1,757
Waltham Forest	943	1,281
Wandsworth	1,217	1,427
Westminster	2,468	2,397
'Squads'	0	1
Grand total	36,015	40,992

[1] Based on force boundary since 1 April 2000

Voluntary Sector

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate the Government have made of the level of direct European Union funding for the voluntary sector in the United Kingdom in the last 12 months. [51208]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 19 April 2002]:* The most recent Government estimate of funding provided by the European Union (four structural funds) to voluntary and community organisations in the United Kingdom, in total, is £232,061,849 for the 2000–01 financial year.

Special Constabulary

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the strength was of the special constabulary for each of the 43 police authorities in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [52058]

Mr. Denham: The number of serving special constables in each police force area from September 1997 to September 2001 are set out in the table.

Police force	September 1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Avon and Somerset	629	584	482	416	391
Bedfordshire	186	175	148	134	119
Cambridgeshire	336	308	293	214	197
Cheshire	491	416	358	307	233
Cleveland	157	136	108	122	98
Cumbria	184	210	193	167	125
Derbyshire	414	355	303	286	263
Devon and Cornwall	1,079	916	908	836	780
Dorset	325	303	287	278	258
Durham	178	159	169	155	146
Essex	641	590	528	478	413
Gloucestershire	287	245	221	197	153
Greater Manchester	657	567	498	408	355
Hampshire	681	747	720	500	400
Hertfordshire	306	267	232	214	177
Humberside	348	289	263	198	207
Kent	588	565	484	416	366
Lancashire	500	465	397	362	325
Leicestershire	402	350	303	202	155
Lincolnshire	273	233	218	179	160

Police force	September 1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
London, City of	84	69	66	46	34
Merseyside	407	463	467	452	507
Metropolitan police	1,528	1,214	1,173	754	753
Norfolk	346	351	317	270	240
Northamptonshire	314	262	210	195	184
Northumbria	480	352	356	323	276
North Yorkshire	337	302	245	189	186
Nottinghamshire	597	530	405	411	281
South Yorkshire	295	266	236	193	189
Staffordshire	643	558	460	461	395
Suffolk	300	402	420	376	322
Surrey	231	226	205	168	176
Sussex	465	415	377	317	301
Thames Valley	694	587	514	463	377
Warwickshire	379	323	260	260	208
West Mercia	558	499	512	443	364
West Midlands	949	784	697	662	604
West Yorkshire	604	590	572	452	371
Wiltshire	150	176	182	172	160
Dyfed Powys	241	237	237	193	174
Gwent	149	114	110	131	148
North Wales	388	336	262	233	203
South Wales	362	360	331	254	250

Note:
Figures provided by Research, Development and Statistics.

The proposals in the White Paper "Policing a New Century: A Blueprint for Reform" set out a radical and ambitious programme of reform, with the overall aim of reducing crime and the fear of crime and tackling antisocial behaviour. The special constabulary has a key role to play in the fight against crime and the fear of crime. The Government are accordingly introducing a wide range of measures to improve the recruitment and retention of specials. These include improvements to the recruitment, training, conditions, management and deployment of specials—focusing their role on intelligence-led, high visibility patrolling and local crime reduction initiatives.

Golden Jubilee

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers serving in the Humberside police authority will be eligible for the Golden Jubilee Medal. [51820]

Mr. Denham: Detailed criteria for the award of the Golden Jubilee Medal are being developed and it will then be for the chief officer of each force to establish how many of their officers are eligible.

Correspondence

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for the Isle of Wight dated 21 March concerning antisocial behaviour orders. [52098]

Mr. Denham: A reply to the hon. Member was despatched on Wednesday 24 April 2002.

Vehicle Speed Detection

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) to what extent the VASCAR vehicle speed detection device relies on human inputs. [52443]

(2) if he will make a statement about the accuracy of the VASCAR vehicle speed detection device. [52444]

Mr. Denham: The VASCAR vehicle speed detection device relies in part on the operator accurately and consistently operating switches. These start and stop a clock and, where necessary, a distance measurement from the vehicle's odometer. The instrument can, alternatively, be pre-fed with the distance between two selected marker points.

Guidance from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) requires operators to be trained and to pass a test as to their performance. They must demonstrate in a sequence of five measurements that none has an error greater than two miles per hour and that the average error across all five is less than 0.75 miles per hour. They are also trained on the selection, for pre-fed operation, of road marks, in order to minimise parallax errors.

VASCAR also relies on frequent distance calibration checks. ACPO guidance requires these to be carried out at the start and, where VASCAR has been used, at the end of shifts. There are minimum distances over which measurements are made. The clock in the device is crystal controlled and its errors are insignificant.

Where the operator is fully trained and the ACPO guidance followed, I am satisfied that the VASCAR device is accurate.

Police Discretion

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether the police have discretion whether to record a reported crime; and whether a complainant may be requested to attend a police station if the crime is to be recorded. [52335]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* Under the National Crime Recording Standard, introduced in all forces in England and Wales from April 2002, all reports of incidents, whether from victims, witnesses or third parties, and whether crime-related or not, will result in the registration of an incident report by the police. Following the initial registration, an incident will be recorded as a crime (notifiable offence) if the circumstances as reported amount to a crime defined by law and if there is no credible evidence to the contrary.

Police officers will determine, on the balance of probabilities, whether an incident amounts to a crime, based on their knowledge of the law and of Home Office counting rules. In most cases, a belief by the victim (or person reasonably assumed to be acting on behalf of the victim) that a crime has occurred will be sufficient to justify its recording as a crime. Once recorded, a crime would remain recorded unless there was credible evidence to disprove that a crime had occurred. A complainant could be requested to attend a police station in the normal course of police inquiries, but this would not be a pre-condition of an incident being recorded as a crime.

In several forces "assault clinics" have been set up in order to improve the level of service provided to victims of minor assault and/or harassment. An initial report of an incident leads to a victim being given an appointment at the clinic, where the victim's statement is taken and the crime is recorded. A review by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) of the system in one force found

that in some cases the victim did not subsequently attend the assaults clinic, leading to the incident not being recorded as a crime. The force is now changing its processes to ensure that this no longer occurs, and other forces have been advised accordingly.

Merseyside Police

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the *(a)* police standard spending assessment and *(b)* Home Office provision were for Merseyside police in (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98, (iv) 1998–99, (v) 1999–2000, (vi) 2000–01 and (vii) 2001–02; and what the projected figures are for (A) 2002–03 and (B) 2003–04. [51617]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* The information is set out in the table. Figures for 2003–04 are not yet available.

£ million

Year	*Police grant*	*Standard spending assessment*	*Total*
1995–96	106.672	108.325	214.997
1996–97	112.589	109.297	221.886
1997–98	113.660	113.674	227.334
1998–99	119.122	114.153	233.275
1999–2000	118.702	117.557	236.259
2000–01[1]	123.723	120.102	243.825
2001–02[1, 2]	131.700	125.883	257.583
2002–03[1]	133.793	126.752	260.545

[1] Grant figures include principal formula police grant and payments from the crime fighting fund (estimated for 2002–03).
[2] The figures for 2002–03 are not directly comparable with 2001–02 owing to the change in funding arrangement for the National Crime Squad/National Criminal Intelligence Service. On a like-for-like basis the comparable total figure for 2001–02 is £252.173 million.
Note:
Standard spending assessment (SSA) figures include capital financing SSAs.

Offences (DNA)

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what class of offences DNA samples are *(a)* taken and *(b)* held even where prosecution does not proceed. [52942]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* Under the provisions of section 63 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE), the police may taken non-intimate DNA samples from all those charged with, informed they will be reported for, or convicted of a recordable offence.

The police may also take a non-intimate sample from those suspected of a recordable offence where there were grounds for believing the sample will tend to confirm or disprove the suspect's involvement.

Samples can be taken with consent in any case.

Pursuant to section 64A of PACE samples may be retained in all cases, even following acquittal or a decision to drop a prosecution, except where the sample was taken as part of a mass screening process and the individual does not consent to the retention of the sample. Retained samples can only be used for purposes related to the prevention or detection of crime, the investigation of an offence or the conduct of a prosecution.

Press Subscriptions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the newspapers subscribed to *(a)* Monday to Saturday and *(b)* on Sunday by his Department, stating for each subscription (i) the number of copies taken, and (ii) the annual cost. [52837]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* Communication Directorate purchases newspapers for its use and for some other parts of the Home Office. The totals for these are shown in the tables.

Information is not held centrally on the purchase and cost of newspapers for the Department as a whole.

A breakdown of the newspaper subscriptions and the total expenditure on this basis could be supplied only at disproportionate cost.

Title	*Copies*	*Unit price £*	*No. of days*	*Total price £*
(a) Monday to Saturday				
Financial Times Monday-Friday	2	0.90	19	34.20
Financial Times Saturday	1	1.00	5	5.00
Times Monday-Friday	2	0.40	20	16.00
Times Saturday	1	0.70	5	3.50
Daily Telegraph Monday-Friday	2	0.50	20	20.00
Daily Telegraph Saturday	1	0.85	5	4.25
Guardian Monday-Friday	2	0.50	20	20.00
Guardian Saturday	1	1.00	5	5.00
Independent Monday-Friday	2	0.50	20	20.00
Independent Saturday	1	0.90	5	4.50
Daily Mail Monday-Friday	2	0.40	20	16.00
Daily Mail Saturday	1	0.60	5	3.00
The Express Monday-Friday	2	0.35	20	14.00
The Express Saturday	1	0.50	5	2.50
Daily Mirror Monday-Friday	2	0.32	20	12.80
Daily Mirror Saturday	1	0.40	5	2.00
Sun Monday-Friday	2	0.30	20	12.00
Sun Saturday	1	0.40	5	2.00
Daily Star Monday-Friday	2	0.30	20	12.00
Daily Star Saturday	1	0.35	5	1.75
Jewish Chronicle Friday	1	0.60	4	2.40
New Statesman Thursday	1	3.95	1	3.95
Campaign	2	3.50	1	7.00
Marketing	2	2.40	3	14.40
PR Week	1	2.10	2	4.20
Marketing Week	1	2.40	3	7.20
Radio Times Tuesday	1	0.85	1	0.85
Economist	1	3.80	1	3.80
Press Gazette	1	2.00	2	4.00
Time Out Wednesday	1	3.60	1	3.60
Voice Weekly	1	0.78	4	3.12
Spectator	1	2.40	1	2.40
Police Review Friday	1	1.75	3	5.25
New Scientist Thursday	1	2.50	1	2.50
AG Railway Guide Janua	1	8.25	1	8.25
Private Eye Wednesday	1	1.50	2	3.00
Auto Express	1	1.50	4	6.00
MJ	1	2.75	2	5.50
Government Chronicle	1	3.40	3	10.20
Caribbean Times	1	0.50	3	1.50
Computer Weekly	1	2.10	2	4.20
Wired	1	3.99	1	3.99
Evening Standard	6	0.35	19	39.90
What Car	1	3.60	1	3.60
Monthly total				361.31
(b) Sundays				
Sunday Times	1	1.20	4	4.80
Observer	1	1.20	4	4.80
Sunday Telegraph	1	1.00	4	4.00
Independent on Sunday	1	1.20	4	4.80
Mail on Sunday	1	1.10	4	4.40
Sunday Express	1	1.00	4	4.00

Title	Copies	Unit price £	No. of days	Total price £
News of the World	1	0.65	4	2.60
Sunday People	1	0.65	4	2.60
Sunday Mirror	1	0.65	4	2.60
Monthly total				34.60
Annual cost				415.20

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the magazines and periodicals subscribed to by his Department, stating for each subscription (i) the number of copies taken, and (ii) the annual cost. [52838]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* Communication Directorate purchases magazines and periodicals for its use and for some other parts of the Home Office. The total for 2001–02 was £59,000.

Information is not held centrally on the purchase and cost of magazines and periodicals for the Department as a whole.

A breakdown of the subscriptions to magazines and periodicals and the total expenditure on this basis could be supplied only at disproportionate cost.

Police Pensions

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of each police authority's total budget was accounted for by police pensions in the financial years *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000, *(c)* 2000–01 and *(d)* 2001–02; and whether he is undertaking a review of police pensions. [51485]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* Figures for police pensions as a proportion of net expenditure are set out in the table.

As we made clear in our White Paper 'Policing a New Century: A Blueprint for Reform', we are aware of the need of police authorities and officers for a system which brings greater clarity about pensions obligations on individual police forces. The Home Office and Treasury are reviewing the options for a revised system which would bring this about.

Percentage

Police Authority	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Avon and Somerset	14.09	14.84	16.16	16.65
Bedfordshire	12.62	11.94	12.48	12.84
Cambridgeshire	12.04	12.33	12.98	12.69
Cheshire	9.92	11.07	11.25	13.63
City of London	18.14	14.19	15.36	16.05
Cleveland	13.75	14.47	15.18	14.85
Cumbria	14.85	14.78	15.37	15.25
Derbyshire	11.72	11.34	13.41	12.37
Devon and Cornwall	13.96	14.29	13.96	14.81
Dorset	13.08	14.53	14.00	15.05
Durham	11.10	12.64	12.04	12.54
Dyfed/Powys	12.98	12.90	13.24	13.41
Essex	12.39	12.00	11.30	12.94
Gloucestershire	13.54	13.40	14.20	14.26
Greater Manchester	15.63	15.92	15.21	16.25
Gwent	9.93	11.34	10.81	11.92
Hampshire	10.07	11.48	10.84	11.35
Hertfordshire	9.24	11.22	9.80	9.51
Humberside	12.77	13.33	14.15	14.49
Kent	11.22	11.35	12.50	12.94
Lancashire	12.82	12.64	13.54	14.35
Leicestershire	12.22	11.54	12.11	12.63
Lincolnshire	14.58	15.33	16.25	16.86
Merseyside	14.54	15.33	15.65	16.43
Metropolitan Police	12.72	11.70	13.25	12.87
Norfolk	12.22	11.63	12.64	12.55
North Wales	14.49	13.72	14.72	14.81
North Yorkshire	13.79	16.50	16.31	17.19
Northamptonshire	10.96	10.74	11.91	10.83
Northumbria	14.94	13.87	14.27	14.41
Nottinghamshire	13.44	13.79	13.66	15.30
South Wales	15.18	14.29	15.34	15.97
South Yorkshire	9.42	10.68	10.59	12.18
Staffordshire	13.67	15.59	14.84	17.03
Suffolk	13.05	14.86	13.54	14.34
Surrey	11.32	10.32	9.32	9.48
Sussex	14.19	14.82	15.99	15.94
Thames Valley	9.39	9.23	9.78	9.90
Warwickshire	13.04	14.47	15.25	16.51
West Mercia	12.39	12.21	13.26	13.65
West Midlands	11.45	11.32	11.89	12.45
West Yorkshire	13.16	14.07	14.18	14.98
Wiltshire	10.93	11.14	11.11	12.26
Total	12.75	12.72	13.30	13.67

Source:
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy Police statistics [Actuals] 1998/99–1999/2000 and [Estimates] 2000/01–2001/02. An actual net pensions figure for Leicestershire was not available in 1998–99 so the figure from the Police statistics Estimates 1998–99 has been used.

Operation Antler

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost in each year, to *(a)* his Department and *(b)* Wiltshire Constabulary of Operation Antler, including salary and support costs; and how many officers have worked on the case in each year. [52413]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* The chief constable informs me that Wiltshire Police Authority salary and support costs for Operation Antler, since it commenced in August 1999, have been as follows:

Year	£
1999–2000	223,457
2000–01	715,823
2001–02[1]	742,002
Total	1,681,282

[1] To February 2002. Figures to the end of March are not yet available.

A special grant in relation to the additional costs of the Porton Down investigation was made by the Home Office to Wiltshire Constabulary in August 2000 for £870,000.

I understand from the force that to March 2000 there were 14 staff on the investigation (10 Wiltshire police officers, two Wiltshire support staff and two Ministry of Defence (MOD) police officers); at its peak from January 2001 there were 26 staff (14 Wiltshire police officers, five Wiltshire support staff, two MOD police officers and five military investigators). The current staffing level is 18 (10 Wiltshire police officers, six Wiltshire support staff, one MOD police officer and one military investigator).

Police Forces

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police force members there were in *(a)* Avon and Somerset police force, *(b)* the south-west region and *(c)* England and Wales in each year from 1997 to 2001. [52694]

Mr. Denham: The requested information is given in the table:

Full-time equivalents

	Avon and Somerset	*South-west region*	*England and Wales*[1]
31 March 1997	2,989	9,425	127,158
31 March 1998	2,976	9,508	126,814
31 March 1999	2,999	9,420	126,096
31 March 2000	2,934	9,313	124,170
31 March 2001	2,994	9,576	125,682
30 September 2001	3,040	9,693	127,231

[1] The England and Wales totals include secondments to the National Crime Squad (NCS), the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS), Central Services and Inter-Force Units

Justice and Home Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the outcome was of the Justice and Home Affairs Council held in Brussels on 22 April; what the Government's stance was on the issues discussed, including its voting record; and if he will make a statement. [53111]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: I represented the United Kingdom at the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 25 and 26 April 2002 in Luxembourg.

A points;

The A points were approved as in document PTS A 19 (a copy of which has been placed in the Library).

Proposal for a Council Directive laying down minimum standards for the reception of applicants for asylum in member states;

A general approach was reached on the draft Directive, subject to consideration of two Parliamentary Scrutiny reserves (the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) and the European Parliament's opinion.

Illegal immigration and trafficking of human beings by sea;

The Council agreed conclusions on action to combat illegal immigration and human trafficking by sea, in particular the need for migration issues to be integrated into the European Union's relations with countries of origin and transit.

Proposal for a Council Decision adopting an action program for administrative co-operation in the fields of external borders, visas, asylum and immigration;

Political agreement was reached on the Council Decision establishing the ARGO programme to fund projects to facilitate co-operation and training in these fields.

Operation on evaluation of the risk in the European Union Airports. Information point;

The Presidency reported on the risk evaluation exercise which was undertaken on 3,4 and 5 April to detect illegal immigrants at airports within the European Union.

Meeting of the Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum (SCIFA) with the participation of the heads of the external border control services (11 April 2002). Information point;

The Presidency reported on a meeting of the Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum (SCIFA) with border control chiefs which discussed the priority areas of the Comprehensive Action Plan to combat illegal immigration and trafficking in human beings.

Meeting on Co-operation with the United States of America in the field of Asylum, migration and frontiers (12 April 2002). Information point;

The Presidency reported on a meeting between the SCIFA and United States experts to discuss border control and migration management following 11 September.

Amendments to the Europol Convention—Europol's participation in joint investigation teams and Europol's right to ask member states to initiate investigations in specific cases;

The Council reached a general approach on proposals to amend the Europol Convention. These will provide for Europol's participation in joint investigation teams in a support capacity and Europol's right to ask Member States to initiate investigations in specific cases. The Council will now consider how to implement the amendments.

Proposal for a Council Decision concerning security in connection with football matches with an international dimension;

A Council Decision was adopted creating a network of experts intended to improve co-ordination and the exchange of information in relation to football disorder.

Draft Council conclusions on the fight against racism and xenophobia;

The Council agreed conclusions calling for action against racially motivated violence, in particular, reinforced police co-operation, the approximation of criminal law and the role of the European Monitoring Centre on racism and xenophobia. The Commission was also invited to submit proposals to raise public awareness.

Request for a negotiation mandate for the Presidency with the United States of America, on judicial co-operation in criminal matters on the basis of Articles 38 and 24 TEU;

The Council authorised the Presidency to open negotiations with the United States on behalf of the European Union for an agreement on co-operation in mutual legal assistance in criminal matters and extradition. I will write separately to the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee regarding those negotiations.

Draft Council conclusions on the approach to apply regarding approximation of penalties;

The Council agreed conclusions on the use of penalty ranges as a means of approximating criminal penalties for common offences. I will write separately to the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee with the details of the methodology to be applied.

Proposal for a Council Framework Decision on combating the sexual exploitation of children and child pornography;

The Framework Decision was remitted for further consideration of the penalties for these offences and of an Italian reservation on the proposed exemption from criminal liability in cases involving persons over the age of sexual consent.

Any other business;

Italy gave an update on the feasibility study into the creation of a European Border Guard which would be presented to a Ministerial Conference in Rome on 30 May 2002. Germany proposed an initiative for an European Union fund to assist the victims of terrorism. The Council also had exchanges of views on the treatment of Palestinian asylum seekers and on the negotiation mandates for agreements with Switzerland concerning their participation in the Schengen and Dublin Conventions. The Presidency reported on the outcome of the European Union/Mediterranean conference which took place in Spain on 22–23 April 2002.

Meeting with Russian Ministers of Justice and Home Affairs in the margins of the Council;

Justice and Interior Ministers met with their counterparts from Russia in the margins of the Council to discuss action to combat organised crime and the management of migration and borders. A joint Declaration establishing a network of contact points to facilitate the exchange of information on organised crime was adopted.

Community Wardens

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the powers of arrest given to community wardens under the Police Reform Bill. [53141]

Mr. Denham: Community support officers and members of community safety accreditation schemes, as contained in Chapter 1 of Part 4 of the Police Reform Bill, will not have powers of arrest. It is the Government's belief that, where appropriate, the chief officer of police should be able to give community support officers the power to detain someone for up to 30 minutes, pending the arrival of a constable, and, as a last resort, to use reasonable force to enforce this.

The Government would also like to allow the chief officer of police and the person's employer, to give members of community safety accreditation schemes, (which could include warden schemes) the power of detention, but without the use of reasonable force.

The provisions which would have made the power of detention available in this way were removed in another place. We have already stated our intention to re-introduce these provisions during consideration of the Bill in this House. The provisions in Chapter 1 of Part 4 are enabling, not prescriptive. It will be for each chief officer of police to decide whether and how to use community support officers and community safety accreditation schemes to combat crime and disorder and increase public reassurance.

Families of Murder Victims

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the procedure is for distribution of homicide information packs by family liaison police officers to families of murder victims. [53263]

(2) how many homicide information packs were handed out by family liaison police officers in the last year. [53262]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* The exact figures as to how many of the Home Office pack "Information for Families of Homicide Victims" are handed out by police family liaison officers (FLOs) are not available.

In cases of homicide, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) family liaison strategy states that FLOs should provide the pack to one or more family members at as early a stage as possible in order for bereaved people to establish some control over their access to the information. The FLO's own knowledge of the criminal justice system and coroners' processes should be used as appropriate to suggest to a family member that they may look at the pack or part of it, on their own, with another family member, with the FLO, or with Victim Support, as issues arise for them. Furthermore, the obligation of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) in explaining any decisions made in accordance with its Victim's Charter should be explained and, where appropriate, a meeting facilitated.

Police

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers have left Sussex constabulary in the last 12 months through *(a)* retirement, *(b)* early retirement, *(c)* injury and *(d)* other employment. [53298]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* In the period from 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002, figures for Sussex were as follows:

(a) Normal retirements—82

(b) Early retirements (ill health)—11

(c) Injury retirements—5

(d) Transfers to other employment—13.

In addition, 77 officers left Sussex before retirement age with no transferral of pension rights to other employment.

Sirius Project

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of the Sirius project; and what contingency plans his Department has for the project not being completed on schedule. [53483]

Angela Eagle: The information technology 2000 contract, placed with the Sirius consortium, provides the Home Office with information technology and related services. It has been providing the Department with information technology since 5 February 2001, and is

expected to do so until February 2011. Business continuity plans are in place and kept under regular review.

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library copies of each version of the internal guidance which have been drawn up by his Department since 1 January 1999 to assist staff in his Department to answer subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 1998. [53381]

Angela Eagle: No. Department-wide guidance has been issued on the handling of subject access requests, but advice has been issued within the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) and in the Prison Service, the two areas where most subject access requests are received. I am placing copies of the relevant guidance in the Library. In the case of the IND instructions certain sections have been edited for operational and security reasons.

Asylum Applications

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps are being taken to accelerate the asylum application process; and what steps he has taken to ensure that the asylum application process is clearly understood by applicants. [53142]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 1 May 2002]:* The measures set out in the White Paper "Secure Borders, Safe Haven" published in February 2002, and in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill are designed to accelerate the asylum process. The introduction of a managed system of induction, accommodation, reporting and removal centres will secure a seamless asylum process and maintain contact with applicants. The appeals system will be streamlined to minimise delay and cut down barriers to removal.

Asylum seekers will attend an induction centre for detailed briefing by the voluntary sector and the Home Office. A pilot induction centre opened in Dover in January 2002.

Racism and Xenophobia

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what definition of *(a)* racism and *(b)* xenophobia is used by his Department. [53961]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The terms "racism" and "xenophobia" are not defined in the United Kingdom's domestic law. Our law deals with those who act on racism through, for example, racial discrimination or inciting racial hatred, behaviours which are defined in our legislation. Where these terms appear and are not defined, such as in Article 29 of the Treaty of European Union, in the view of United Kingdom Government the terms should be given their ordinary accepted meaning having regard to the context in which they are used. This is also the approach taken within the Home Office.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Coolants

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what coolant will be used for the building services water chilling system for the new GCHQ building. [52045]

Mr. Straw: The consortium (Integrated Accommodation Services) building the new GCHQ accommodation are using the refrigerant HFC 134A to chill the water. This is a commercially available non-ozone depleting refrigerant.

Ministerial Training

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much has been spent by his Department on training by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52750]

Mr. Bradshaw *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* Nothing.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much has been spent by his Department on training in leadership skills for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52725]

Mr. Bradshaw *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* Since 1997 the FCO has spent £1,995,213 on the delivery of leadership skills and other management or job related training programmes.

The Secretary of State and current ministerial team have not attended the programmes provided by CMPS or the in house FCO programmes.

£

	Cost per year
Top management programme[1]	
1997–98	128,780
1998–99	145,630
1999–2000	51,535
2000–01	—
2001–02	—
Total	209,945
Band C management development programme[2]	
1997–98	—
1998–99	—
1999–2000	—
2000–01	206,749
2001–02	198,821
Total	405,570
Band D management development programme[3]	
1997–98	—
1998–99	—
1999–2000	—
2000–01	502,953
2001–02	611,783
Total	1,114,736
SMS management development programme[4]	
1997–98	—
1998–99	—
1999–2000	—
2000–01	91,174
2001–02	50,647
Total	141,821

£

	Cost per year
Strategic leadership for senior managers[4]	
1997–98	—
1998–99	—
1999–2000	—
2000–01	11,868
2001–02	89,300
Total	101,168
Deputy head of mission programme[6]	
1997–98	—
1998–99	4,000
1999–2000	4,000
2000–01	325
2001–02	1,148
Total	9,473
Heads of mission programme[7]	
1997–98	—
1998–99	—
1999–2000	—
2000–01	—
2001–02	12,500
Total	12,500
Total costs	1,995,213

[1] Provided by London Business School 1997–2000
[2] Provided by International Training Service (ITS) 2000–02
[3] Provided by Ashridge 2000 to date
[4] Provided by Innermost 2000 to date
[5] Provided by Innermost 2001 to date
[6] Provided by in house speakers from the Senior Management Structure 1999 to date
[7] Provided by in house speakers from the Senior Management Structure 2001 to date

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much has been spent by his Department on voice coaching for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52720]

Mr. Bradshaw *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* Since 1997 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has spent £257,533 on the delivery of presentation and media skills training.

The FCO provides in-house training in Effective Speaking, Presentation Skills for Senior Grades, Presentation Skills for Occasional Speakers and Media Skills and Techniques for FCO Officials. The FCO employs professional training providers, via competitive tender, to deliver presentation and media skills training.

The Secretary of State and current ministerial team have not attended programmes provided by Centre for Management and Policy Studies or FCO in-house courses.

Effective Speaking for Officers in Band B and above and Effective Speaking for Senior Grades

Training provided by:

Effective Speaking Ltd. 1997–99

Crystal Media 1999 to date

A two day course to help officers prepare presentations, improve their vocal technique and increase confidence and a one day course to help senior officers prepare a presentation, improve their vocal technique and take questions from the floor.

Cost per year:

2000–01: £84,490

2001–02[1]: £83,729

Total: £168,219

Effective Presentation Skills for Occasional Speakers

Training provided by:

Effective Speaking Ltd. 1997–2001

Crystal Media 2001 to date

A one or two day ad hoc course for individuals to help them prepare and deliver an effective presentation.

	Cost per year (£)
1997–98	—
1998–99	6,000
1999–2000	10,558
2000–01	7,231
2001–02	28,821
Total	52,610

Media skills: "BBC" In-House; Radio and Telephone Skills; TV, Radio and Telephone Skills (1997–2000) Media Skills and Techniques (2000 to date)

Training provided by:

FCO in-house trainers with ad hoc input from Crystal Media 1997 to date

Cost per year:

2000–01: £18,283

2001–02[1]: £18,421

Total: £36,704

Total costs: £257,533

[1] No records available prior to 2000.

Israel

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in other European Union countries on seeking compensation from the Israeli Government for damage to or the destruction of EU-financed projects in Gaza and the West Bank as a result of Israeli military action. [53436]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The damage to EU and other donor funded projects in the West Bank and Gaza Strip caused by Israeli military actions was first discussed by EU Foreign Ministers at the 28 January General Affairs Council. Following that meeting the EU demanded that this practice stop and reserved the right to demand compensation in the appropriate fora. That remains our position. The European Commission continues therefore to monitor and cost the damage arising from recent IDF operations.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with European and United States counterparts about the situation in Israel. [53938]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has spoken to US Secretary of State (three times since Saturday), and has had regular discussions with his European Union colleagues about the situation in Israel and the occupied territories. The middle east peace

process was discussed at the General Affairs Council on 15 April and at the Valencia EuroMed meeting on 23 April.

Fiji

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many people from Fiji have received entry clearance to reside in the United Kingdom in each of the last five years. [53908]

Mr. Bradshaw *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* I list below details of entry clearance applications received and issued in Suva for settlement since 1997. We do not record the nationality of those applying for settlement and applicants can apply at any post in the world.

To differentiate between nationality of each applicant, we would need to ask all 166 entry clearance posts to carry out a manual search of their records. This could be done only at disproportionate cost.

	Received	*Issued*
1997	36	36
1998	42	39
1999	22	20
2000	42	42
2001[1]	7	7

[1] 2001 statistics cover period 1 January to 31 March 2001

All entry clearance posts submit an annual statistical return from which the above statistics were obtained. This information is collated in the Entry Clearance Annual Statistics booklet, copies of which are currently available in the House Library. The latest year for which this information is available is 2000.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the written questions asked of him between *(a)* 1 to 30 June 2001, *(b)* 1 to 31 July 2001, *(c)* 1 to 30 September 2001, *(d)* 1 to 31 October 2001, *(e)* 1 to 30 November 2001, *(f)* 1 to 31 December 2001, *(g)* 1 to 31 January 2002, *(h)* 1 to 28 February 2002, *(i)* 1 to 31 March 2002 and *(j)* 1 to 30 April 2002 that had not received a substantive answer by 30 April; and if he will state (i) the name of the hon. Member asking the question and (ii) the reasons the question had not received a substantive answer. [54080]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) on 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 949W.

The following questions have not yet received a substantive reply.

(a) None
(b) None
(c) None
(d) None
(e) None
(f) None
(g) None
(h) None.

(i) Three questions from the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones). Due to administrative errors the processing of the questions was delayed. The question from the hon. Member for Buckingham has been answered and the questions from the hon. Member for Meriden and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak will be answered shortly.

(j) On 30 April 26 questions were awaiting a substantive reply from the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner), my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas), my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths), my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich (Mr. Henderson), my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Andy King), my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper), my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston), my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones), my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian Lucas), the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor), the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray).

Those questions which have not already received an answer will receive an answer shortly.

Conflict Prevention

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many times his Department has discussed the two Whitehall budgets for conflict prevention, referred to by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary in a speech to the Royal College of Defence Studies on Thursday 25 April, with *(a)* the Ministry of Defence and *(b)* the Department for International Development; when these discussions took place; and what (i) spending commitment and (ii) countries were discussed on each occasion. [54142]

Mr. Straw: I (and my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook)), have met colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and Department for International Development to discuss the global pool on 30 November 2000, 15 March 2001 and 25 February 2002. We decided priority regions and themes for the pool as well as discussing administrative procedures for the pool. The current priorities for the global pool are Afghanistan, the Balkans, Belize/Guatemala, Indonesia/East Timor, central and eastern Europe, Russia/FSU, middle east, South Asia, small arms and light weapons, UN reform, OSCE/Council of Europe reform, and EU civilian crisis management.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, who chairs the Africa Pool Ministerial Group, has met colleagues on 25 October 2000, 7 December 2000, 27 February 2001, 23 July 2001, 22 October 2001, 10 December 2001 and 4 February 2002. These meetings considered country and thematic

priorities as well as management arrangements for the Africa pool. The country priorities agreed by Ministers are Sierra Leone, DRC and the Great Lakes, Sudan, Nigeria and Angola. Thematic priorities are building African peacekeeping capacity and tackling the economic causes of conflict.

In addition officials meet on a regular basis.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the two Whitehall budgets for conflict prevention, referred to by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in a speech to the Royal College of Defence Studies on Thursday 25 April 2002, have been spent on *(a)* by date and *(b)* by spending commitment. [54143]

Mr. Straw: A report on the activities of the pools in their first year will be published later in 2002 and will describe the programmes funded by the pools.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries have benefited from the two Whitehall budgets for conflict prevention, referred to by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in a speech to the Royal College of Defence Studies on Thursday 25 April; and in what ways. [54144]

Mr. Straw: Most of the funds allocated to the global pool have been divided among a set of geographical and thematic priority areas:

The Balkans
Central and Eastern Europe
Russia and the Former Soviet Union
Indonesia and East Timor
The Middle East and North Africa
Afghanistan
Belize/Guatemala
South Asia
Small Arms and Light Weapons
Strengthening the UN
EU Civilian Crisis Management
The OSCE and Council of Europe.

The thematic priorities are of potential benefit to countries in both pools.

The Sub-Saharan Africa pool has prioritised the following areas and themes:

Sierra Leone
Nigeria
DRC and the Great Lakes
Sudan
Angola
Building African Peacekeeping capacity
Tackling the economic causes of conflict.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs from which existing funds the money for the two Whitehall budgets for conflict prevention, referred to by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in a speech to the Royal College of Defence Studies on Thursday 25 April, was taken. [54141]

Mr. Straw: The money for the Sub-Saharan Africa and Global Conflict Prevention Pools came from relevant existing funds held by the Ministry of Defence, the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office plus an additional contribution from HM Treasury.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans his Department has to spend the two Whitehall budgets for conflict prevention, referred to by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in a speech to the Royal College of Defence Studies on Thursday 25 April. [54140]

Mr. Straw: Spending under the Sub-Saharan Africa and Global Conflict Prevention Pools is well under way. The PSA target of the pools is improved effectiveness of the UK contribution to conflict prevention and management as demonstrated by a reduction in the number of people whose lives are affected by violent conflicts and a reduction in potential sources of future conflict, where the UK can make a significant contribution. Activities funded by the pools are tailored to meet this target.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the *(a)* size and *(b)* nature is of the two Whitehall budgets for conflict prevention, referred to by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in a speech to the Royal College of Defence Studies on Thursday 25 April. [54145]

Mr. Straw: Following a review of the Government's conflict prevention and resolution activities, the FCO, Ministry of Defence and Department for International Development agreed to pool relevant existing funds to allow for a more co-ordinated approach to conflict prevention and resolution activities. Two conflict prevention pools were established on 1 April 2001: Sub-Saharan Africa (Africa pool) and another for the rest of the world (global pool). The Africa pool has been allocated £50 million per annum from 2001–04 to spend on conflict prevention programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa. The global pool budget will be £60 million for 2001–02, £68 million for 2002–03 and £78 million for 2003–04.

In addition, the pools contribute to the additional costs of the UK assessed and non-assessed contributions to support UN and other peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations. In 2001–02 these included commitments in Sierra Leone, DRC, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Macedonia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and the Iraqi no fly zones.

Plane-spotters

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Dutch Government concerning co-operation regarding the British and Dutch plane-spotters in Greece. [54147]

Mr. Straw: I have had no direct discussions with the Dutch Government concerning this case. However since the arrest of the aviation enthusiasts, on 10 November 2001 until their release on 14 December 2001, our embassy in Athens were in almost daily contact with the Dutch embassy at consul, consul-general and ambassadorial levels. On 9 December, our ambassador along with the Dutch ambassador visited the defendants while in prison. On 19 April this year both the British and

Dutch consuls in Athens met with the group's defence lawyers, and sat together during the trial between 24–26 April.

Greece

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will next meet his Greek counterpart on a bilateral basis. [54148]

Mr. Straw: I have no plans for a bilateral meeting with the Greek Foreign Minister, George Papandreou, although I hope to see him at the Brussels GAC on 13 May.

Gibraltar

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs further to his answer of 30 April 2002 to the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble), *Official Report*, column 651W, if he will make a statement on the meeting between the Minister for Europe and his Spanish counterpart on 2 May. [54915]

Peter Hain: As I informed the House on 30 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 651W, I met my Spanish counterpart in London on 2 May. We had a friendly and constructive meeting. We made further progress. Substantial difficulties remain. We remain committed to reaching an agreement if possible.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what requests his Department has made since 10 December 2001 for information concerning smuggling between Gibraltar and Spain; [54182]

(2) what assessment his Department has made of information it has received prior to 10 December 2001 concerning smuggling between Gibraltar and Spain; [54184]

(3) when his Department last received information from the Spanish authorities concerning smuggling between Gibraltar and Spain; [54183]

(4) what assessment his Department has made of information it has received since 10 December 2001 concerning smuggling between Gibraltar and Spain. [54181]

Mr. Straw: As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe said in his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) on 10 December 2001, *Official Report*, column 633W, we have asked the Spanish Government to make available to us any current evidence that they have of significant cross-border smuggling. We will continue to do so whenever complaints are made, and would, with the Government of Gibraltar, investigate any evidence received. We have not seen any recent evidence of large-scale smuggling.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his visit to Gibraltar on 3 May. [54329]

Peter Hain: The Foreign Secretary visited Gibraltar on 3 May. He met the Chief Minister, opposition leaders Mr. Joe Bossano and Mr. Joe Garcia; and other leading Gibraltarians during meetings with a range of representative organisations. He took part in a phone-in organised by the Gibraltar Broadcasting Corporation. He also saw for himself the recent changes at the border. He met the commander, British forces.

The Foreign Secretary explained our objective is a settled, secure and prosperous future for Gibraltar. He underlined that no agreement would be better than a bad agreement and that the people of Gibraltar would have the final say in a referendum.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has asked Spain to relinquish its claim to full sovereignty of Gibraltar as part of the talks under the terms of the Brussels process on the future status of Gibraltar. [54354]

Peter Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 451, and to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle) on 24 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 294–95W.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the Government of Gibraltar was advised of his intention to visit Gibraltar in May. [54328]

Peter Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has stated his intention to visit Gibraltar on a number of occasions. The Foreign Secretary told the Chief Minister on 30 April of his intention to visit on 3 May.

Olympic Games

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice his Department is preparing for UK citizens who will visit Greece *(a)* this summer and *(b)* for the Athens 2004 Olympic games with regard to activities which are legal in the United Kingdom but illegal and imprisonable in Greece; and if he will make a statement. [54139]

Mr. Straw: Foreign and Commonwealth Office Travel advice is kept under constant review, and is available on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website at www.fco.gov.uk/travel. The travel advice for Greece includes guidance on local laws and customs. Specific travel advice for the 2004 Olympic games will be prepared nearer the time. Currently the advice for Greece headed Local Laws and Customs reads:

> Visitors should not become involved with drugs of any kind. Possession of even small quantities can lead to long terms of imprisonment.
>
> Driving any vehicle whilst over the legal drinking limit is heavily penalised and can result in stiff fines and/or imprisonment.
>
> Visitors seeking employment in bars or night clubs should be aware that they are required to have a Health certificate/licence issued by the local authorities to work in such establishments. Failure to have such a certificate is punishable by a fine and or imprisonment.
>
> Do not take photographs or make notes near military or official installations. Seek permission before photographing individuals.

Should we become aware of any other laws that differ significantly from those of the United Kingdom and which may impact adversely on British nationals we will, of course, highlight them in the travel advice.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department was first informed of the arrest of the Britons related to bombing incidents in Saudi Arabia; and when he and officials in his Department made representations to the Saudi Government on behalf of the accused. [53916]

Mr. Straw: The five British nationals accused of involvement in bombings in Saudi Arabia were arrested on separate occasions between 17 December 2000 and 8 June 2001. FCO officials learned of each arrest shortly after it had happened.

Ministers and FCO officials have made repeated representations on these cases from the outset. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made representations on numerous occasions directly with the Saudis. We will continue to do all we can for the detainees.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department was informed of the sentences passed on the Britons accused of the bombing campaign in Saudi Arabia; and what sentences were passed against each of the accused. [53917]

Mr. Straw: The Saudi authorities have not informed us that sentences have been passed on the five British nationals accused of involvement in the bombings. We cannot release details of individual consular cases and the men have a right to confidentiality.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will widen the scope of the UK/EU travel ban against Zimbabwean officials to include businessmen. [54146]

Mr. Straw: Any possible further measures against Zimbabwe will depend on the outcome of the current inter-party dialogue between ZANU-PF and the Movement for Democratic Change.

Iraq

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with European colleagues regarding military action against Iraq; and which European countries have made a commitment to supplying troops for military action against Iraq. [53939]

Mr. Bradshaw: We stay in close touch with European and other Governments about the situation in Iraq. Since no decision has been made on military action against Iraq, no Government, including the UK, have made troop commitments.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs at which meetings of the UN Security Council Professor Hans Koechler's report on the appeal proceedings at the Scottish Court in the Netherlands was *(a)* on the agenda and *(b)* discussed. [53542]

Mr. Bradshaw: None.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 8 May 2002

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures her Department has taken since 1997 to encourage energy efficiency in *(a)* the domestic sector, *(b)* the commercial sector, *(c)* the industrial sector and *(d)* the public sector; and how much Government financial support has been made available. [50433]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have introduced a wide range of measures, including market incentives, financial assistance, legal obligations, and guidance and information, to encourage energy efficiency in all sectors of the economy. These include:

the Energy Efficiency Commitment (EEC) on domestic energy supplies, from 2002 to 2005;

the Climate Change Levy and Climate Change Agreements;

the UK Emissions Trading Scheme;

the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES)

revised building regulations which require high energy efficiency standards;

the Market Transformation programme;

a wide range of measures to support combined heat and power (CHP);

the Community Energy capital grant programme;

substantial Government funding of the Energy Saving Trust and the Carbon Trust to promote and support energy efficiency in the domestic, public, industry and business sectors.

The majority of DEFRA's financial support for energy efficiency measures is channelled through the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (now marketed as Warm Front), the Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme, the Energy Saving Trust and the Carbon Trust. The total funding made available by the Department and its predecessors to support and promote these efficiency programmes in each year since 1997 is set out in the table.

Total funding for energy efficiency

	£ million[1]
1997–98	110.5
1998–99	109.0
1999–2000	112.0
2000–2001	163.5
2001–2002	224.0

[1] Includes funding for the Carbon Trust of £26.5 million from recycled Climate Change Levy receipts.

Eggs

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Lion Code of Practice and Lion Quality Mark in *(a)* reducing salmonella levels in egg production and *(b)* raising overall food safety standards; what reference was made to the Lion Quality Scheme in her Department's report entitled "Sustainable Food and Farming—Working Together"; and what plans she has to endorse the British Egg Industry Council's Lion Code of Practice for all eggs sold in the United Kingdom. [53201]

Mr. Morley: In the period since 1998 there has been a significant fall in human salmonellosis in Great Britain and in egg-associated salmonella outbreaks. Lion code producers can be proud of the investment they have made in the Lion Mark scheme, which includes vaccination of flocks against salmonella, good biosecurity measures, registration, and traceability and controls on storage times and temperature that go beyond statutory requirements. We warmly endorse the work they have done on this.

The Sustainable Food and Farming report did not make specific mention of any sectors. The paper indicated where DEFRA and others are taking forward recommendations made by the Policy Commission on Farming and Food, and sought views on what should be done next. I hope that the egg industry will contribute to this exercise.

Dairy Industry

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to simplify the administration of milk quotas; and if she will make a statement on the benchmarking in the dairy industry. [53209]

Mr. Morley: The implementation and administration of the milk quota system is under continuous review. The new Dairy Produce Quotas Regulations, which entered into force on 31 March 2002, will reduce the administrative burden on the industry by removing unnecessary requirements, such as certain deadlines, and liberalising the provisions for the permanent transfer of quota without land.

We support the use of benchmarking by the dairy sector as a useful tool in identifying and promulgating best practice. We have, for example, already supplied the Milk Development Council (MDC) with Farm Business Survey data for farms with dairy enterprises with a view to the MDC setting up on-line interactive data base which would allow dairy farmers to benchmark their businesses.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what proposals she has to encourage greater co-operation and communication between participants in the dairy supply chain arising from her Department's response to the Milk Task Force report published on 3 January. [53210]

Mr. Morley: We shall take every opportunity to encourage all parts of the dairy industry to take up the recommendations of the Milk Task Force to improve communications between one another—for example between supermarkets and their suppliers—and to increase co-operative and collaborative activity—for example between processing and production and between dairy farmers. But it for the industry itself to make progress in these important areas.

Fruit

Hugh Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what progress is being made in negotiations to amend the EU marketing standard for apples and pears. [52600]

Mr. Morley: There have been no further discussions since my written reply of 5 March.

Red Cross

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what financial support her Department has given since 1 April 2000 to projects in the UK run by the British Red Cross in rural communities. [52968]

Alun Michael: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle) on 30 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 609–10W.

Wood Imports

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what proposals she has to introduce tariffs and labelling on wood imports. [53654]

Mr. Morley: At present we have no plans to introduce tariffs or labels on wood imports. Such controls have, however, been considered as part of a thorough examination of the pros and cons of a variety of courses of action designed to combat illegal logging and to promote the sustainable management of forest overseas.

In the case of tariffs, we are using the current negotiations in the World Trade Organisation under the Doha development agenda to propose a reduction or elimination of tariffs on timber and wood products from sustainably managed sources. This would provide a positive incentive for owners of forests and those in the international timber trade.

When considering mandatory labelling, we were mindful that any action would most likely contravene European Union rules on free trade. Instead we announced in July 2000 that all central Government Departments and agencies would actively seek to buy timber from sustainable and legal sources. Wood products and timber labelled under credible certification schemes will be accepted as meeting this requirement.

We have taken the lead internationally in efforts to combat illegal logging and to promote the sustainable management of forests. We are currently working with partners in the timber trade, the environmental community and with Governments in the timber producing countries. For example, on 18 April the Governments of Indonesia and UK signed a Memorandum of Understanding committing the two parties to a range of actions to tackle forest law enforcement and governance in Indonesia and the import by UK of illegally logged forest products from Indonesia.

At the forthcoming World Summit, we shall, of course, be aiming to secure further commitment and action on sustainable forest management.

Financial Support Schemes

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the financial support schemes sponsored by her Department and its agencies for *(a)* horticulture, *(b)* agriculture, *(c)* arboriculture, *(d)* fisheries, *(e)* pisciculture, *(f)* environmental projects and *(g)* environmental protection. [53402]

Mr. Morley: An outline of the work of the Department will be provided in the forthcoming departmental report, and information on individual schemes is available on our website. A detailed reply could be given only at disproportionate cost.

Sellafield

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether drinking water is extracted from the groundwater under Sellafield. [53651]

Margaret Beckett: The groundwater at Sellafield is not used for drinking water supplies.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on what dates *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials in her Department held meetings with the Irish Government to discuss the British Nuclear Fuels plant at Sellafield between 7 June and 5 October 2001; where each meeting took place; which Ministers were involved in each meeting; and which Irish Government Departments were involved in each meeting. [53358]

Margaret Beckett: Apart from the meeting of UK Government officials and officials from Ireland's Department of Public Enterprise on 5 October (referred to in the answer I gave on 20 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 373W), no other meetings took place between the dates specified in the question.

Arable Farmers

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps the Government are taking to ensure that there is parity of support for arable farmers across the UK. [53424]

Mr. Morley: Agriculture is a devolved responsibility in the United Kingdom. But support for the arable sector, like many others, is governed by the relevant Common Agriculture Policy regimes which set rates of aid and conditions applicable to all Member States.

Illegal Meat Imports

Phil Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action she is taking to prevent illegal meat imports. [53677]

Mr. Morley: We have taken a range of initiatives aimed at improving our ability to prevent and detect illegal imports of animal products. These initiatives have been co-ordinated by officials in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but involve other departments such as HM Customs and Excise and the Food Standards Agency, and the local authorities who are responsible for controls at ports and airports. We have concentrated on raising public awareness of our import rules through our Embassies, and strengthening intelligence gathering and sharing to improve targeting of anti-smuggling measures. We also introduced new posters which are displayed at airports and ports to ensure that travellers are aware of the restrictions on what may be

imported. On 28 March we published an action plan which is available in the House Libraries. This plan commits Government to a range of measures including completing a risk assessment of disease risks posed by illegal imports of meat. In addition we have enquired into the use of detector dogs and aim to carry out a pilot this summer. These actions are kept under constant review.

Pigs

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much post-weaning multisystematic wasting syndrome has added to the production costs of pig meat in the last 12 months. [53701]

Mr. Morley: Although no independent studies of the economic effects of this disease have been carried out, the economic consequences can be significant. When the disease is present on farm, the mortality rate for weaner pigs appears to increase from around 3 per cent.-5 per cent. to 5 per cent.-20 per cent. At worst, a continuous 20 per cent. post-weaning mortality rate would increase costs by an estimated £11.00 per 95kg pig sold. This represents 10 per cent.-14 per cent. of the average sale price.

In addition, the Meat and Livestock Commission estimates that some 300,000 pigs that would otherwise have reached slaughter weight have been lost to the disease. Based on this estimate, the loss to the pig industry is some £21 million at the farm gate, around 2.5 per cent. of total annual farm gate value.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the reasons were for the delay in answering the question, Ref 288, tabled by the hon. Member for South Suffolk on 25 June 2001. [54108]

Mr. Morley: This question was overlooked by the Department during the demands of the foot and mouth crisis. I regret the delay.

Forestry Commission

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what funds exist to enable the Forestry Commission to assist employees with their council tax payments; and if she will make a statement. [53795]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission has no funds which enable it to assist employees with their council tax payments. Forestry Commission employees can, however, apply for assistance from various benevolent funds if they are experiencing financial difficulties.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many Forestry Commission employees are being assisted with the payment of council tax; and if she will make a statement. [53797]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission does not assist any employee with their council tax payments.

Scottish Fishermen's Federation

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she last met representatives of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. [54486]

Mr. Morley: I last met with representatives of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation on 17 April 2002.

Future of Farming and Food Commission

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the total level of funding required to implement the recommendations of the Policy Commission report on the Future of Farming and Food; and when she plans to begin implementing the report's recommendations. [54489]

Mr. Morley: The Policy Commission estimated that implementing its recommendations would cost approximately £500 million over three years. However, the cost of many of the recommendations would depend upon the precise way in which they were implemented.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced on 26 March a series of early actions as a first step towards implementing the report. In the early autumn, after discussion with all of those with an interest in food, farming, the environment and rural areas, the Government will produce a Strategy for Sustainable Food and Farming in England. This will incorporate a definitive response to all of the Policy Commission's recommendations.

Flax

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what forms of financial assistance are available to farmers intending to grow flax; what assessment she has made of the levels of flax production in the UK; what percentage of agriculturally productive land was under flax in the last year for which figures are available; what steps her Department is taking to encourage flax production; and if she will make a statement. [54490]

Mr. Morley: Flax is eligible for aid under the Arable Area Payments Scheme (AAPS). Payments rates vary in different parts of the UK. In England the rate in 2001 was £270.88 per hectare. Aid is also payable on the tonnage of flax fibre produced by an authorised primary processor, the most recent rate being £55.67 per tonne.

Flax production in the UK built up during the early 1990s before falling back again, peaking at just over 20,000 hectares in 1996. In 2001, AAPS aid was claimed for 4,847 hectares of flax in the UK out of a total AAPS claim of 4,511,374 hectares, flax representing 0.1 per cent. of arable agriculturally productive land. The Census total for all agricultural land in the UK, excluding common rough grazing, is 17,323,000 hectares. Flax therefore represents around 0.03 per cent. of all agriculturally productive land.

The Government Industry Forum on Non-Food Crops, set up to evaluate opportunities for non-food crops and provide strategic advice to Government, has commissioned a case study on the potential for UK grown fibre crops in composite materials. We expect this report to be published in the summer.

Welfare of Laying Hens Directive

Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the proposed date of implementation of European Directives on the Welfare of Laying Hens. [54162]

Mr. Morley: A statutory instrument to implement in England Directive 99/74/EC on the Welfare of Laying Hens was laid before Parliament on Wednesday 1 May.

Debates will take place in both Houses of Parliament soon.

Animal Diseases

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact of *(a)* the reopening of livestock markets and *(b)* other increased animal movements on the incidence of TB and other animal diseases. [54461]

Mr. Morley: As yet we do not have enough data to enable an analysis of what part the reopening of markets and resumption of livestock movement has played in the number of incidents of bovine TB disclosed in the first quarter of this year. We will continue to monitor the position carefully with the independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB to produce an analysis when sufficient data are available. The chief veterinary officer has issued general advice to farmers on assessing disease risk when buying in animals. This is contained in the leaflets "Golden Rules for a Healthy Herd" and "Golden Rules for a Healthy Flock".

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what contingency plan her Department has to deal with two or more separate animal disease epidemics at the same time; and if she will make a statement. [53799]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* This Department has a range of both legislation and operational procedures in place in order to deal with animal disease epidemics. The Interim Foot and Mouth Contingency Plan provides an operational framework for a response to one or more concurrent outbreaks of disease. My officials are working on these contingency arrangements to ensure a co-ordinated inter-agency approach to disease outbreaks and one that fully involves stakeholders.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much compensation has been *(a)* allotted and *(b)* paid for bovine TB for (i) slaughtering and (ii) restriction of movement of cattle in each year since 1980. [53761]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The compensation paid for cattle slaughtered to control bovine TB in each year since 1980 is set out in the table. No compensation is paid because of movement restrictions.

The compensation rate was changed on 26 August 1998 from 75 per cent. of limited value to full market value of the animals.

Year	*Amount (£)*
1980	289,446
1981	365,227
1982	250,782
1983	295,469
1984	284,613
1985	337,806
1986	310,399
1987	525,447
1988	368,158
1989	584,205
1990	1,104,259
1991	678,916
1992	683,831
1993	2,081,436
1994	2,019,911
1995	1,988,820
1996	2,275,481
1997	2,386,029
1998	3,605,242
1999	5,770,983
2000	7,307,797
2001	7,074,125

Silk Stream Flood Defence Project

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on progress with the Silk Stream Flood Defence project in the Hendon constituency. [54479]

Mr. Morley: Operational responsibility for flood measures rests with the local operating authorities, normally the Environment Agency (EA) and local councils, who decide which projects to promote and their timing. I understand that the EA has recently reviewed the extent of their flood alleviation proposals for the Silk Stream and the London borough of Harrow is due to consider the revised scope of the proposals for planning purposes by the end of May. The EA will then be submitting an application for grant to DEFRA which will be considered against our normal economic, technical and environmental criteria and priority score arrangements. Subject to all approvals and contributions being in place, the EA plan to commence works in summer 2003.

Veterinary Service

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what proportion of private veterinary surgeons have received training for each notifiable disease from her Department and its predecessors in the last five years. [54224]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Private Veterinarians are appointed as Local Veterinary Inspectors (LVIs) by the Department in order to carry out specific functions.

Part of the appointment process involves departmental training in those areas to which the appointment relates. The objectives of such training are to improve the ability and performance of the LVI in carrying out work for the Department and to provide motivation to achieve and maintain satisfactory standards.

Following a successful assessment of the trainee's suitability a temporary appointment of six months will be established. During this period an assessment of the officers' competence will be made. Satisfactory assessment leads to a full appointment.

It is the responsibility of the Department to maintain a level of training suitable for the LVI to perform his or her functions. Training is complemented with written instructions, newsletters and practice liaison meetings during which new issues and instructions are discussed. The department's official journal of the SVS—State Veterinary Journal—is published and distributed to LVI practices bi-annually. These publications have included a series of articles on notifiable diseases. All LVI's have access to a departmental veterinary officer 24 hours a day 365 days a year.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will publish her Department's strategy for coping with a new outbreak of foot and mouth. [54521]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The Interim Foot and Mouth Disease Contingency Plan was placed on DEFRA's website for consultation on 12 March 2002. It codifies the operational response regime that was developed during the last outbreak and as such forms the basis for any future response to a new disease outbreak. It is however work in progress and will be reviewed to take account of any recommendations made when the official independent inquiries report.

Dangerous Dogs Act

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the cost to the taxpayer of keeping dogs under the provisions of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 has been in the last 12 months. [54522]

Mr. Morley: There are no centralised records of figures or costs of dogs held, by all police forces, under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (as amended). However the Metropolitan police, who hold the largest number of dogs under the 1991 Act, have informed us that the cost for holding such dogs in their area for the last 12 months was £280,030.10.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the average length of time dogs have been held by the police under the provisions of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was. [54524]

Mr. Morley: There are no centralised records of figures or costs of dogs held, by all police forces, under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (as amended). However, the Metropolitan police, who hold the largest number of dogs under the 1991 Act, have informed us that the average length of time for a dog to be held in their area since 1991 is 418 days, but for the one year 2001–02 the average was 51 days.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to review the terms of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. [54576]

Mr. Morley: There are no plans to review the 1991 Act.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many dogs are held by the Metropolitan police service under the provisions of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. [54575]

Mr. Morley: The Metropolitan police are currently holding 34 dogs under the 1991 Act.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what has been the total cost of keeping dogs under the provisions of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. [54523]

Mr. Morley: There are no centralised records of figures or costs of dogs held, by all police forces, under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (as amended). However, the Metropolitan police, who hold the largest number of dogs under the 1991 Act, have informed us that the total cost within the Metropolitan police of holding dogs under the 1991 Act since it came into force is £4,567,692.36.

Scrapie

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether she intends to introduce a compensation scheme for rams devalued owing to culling under the National Scrapie Plan. [54848]

Mr. Morley: Participation in the National Scrapie Plan is voluntary, and at present it is only those rams which are most susceptible to scrapie which have to be removed from the breeding flock (either by slaughter or castration). It is normal farming practice to remove rams that are not required for breeding, and the plan allows sheep farmers to take susceptibility to scrapie into account in this process. The market provides a return for rams that are removed, and the Government have no plans for a subsidy to top up this return. Decisions on the financial arrangements for any future schemes under the National Scrapie Plan will be taken in full consultation with stakeholders.

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has for the future funding of the National Scrapie Plan. [54847]

Mr. Morley: The National Scrapie Plan is a long-term programme for the eradication of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies from sheep in Great Britain. Funding for future years of the plan will be finalised under the normal spending review process.

Radioactive Waste

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received in respect of proposals to change the planning system as they refer to radioactive waste disposal. [54167]

Ms Keeble: I have been asked to reply.

My Department invited views on the proposals to give Parliament an opportunity to approve in principle major infrastructure projects including radioactive waste disposal schemes set out in the consultation paper "New Parliamentary Procedures for Processing Major Infrastructure Projects". Of some 400 responses, 22 referred to radioactive waste disposal. We are currently considering all the replies received in response to the consultation paper.

There were no similar invitations to comment on radioactive waste disposal in the Planning Green Paper: "Planning: Delivering a Fundamental Change" nor the other consultation papers: "Possible Changes to the Use

Classes Order and Temporary Uses Provisions—A Consultation, Compulsory Purchase and Compensation: the Government's Proposals for Change", and "Planning Obligations: Delivering a Fundamental Change".

All the proposals in the Planning Green Paper and the consultation papers apply to England.

PRIME MINISTER

Commonwealth Games

Q17. **Kate Hoey:** To ask the Prime Minister what events he plans to attend during the Commonwealth games in Manchester. [53189]

The Prime Minister: At present, I expect to attend both the opening and closing ceremonies of the Commonwealth games.

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Kevin Hughes: To ask the Prime Minister what additional projects are planned for the Performance and Innovation Unit; and if he will make a statement. [55342]

The Prime Minister: I have asked the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) to carry out a project examining the development of Electronic Networks in the UK over the next decade.

The project will look at predicted technology and market developments; the importance of Electronic Networks to UK productivity and growth and the regulatory challenges for the next decade. The output of the project will be a report to Government which will assist with the setting of future Government policy and approach, and will contribute to strategic thinking for the new regulator Ofcom.

Responsibility for the current performance, development and economic impact of UK Electronic Networks already lies with groups including the DTI, Oftel, the Office of the e-Envoy, HM Treasury, the Broadband Stakeholders Group and those involved in the Digital TV Action Plan. The PIU has been asked to take a long-term strategic view to complement this existing body of work.

My hon. Friend the Minister for E-Commerce and Competitiveness at the DTI will be the Sponsor Minister for the project.

The scoping note for the project is available on the PIU website, www.piu.gov.uk. The PIU aims to complete its study by summer 2002.

Delivery Unit

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1450W, on the No. 10 Delivery Unit, if he will list the names of the full-time and part-time civil servants employed in the No. 10 Delivery Unit working in the areas of *(a)* transport, *(b)* health, *(c)* crime and asylum and *(d)* education. [54689]

The Prime Minister: The Delivery Unit reports to me under the day-to-day supervision of the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Lord Macdonald, and is headed by Professor Michael Barber.

Professor Barber is supported in his work across the key areas of public service: health; education; crime and asylum and transport, by the Deputy Head of the unit, William Jordan, and team leaders, Liz Lawrence, Adrian Masters, Tony O'Connor, Rosemary Scully and Jenny Wright.

The unit is further staffed by a team with experience of delivery, drawn from the public and private sectors.

Security Services Employees

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister how many applications were referred by the Cabinet Secretary to the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments in respect of employees or former employees of *(a)* MI5, *(b)* MI6 and *(c)* GCHQ in each year from 1 May 1997. [54669]

The Prime Minister: None. The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments considers applications from the most senior Crown servants who wish to take up outside appointments within two years of leaving the service. It is independent and the Cabinet Secretary has no role in referring these applications to it.

The committee is serviced by its own secretariat and it gives its advice directly to me, or, if the applicant is a diplomat or in MI6, to the Foreign Secretary. Since 1 May 1997 until the end of the reporting year on 31 March 2002, the committee has considered no applications from MI5 or GCHQ, and two (one in 1998 and one earlier this year) from MI6.

Business appointment applications from staff below the most senior levels are dealt with by the Department itself, after Cabinet Office advice if appropriate under the rules. However, the rules make provision, exceptionally, for any application to be referred to the advisory committee if the Head of the Home civil service and the departmental Minister so agree. In the period concerned there have been no such cases in MI5, MI6 or GCHQ.

WALES

Voting Age

6. **Matthew Green:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on reducing the minimum voting age in elections to the National Assembly for Wales to 16 years. [53149]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None. We have no plans to reduce the voting age.

Public Sector Workers (Recruitment)

7. **Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues about recruitment of public sector workers by Government Departments in Wales. [53150]

Mr. Touhig: Neither my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State nor I have had any recent discussions. We are always available to meet colleagues on this or other matters.

Poverty

8. **Kevin Brennan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues and the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales about integrated policies to tackle poverty in Wales. [53152]

Mr. Touhig: I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues and the First Minister about a range of issues, including poverty in Wales, and ways to tackle it.

Euro

9. **Mr. Bryant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what evaluation his Department has made of Wales' preparations for possible UK adoption of the euro. [53153]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Wales has been preparing for the arrival of the euro since 1998 when the old Welsh Office set up the Euro Task Force for Wales to make Welsh businesses aware of the issues which might affect them following the introduction of the euro in the 12 countries of the eurozone.

The Task Force has been disseminating information to businesses across Wales in a number of ways including conferences, exhibitions, a telephone helpline, website and leaflets.

Manufacturing Employment

10. **Chris Grayling:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on changes in manufacturing employment in Wales in the past 12 months. [53154]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with the First Minister and other ministerial colleagues to discuss a range of issues including manufacturing employment in Wales.

The Government recognise it is a particularly tough time for manufacturers in the UK, due to the slowdown in world economy and weakness of the euro. However, these problems are not confined to the UK or in particular, to Wales. I am pleased to note that Wales is posting the fastest fall in unemployment of any region or country in the UK.

Renewable Energy

11. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Department for Trade and Industry regarding renewable energy production in Wales. [53155]

Mr. Touhig: I meet my ministerial colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry regularly to discuss a range of issues, including energy production in Wales.

My hon. Friend the Chancellor's Budget announcements contained a number of incentives for renewable energy production.

They include: enhanced capital allowances for business investment in energy saving technologies; exemption from the Climate Change Levy for Combined Heat and Power (CHP) and coal mine methane projects; the first economy wide-emissions trading scheme; a fuel duty differential for sulphur free petrol and diesel; a fuel duty exemption for hydrogen; lower duty for biodiesel; and a commitment to review the potential use of economic instruments to tackle household energy efficiency.

24. **Ian Lucas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the National Assembly for Wales to ensure that Wales plays its part in achieving the UK Government's target to produce 10 per cent. of the UK's energy from renewable sources by 2010. [53169]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with my ministerial colleagues to discuss a range of issues including renewable energy.

The overall target, for the UK, of electricity generated from renewable sources by 2010 is 10 per cent.

I am pleased to note that the Assembly's Economic Development Committee has recently launched a consultation paper on renewable energy. The committee will propose targets, for Wales, for both electricity production and heat production from renewable sources by 2010 and 2020, in the light of the responses to the consultation. These proposals will inform the National Assembly's development of a renewable policy for Wales.

I look forward to receiving the committee's final report.

Student Debt

12. **Mr. Francois:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on student debt in Wales. [53156]

Mr. Touhig: I meet regularly with colleagues to discuss a range of issues, including student finance.

Health Spending

13. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with his ministerial colleagues regarding the audit body proposed to oversee health spending in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [53157]

Mr. Touhig: My right hon. Friend has discussed this matter with both the Assembly First Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington. I have also discussed it with the Assembly Secretary for Health and Social Services.

The Commission for Health and Improvement (CHI) and the Audit Commission are England and Wales bodies. The First Minister and the Assembly Cabinet are content with the proposals in principle. It will be necessary to make sure that this works properly and effectively for Wales, and these detailed issues will be addressed during the framing of the necessary legislation.

27. **Andrew Selous:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales about the impact of the Budget on health spending in Wales. [53172]

Mr. Touhig: My right hon. Friend and I have spoken with the Assembly First Minister and with the Health Secretary about the increase to the Welsh Block consequential on the increases in Government spending on health announced in the recent Budget.

The resulting amount for the Block was £1.8 billion over the next five years and I am pleased to say that the Assembly intends to spend the full amount on health.

Film Industry

14. **Michael Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he is having with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales on measures to promote the film industry in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [53158]

Mr. Touhig: I have regular meetings with colleagues to discuss a range of issues, including the promotion of the Welsh film industry.

Health and Social Care (Monmouth)

15. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will meet the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the proposed health and social care facility for Monmouth. [53159]

Mr. Touhig: My right hon. Friend and I discuss health issues on a regular basis with the First Minister and the Health and Social Care Minister on a regular basis.

I am aware that the proposed health and social care joint facility project (Monnow Court) is a collaboration between the local authority, Gwent NHS Trust, Gwent HA, LHG, CHC and the voluntary sector.

Social Services

16. **Dr. Murrison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales regarding improvements in the provision of social services in Wales. [53160]

Mr. Touhig: My right hon. Friend has regular discussions with the First Minister on a range of matters, including improvements in the provision of social services in Wales.

European Union (Funding)

17. **David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the alue in 2001–02 of *(a)* EU structural funding and agricultural support payments in Wales and *(b)* the share of the UK's EU contribution that is represented by the Welsh share of UK GDP. [53161]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In 2001–02 structural fund payments in Wales amounted to £146 million and agricultural support payments amounted to £155 million.

Tourism

18. **Huw Irranca-Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in the use of the cultural and heritage assets of Wales in encouraging inbound tourism. [53162]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with my ministerial colleagues to discuss a range of issues including the tourism industry in Wales.

I am pleased to note that to help encourage tourists to visit Wales and enable them to make the most of Wales' unique historical and cultural assets, the Wales Tourist Board is working with a range of partners to develop a Cultural Tourism Strategy for Wales. This strategy will help visitors access and experience the various aspects of Welsh culture.

Pensioners (Transport Use)

19. **Donald Anderson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has held with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales about the use of transport by pensioners in Wales. [53164]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Minister and discuss a variety of issues relating to transport in Wales.

From April 2001, the Assembly introduced free bus passes and discounts of at least 50 per cent. on bus fares for pensioners (men aged 65 and over, and women aged 60 and over) and disabled people.

From April 2002 the Assembly introduced free bus travel for pensioners and disabled people.

In both cases the Assembly is supporting the measures by funding local authorities through the revenue settlement.

The Assembly shares the UK Government's commitment to eradicate the inequality in the concessions ages for men and women at the earliest opportunity, and a Bill is proceeding through Parliament to enable that policy to be implemented throughout England and Wales.

Small Businesses

20. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Treasury about fiscal measures to assist small businesses in Wales. [53165]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with Cabinet colleagues, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to discuss a wide range of issues, including small businesses.

The Chancellor's recent Budget announcement included a number of fiscal measures to support small businesses at every stage. These include simplification of VAT for small businesses by increasing the VAT registration threshold, extending optional flat rate scheme and further reforms of the VAT annual accounting scheme.

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Treasury about measures to assist small businesses in Wales. [53144]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with Cabinet colleagues, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to discuss a wide range of issues, including small businesses.

The Chancellor's recent Budget announcement included a number of fiscal measures to support small businesses at every stage. These include a reduction in the corporation tax starting rate from 10 per cent. to zero, helping small businesses throughout the UK and Wales to continue to flourish and prosper.

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about measures to assist small businesses in Wales. [53163]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with Cabinet colleagues, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to discuss a wide range of issues, including small businesses.

The Chancellor's recent Budget announcement included a number of fiscal measures to support small businesses at every stage. These include Research and Development tax credit, benefiting 50 large firms in Wales.

Small and Medium Enterprises

22. **Mr. Barker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the encouragement of small and medium enterprises in Wales. [53167]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Chancellor's recent Budget announcement included a number of fiscal measures to support SMEs at every stage. These include measures to promote enterprise in disadvantaged communities in Wales with stamp duty relief and Community Investment Tax Credit.

Dentistry

21. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had on provision of NHS dental treatment in Wales. [53166]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular meetings with the First Minister and the Health and Social Services Minister to discuss the NHS and other health matters.

Brussels (Welsh Representation)

23. **Adam Price:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with colleagues in the National Assembly in relation to official Welsh representation in Brussels. [53168]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with my ministerial colleagues to discuss a range of issues including representation of Wales in Europe. However, the issue of official Welsh representation in Brussels is entirely an internal matter for the Assembly.

I am pleased to note that the Assembly Executive recognises the importance of Wales having a strong voice in Europe and that it plans to clarify who represents Wales in Brussels—thereby strengthening its own representation in this region.

Devolution

25. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the devolution settlement. [53170]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The devolution settlement continues to work well, serving the interests of people both in Wales and the rest of the UK.

Climate Change Levy

26. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues about the impact of the climate change levy on manufacturing employment in Wales. [53171]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet regularly with Cabinet colleagues and discuss a wide range of issues, including the impact of the climate change levy on manufacturing employment.

Part of the Government's strategy of encouraging energy efficiency through the Climate Change Levy (CCL) has been to move the burden of tax from 'goods' such as jobs to 'bads' such as pollution. The Government is committed to making Britain one of the most competitive environments for business in the world, which is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that the overall tax burden in the UK is much lower than the EU average. It is also important to consider the less-easily quantifiable costs on operating a business, such as employment regulation.

The climate change levy is small in proportion to total energy costs, and energy costs themselves are only a small proportion of total business costs. All sectors can reduce the impact of the levy on their costs by improving energy efficiency, and taking advantage of the available incentives.

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales on what subjects and on which dates his Department has recently consulted organisations representing young people; and if he will list such organisations. [52490]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None, the nature of its functions means that the Wales Office undertakes very few consultations. When it does so, though, my Department will take account of the new core principles for the involvement of children and young people published by my hon. Friend the Minister for Young People in November 2001.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Departmental Policies

James Purnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what impact her Department's policies have had on the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency since 1997. [54337]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will list the *(a)* private finance initiative and *(b)* public private partnership projects which have been delayed. [44886]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Public Private Partnership for which this Department is responsible has not been delayed.

Better Quality Service Programme

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills which of the services of her Department have not been reviewed under the Better Quality Services Initiative; and when they will be reviewed. [50320]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The review of the Department's activities and services under the Better Quality Service Programme started in 1999 and is reflected in its Spending Review 2000 Service Delivery Agreement, which requires all its activities t be reviewed by 2004. We are on course to meet this target: progress is reported in the Department's Annual Report. There are four more Quinquennial reviews of the Department's Non-Departmental Public Bodies to be carried out in the next two years.

Building Projects

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will list the building projects under construction; and what coolant will be used for the building services water chilling system for such projects. [52049]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Within my Department there are no current building projects under construction, hence there is no further information to provide.

National Insurance Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what her estimate is of the cost in the next 12 months of the budget changes to employers' national insurance contributions to *(a)* her Department, *(b)* agencies of her Department, *(c)* local government carrying out functions within the responsibility of her Department and *(d)* higher education. [52083]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 29 April 2002 by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, *Official Report* column 544.

Special Educational Needs

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many special needs places are available in special schools in England and Wales; and what the equivalent figure was in 1997. [52528]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Information on the number of special needs places available in special schools is not collected.

The numbers of pupils on roll in maintained and non-maintained special schools in January 1997 and 2001 were 98,249 and 95,598 respectively. This represents 1.2 per cent. of all pupils in 1997 and 1.1 per cent. in 2001.

For information on Welsh special schools I refer the hon. Member to the National Assembly for Wales.

Red Cross

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what financial support her Department has given since 1 April 2000 to projects run by the British Red Cross. [52947]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* I refer to the Home Office answer to this question on 30 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 609W.

Disabled Access

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what adjustments have been made to her Department's premises following the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; and what the cost of these adjustments was as a proportion of her Department's budget. [53027]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* Separate records are not kept on specific changes or costs of modifications to the Department's premises to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Expenditure on statutory and beneficial "reasonable adjustments" is subsumed within on-going works programmes covering a wide range of building maintenance and improvement projects.

Work-based Training

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what plans she has to compensate families who lose benefits when their child undertakes vocational work-based training; [53338]

(2) what plans the Government have to protect the level of child maintenance of families whose children take the work-placed training option; [54174]

(3) if the Government will increase the level of financial support to families whose children take work-placed training. [54173]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We have no plans at present to change the arrangements for supporting young people engaged in work-based training, and their families.

Private Tuition

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what plans she has to introduce a system of inspection for the private tuition industry; and if she will make a statement; [54197]

(2) what plans she has to regulate the private tuition industry; and if she will make a statement. [54198]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We have no plans to regulate private tuition. Employment agencies and businesses, including those that supply private tutors, are already regulated by the Employment Agencies Act 1973 and associated Regulations, which are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Henry Box School

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what targets were agreed by Henry Box school, Oxfordshire, at the time of its acquisition of specialist status; and which have not yet been achieved. [54426]

Mr. Timms: The Henry Box school has been operating as a language college since September 2001. The information requested is being collated. I will therefore write to the hon. Member as soon as possible giving a full reply to the question raised.

Ofsted Reports

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will list the reports she expects Ofsted to publish in the next six months. [54891]

Mr. Timms: This is a matter for HM Chief Inspector of Schools. I have therefore asked David Bell to write to the hon. Member and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

Teacher Work Load

Ann Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will make a statement on the School Teachers' Review Body's special review of approaches to reducing teacher work load. [55341]

Mr. Timms: The report I commissioned from the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) on approaches to reducing teacher work load has been laid before Parliament and is available in the Vote Office. I am grateful to the chair and members of the review body for their work on this important report.

I asked the review body to produce this report because I want to make sure teachers have the time and support to do what they do best—teach. I welcome the way in which the report has been produced, with careful analysis of all the evidence and opinions from the teaching profession and beyond.

The report proposes changes that would amount to a major package of reform with substantial implications for both Government and the teaching profession. I shall now hold a full consultation, running until 3 July. In addition, I shall be looking to the School Workforce Remodelling Working Party that I set up in January to consider carefully the report and give me its views. I want to hear every side of the debate before we move forward and I consult further on practical measures.

DEFENCE

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the development of unmanned aerial vehicles. [39202]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) on 26 February 2002, *Official Report*, columns 1137–38W.

Army Pensions

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the latest estimate is of the number of cases affected by the mistaken taxing of certain categories of Army pensions; and what he estimates the costs of putting this right will be. [37848]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 27 February 2002]:* As regards the numbers of individuals affected by the tax error, our latest assessment remains that which I gave to the hon. Member on 26 February 2002, *Official Report*, columns 1136–37W. Our latest estimate of the cost to refund affected individuals similarly remains that which I gave to the hon. Member on 11 February 2002, *Official Report*, columns 8–9.

Complaints

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many complaints were registered against his Department and its predecessor Departments in *(a)* 1990 to 1996 and *(b)* 1997 to 2002; how many are current; and what proportion were (i) taken up and (ii) upheld by the parliamentary ombudsman in those periods. [51589]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 22 April 2002]:* Information on the total number of complaints registered against the Ministry of Defence is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Information on complaints submitted to the parliamentary ombudsman is contained in the ombudsman's annual reports, copies of which are available in the Library of the House or on the ombudsman's website at www.ombudsman.org.uk.

Defence Expenditure

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much of the £950 million provided for defence since 11 September 2001 has been spent. [52361]

Mr. Hoon: The additions to the defence budget in 2001–02 from the reserve cover a number of heads, including the £252 million for the campaign against international terrorism. Final outturn figures for expenditure in 2001–02 are not yet available, but they are expected to show that most of the sum to which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor referred in his Budget speech has been spent in that year.

A400M

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when aircraft designs for the A400M will be finalised; when contracts for the A400M will be signed off; when production of the A400M will start; and if he will make a statement on the A400M. [53418]

Dr. Moonie: The contract for the development and production of the A400M was signed on 18 December 2001, but its activation was subject to the German Government obtaining Bundestag funding approval. This was achieved in late March. The participating nations are in the process of implementing a jointly agreed mechanism designed to activate the contract at the earliest opportunity.

We expect that design work on the A400M will be completed by mid 2005. However, the progressive completion of the design will allow the manufacture of some major components to begin in 2004. Assembly of the first A400M aircraft is expected to begin in 2006.

Correspondence

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) whether personal letters from lords-lieutenant to him are *(a)* treated officially and *(b)* delegated to junior ministers; [52340]

(2) if he will make a statement with regard to his policy on personally replying to letters from *(a)* privy councillors, *(b)* other hon. Members, *(c)* royalty, *(d)* lords-lieutenant and *(e)* others; [52341]

(3) if it is his policy to reply personally to letters addressed personally to him by lords-lieutenant of counties. [52339]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* It is common practice for the Secretary of State for Defence to respond to letters addressed personally to him from members of the royal family and Members of Parliament who are fellow Privy Councillors. Letters from other hon. Members would normally be delegated to the responsible junior Minister for reply, although there will be some exceptions to this rule. Similarly, letters from Her Majesty's lords-lieutenant would normally be delegated to the responsible junior Minister or his private secretary. Letters from others will be handled on a case-by-case basis. Most will receive an official response, but some will receive a response from a Minister or one of his private secretaries.

Defence Medical Services

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with front-line commanders about the effects of medical limitations on their ability to deploy troops with particular reference to manning levels in the Defence Medical Services. [53873]

Dr. Moonie: The provision of appropriate levels of medical support to British forces is an integral element of operational planning. I am briefed regularly on operational issues.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will *(a)* complete and *(b)* publish the Medical Manning and Retention Review; which outside organisation and individuals he will consult in the preparation of the review; and if he will make a statement. [53800]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 25 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 425W. The outcome of the review will be announced in due course. The review team includes an independent human resources consultant and we are also consulting the NHS, which is providing an adviser to the team, the Department of Health, the Office of Manpower Economics, the British Medical Association and the British Dental Association.

Pensions

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many widows of Royal Air Force service men have been affected by his Department's error in deducting tax wrongly from their pensions; [54163]

(2) how many *(a)* disabled ex-service men and *(b)* disabled ex-service women in the Royal Air Force have been affected by his Department's error in deducting tax wrongly from their pensions. [54164]

(3) how many widows of Royal Navy servicemen have been affected by his Department's error in deducting tax wrongly from their pensions; [54319]

(4) how many disabled ex-service *(a)* men and *(b)* women formerly in the Royal Navy have been affected by his Department's error in deducting tax wrongly from their pensions; [54321]

(5) what the total cost will be of the refund to disabled ex-servicemen formerly in the RAF and Royal Navy because of the error made by his Department in deducting tax wrongly from their pensions; [54320]

(6) for how many years his Department has known about its error in deducting tax from the pensions of disabled ex-servicemen formerly in *(a)* the Royal Navy and *(b)* the Royal Air Force. [54322]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The potential for the issue of mistaken taxation of service invaliding pensions to apply to the Royal Navy and RAF as well as the Army was identified only very recently. Work is continuing to identify the extent of the error and I am therefore unable at present to provide numbers of affected RN and RAF pensioners. The total cost of the tax refunds to be paid will not be known until this work has been completed. No widow(er)s are directly affected as all widow(er)s' pensions under the Armed Forces Pension Scheme are taxable, regardless of whether their spouse was in receipt of an attributable pension. Some may, however, be affected indirectly as beneficiaries of a pensioner's will.

Overnight Accommodation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence under what regulations it is permissible for non-service personnel to be given overnight accommodation at MOD bases; who has to agree to the stay; what notice has to be given; what notification must be given to security services; and if he will make a statement. [54263]

Dr. Moonie: Certain non-service personnel may be accommodated on Ministry of Defence bases in view of their duties or connection with the MOD, by authority of Defence Council Instructions. Commanding officers also have discretion to allow personnel to invite non-service personnel to stay in MOD accommodation, and to apply suitable rules. No requirements for periods of notice, or notification to the security services, are laid down centrally. Guests are registered with the MOD base authorities, generally by signing in at guardrooms or reception points.

Terrorism

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to implement the recommendations of the second report of the Defence Committee, HC 348, on the threat from terrorism. [54165]

Mr. Hoon: The Government's response to the Committee's report was published on 7 March 2002 (HC 667). Work on the "New Chapter" to the Strategic Defence review is continuing. I expect to be in a position to publish some conclusions in the late spring or early summer.

Nuclear Weapons Tests (Compensation)

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on compensation claims made by former service men in respect of exposure to radiation in atmospheric nuclear weapons tests. [54213]

Dr. Moonie: We have every confidence in the independent studies carried out by the National Radiological Protection Board and the Imperial Cancer Research Fund that showed veterans' participation in the nuclear test programme has not had a detectable effect on their expectation of life, or on their risk of developing cancer or other fatal diseases. Consequently grounds do

not exist for compensation to be paid to British nuclear test veterans or their surviving spouses and families. There are no plans to review this position.

Western European Union

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with the President of the Western European Union; and what issues were discussed. [54629]

Mr. Hoon: None.

Private Gray

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 24 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 260W, when his Department was informed by Surrey police of the re-opening of the investigation into Private Gray's death; what the terms of the investigation are; what his Department's involvement in the investigation is; and if he will make a statement. [54811]

Dr. Moonie: Surrey police informed the Ministry of Defence of their intention to reinvestigate the death of Private Gray on 30 April 2002. This followed their meeting with the family of Private Gray the previous day. The terms of the investigation are a matter for the Surrey police, who have stated that no further information will be released until their inquiries are complete. The Surrey police investigation team is fully independent of the MOD, although the Army will co-operate fully with the investigation as required.

War Cemeteries

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 2002, to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), *Official Report*, column 166W, on war cemeteries, if he will place in the Library copies of the correspondence between the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the French Ministry of the Interior concerning plans to build on a war cemetery for a new Paris airport. [54881]

Dr. Moonie: The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is an independent Commonwealth organisation governed by Royal Charter. As it is not a British Government Department I am unable to place copies of correspondence between the Commission and the French Government in the Library.

Afghanistan

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans there are to use SHAPE military experts for planning a Turkish-led ISAF in Kabul. [54837]

Mr. Hoon: There are no such plans.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received from his *(a)* Turkish and *(b)* EU counterparts regarding the possibility of using SHAPE's military experts for planning a Turkish-led ISAF; and if he will make a statement. [54836]

Mr. Hoon: I have not receive any representations from my Turkish or EU counterparts on this subject.

I am not aware of any recent requests from Turkey for NATO operational planning assistance, nor of this prospect having been raised in EU circles. However, should a request be received for planning support, this would be considered on its merits.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what conditions need to be met by his Department prior to Turkey agreeing to lead ISAF in Kabul. [54838]

Mr. Hoon: Turkey formally announced on 29 April its willingness to take over the leadership of the ISAF. Wide-ranging discussions have taken place, and continue, between Turkey, the US, the UK and others on the practical steps that will be needed to implement this decision. These include the support that may be needed from the UK, as the current lead nation, before during and after the handover of responsibility to Turkey.

Fluorescent Particle Trials

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 535–36W, on fluorescent particle trials, if he will place in the Library the conclusions of the subsequent defence trials involving simulant organisms referred to; what assessment he has made of the implications of the impact of the trials on human health; and if he will make a statement. [54343]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The trials were undertaken to assess the performance of developmental and in-service protective equipment and detection systems. I am withholding the conclusions in accordance with Exemption 1a of the Code of Practice to Access to Government Information, relating to defence, security and international relations.

Defence Analytical Service Agency

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Quinquennial Review of the Defence Analytical Service Agency will take place. [55339]

Dr. Moonie: The Quinquennial Review (QQR) of the Defence Analytical Service Agency (DASA) will begin this month, though some preliminary work is already under way. The aim of the review is to examine how DASA has performed since the previous QQR in 1997 and to recommend what measures should be taken in order to reinforce the agency's delivery of cost-effective services to its customers and to ensure that effective use is made of its statistical expertise and other human resources.

The review will proceed in two phases. First, a number of "framework" issues will be examined, including whether DASA is best placed as a Next Steps Agency within the Ministry of Defence to exploit its full potential and whether existing governance arrangements require adjustment. The report of this first phase of the review is expected by the end of May.

Second, the review will address, in the light of the answers to the "framework" issues, a number of questions concerned with the operating efficiency of DASA, including the development of a more appropriate relationship between other providers of statistics within Government and a review of the current organisational configuration to ensure that it is best placed to meet

customer requirements both now and in the future. The report of this second phase of the review is expected at the end of August.

The review will be carried out by a small team, which will consult closely with DASA management and other stakeholders, including DASA's customers. The MOD is interested also to hear the view of other organisations or individuals who would like to make a contribution to the review. Those wishing to do so should send their contributions to:

DASA QQR Team
Room 30, St. Giles Court
St. Giles High Street
London WC2H 8LD.

Medical Categories (Army)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the Army are in the medical categories *(a)* FE, *(b)* FT, *(c)* LE, *(d)* LT, *(e)* BE, *(f)* BT, *(g)* HO, *(h)* HO (UK), *(i)* HONI and *(j)* HO (UK) NI; in each case what percentage of (i) establishment and (ii) actual manning this represents; and if he will make a statement. [54131]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Details of UK Trained Army Peronnel (UKTAP) in the specified medical categories are shown in the table. This excludes Gurkhas and Full-Time Reserve Service Personnel for which this information is not centrally held.

Strength of UKTAP by Pulhheems employment standard (PES) as at 1 April 2002

	Total number	*Liability (percentage)*	*Strength (percentage)*
FE	86,214	82.96	89.33
FT	5	0.00	0.01
LE	7,356	7.08	7.62
LT	1	0.00	0.00
BE	11	0.01	0.01
BT	0	0	0.00
HO	850	0.82	0.88
HO(UK)	165	0.16	0.17
HONNI	587	0.56	0.61
HO(UK)(NNI)	31	0.03	0.03
Liability (MPT)			103,926
Strength			96,507

It should be noted, however, that the above categories do not give a complete picture as there are a number of other categories for which details have not been requested.

Of the above categories, only Forward Everywhere has no restrictions placed upon it. This does not, however, mean that personnel in the other categories are non-effective. Many categories restrict only the locations that personnel may be posted to or the type of work they may undertake. Pregnancy is obviously a prime example of this situation, and it should be noted that the non-FE figure for women is currently much higher than for men.

Territorial Army

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women are serving in the Territorial Army. [54692]

Dr. Moonie: As at 1 April 2002, the strength of the Territorial Army stood at 39,663 personnel, including those mobilised in support of operations. Of these, 32,473 were male and 7,190 female.

Medical Treatment

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether he plans to make the short-term measure announced in December 2000 temporarily to supplement NHS treatment of armed forces personnel with private provision into a permanent policy; and if he will make a statement. [54129]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* I assume that the hon. Member is referring to my answer of 9 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 482W to the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) in which I referred to contracts having been placed with private sector providers to help return personnel to fully deployable status. We have continued to fund a limited amount of private health care treatment, where this is justified, under central and local arrangements. For the long term, in announcing recently the outcome of the quinquennial review of our medical agencies on 11 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 556–57W, we stated that while developing and strengthening our relationship with the NHS, we would also make use of private sector healthcare providers as necessary.

TREASURY

Newspaper Advertising

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the expenditure of his *(a)* Department, *(b)* agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies on newspaper advertising by title in each year since 1997. [26991]

Ruth Kelly: This information is not available in the form requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the levels of sickness absence were in each of the last three years in *(a)* Customs and Excise as a whole and *(b)* each division and regional collection of the VAT and Excise sections. [53479]

Mr. Boateng: The average number of working days lost per person due to sickness absence within HM Customs and Excise are detailed in the table.

Calendar year	*Average working days lost*
31 December 1999	9.6
31 December 2000	9.0

The information for the calendar year to 31 December 2001 is due to be published later this year by the Cabinet Office.

The data cannot be provided for VAT or Excise on a divisional or regional basis as it is not available in this format.

Rural Awareness

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when his Department will establish rural targets and monitoring as part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, Rural Proofing in 2001–02. [54412]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Treasury has a secondee from the Countryside Agency to advise on the Treasury's role in rural policy and to inform Treasury evaluation of how best to deliver Government objectives for rural areas through the spending review. These objectives and associated targets are set out in the White Paper "Our countryside: the future".

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when his Department will have rural proofing embedded in policy-making procedures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, Rural Proofing in 2001–02. [54433]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Treasury is rural proofing policy. It has employed a secondee from the Countryside Agency to work across the Department on the Treasury's role in rural policy as one of a number of cross cutting issues that include sustainability. The result has set the basis for examining the rural dimension of spending review 2002 and for informing future policy development. The Treasury is currently evaluating what further steps are necessary to consolidate this work and to set a framework for the Department to take it forward from 2003 on.

Terrorist Suspects

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 541W, on terrorist suspects, if he will identify the individuals and organisations referred to in the assets freeze list published by the G7 Finance Ministers. [54509]

Ruth Kelly: The individuals and organisations listed by the G7 Finance Ministers on 20 April 2002 are:

Es Sayed, Abdelkader Mahmoud;

Abu Hamza, al-Masri;

Ben Heni, Lased;

Aouadi, Mohamed Ben Belgacem;

Bouchoucha, Mokhtar;

Charaabi, Tarek;

Essid, Sami Ben Khemais;

The Aid Organisation of the Ulema.

Insurance Premiums

Mr. Barker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will request the OFT to investigate the change in insurance premiums in areas at risk from flooding since autumn 2000. [54427]

Ruth Kelly: The Government have no plans to request the OFT to investigate price changes for insurance in areas at risk of flooding since autumn 2000. The Government are in discussion with the insurance industry with the mutual aim of ensuring that affordable flood cover remains available as widely as possible. It would be for the Director General of Fair Trading to decide whether to investigate if a case were presented.

Smuggling

Paul Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the percentage of *(a)* heroin, *(b)* cocaine and *(c)* cannabis that escaped detection and was imported into the United Kingdom in each of the past three years. [54818]

Mr. Boateng: No accurate estimates are currently available.

Money Laundering Terrorist Finance

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what extra expenditure is planned this year, and in which Departments and agencies of Government, to tackle *(a)* money laundering and *(b)* the financial supports for terrorism. [45748]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: I have been asked to reply.

A full answer is not available in the form requested, partly because expenditure on activities against money laundering and terrorist financing are not always separately identified and partly because budgets for 2002–03 are in some cases not yet finalised. I can however provide the following information. Information about expenditure for the National Criminal Intelligence Service has been included although it is not a Government agency.

The Government have made £18 million available this year and £21 million next year to meet the costs of establishing the Assets Recovery Agency expected to be created by the Proceeds of Crime Bill currently going through Parliament, and related costs. As part of the budget settlement for counter terrorism in 2002–03 £1 million has been provisionally earmarked for tracking terrorist finances. This will provide funding for a multi-agency unit based at the National Criminal Intelligence Service supported by additional investigative capacity at the Metropolitan police service.

The Crown Prosecution Service has obtained £85,000 from the Recovered Assets Fund for a project on the training of prosecutors across the criminal justice system in implementation of the Proceeds of Crime Bill, which includes new money laundering offences.

The Department for International Development is increasing support for anti-money laundering activities in 2002–03, including:

funding the Executive Secretary post of the Eastern and Southern Africa Anti-Money Laundering Group (£70,000 per year for three years);

co-funding with the European Union an anti-money laundering technical assistance programme for 10 countries in east and south-east Asia (£700,000 over three years);

funding the Secretariat of the Egmont Group of financial intelligence units (hosted by the United Kingdom National Criminal Intelligence Service) (£75,000 per year for two years). Department for International Development will supplement this support with funds for a training post at the National Criminal Intelligence Service dedicated to developing training materials relevant to developing countries and countries in transition (estimated £150,000 per year for three years).

In financial year 2002–03 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has ring-fenced £250,000 from its Drugs and Crime Fund to provide technical assistance to combat money laundering in countries which are the

greatest threat to the United Kingdom's financial system. This represents an increase of over 10 per cent. over the previous financial year.

The National Criminal Intelligence Service has increased the staffing of its Economic Crime Unit, which handles (inter alia) reports from financial and other institutions of transactions suspected to represent money laundering, from 44 staff in January 2001 to 66 staff in December 2001 with a further increase of up to 20 staff planned for 2002–03.

Customs and Excise will be implementing the new regulatory regime for money service businesses (bureaux de change, money transmission agents and third party cheque cashiers). This requires all affected businesses to register by 1 June this year. The resourcing levels for this regime are still to be finalised, but it is estimated to be about 40 staff years per annum.

Taxation (Millionaires)

Paul Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many millionaires in the United Kingdom had a nil tax contribution in 2000–01. [54844]

Dawn Primarolo: Information on tax liabilities analysed by the total wealth of living individuals is not available. A declaration of total assets is required only for inheritance tax purposes and the estimate of millionaires given in the reply to my hon. Friend on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 540W, was based on inheritance tax statistics.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will reply to the letter to him dated 2 April from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. I. Hesketh. [55002]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have done so.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

UK Master Franchise

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to her answer of 25 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 695W, on trading scheme exemptions, whether her Department determines that an individual or a company is operating a UK master franchise in a trading scheme via inspection of the contract between *(a)* the franchisor and the UK master franchise and *(b)* the UK master franchise and its franchisees; and if she will make a statement. [54507]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The Department does not routinely inspect trading scheme contracts or advise individuals on them.

Schemes will vary but the precise nature of the contractual arrangements concluded between scheme members will be a relevant factor in the application of regulatory controls in any given case.

Textile Industry

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) whether her Department has carried out an assessment of the impact on the textile industry in the UK of the worldwide economic downturn since 11 September; [53237]

(2) what action her Department has taken to support the textile industry in the UK since 11 September. [53238]

Mr. Alexander *[holding answer 30 April 2002]:* The Department has made no specific assessment of the impact of the events of 11 September on the textile industry. However, we continue to work closely with the industry's own Textile and Clothing Strategy Group (TCSG) to help to improve the industry's productivity and competitiveness, a process which has been in place since before the events of 11 September. The Government have provided more than £80 million to the industry since 1997, and in the last year alone, spent close to £3 million on encouraging innovation within the industry by developing the technical textiles market, developing supply chain and design skills, promoting the benefits of e-commerce and providing export support and education and training opportunities.

My officials maintain an on-going dialogue with the industry and keep in close contact with regional bodies including the devolved Administrations, industry representative organisations such as the British Apparel and Textile Confederation (BATC), and textile and clothing companies as well as the TCSG.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what *(a)* surplus and *(b)* deficit was passed to the Exchequer in the form of Government receipts during the course of the ECGD's trading activities in each of the last five years. [54362]

Ms Hewitt: The following surpluses were passed to the Exchequer in the form of Government receipts by ECGD during financial years 1997–98 to 2000–01. The figures for 2001–02 have not been included as these have yet to be audited.

	Extra receipts (£)
1997–98	469,871,250.17
1998–99	384,676,457.08
1999–2000	147,698,759.97
2000–01	226,905,795.70

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much has been spent by the administration section of the Export Credits Guarantee Department under code B4 (Grant and transfers: current) in the appropriation accounts on recruitment costs in the last five financial years; how much was paid to each recruitment company; what position was recruited for in each year; and if she will make a statement. [54359]

Ms Hewitt: Details of amounts of money paid to individual companies are commercially confidential. I have listed in the table ECGD's total spend on recruitment for financial years 1997–98 to 2000–01, the names of the recruitment companies employed by ECGD in those years and ECGD's total recruitment in the same period. Figures for 2001–02 have not been included as these have yet to be audited.

2000–01	1999–2000	1998–99	1997–98
Recruitment spend (£)			
106,243.34	145,001.24	69,516.11	146,857.57
Recruitment companies			
Capita Business	Barclay Simpson Associates	Barclay Simpson Associates	Barclay Simpson Associates
Datatech Search and Selection	Capita Business Services	Capita Business Services	Capita RAS Ltd. (ex RAS)
Reed Staffing Services	Chambers Professional Recruitment	Capita RAS Ltd. (ex RAS)	Carr Lyons Search and Selection
	Hays Accountancy Personnel	Chambers Professional Recruitment	
	Reed Staffing Services Ltd.		
ECGD recruitment			
Administrative grades			
16	17	13	7
Executive grades			
22	21	—	24
Management grades			
3	3	—	1
Senior civil service			
1	1	—	2
Specialist (eg legal/operational research)			
—	—	3	6

MOX Fuel Shipment

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what date she expects the ships carrying the faulty MOX fuel from Japan to Sellafield to enter UK territorial waters. [53139]

Ms Hewitt: This is an operational matter for the companies and agencies concerned. Detailed information about the timings and routes for transports of nuclear materials is not disclosed publicly for security reasons.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what additional security measures have been ordered for the return of the faulty MOX fuel from Japan to Sellafield as a result of the events of 11 September 2001. [53140]

Ms Hewitt: The Government keep security requirements for transports of nuclear materials under regular review. The Government are satisfied that the security arrangements for the transport of MOX from Japan to the United Kingdom are amply robust to deal with any potential threats. In addition, the Government of the United States have confirmed to the Government of Japan that arrangements for transporting the fuel from Japan to the United Kingdom, including the security measures in place, are consistent with the terms of the bilateral agreement on nuclear co-operation between the United States and Japan.

Maladministration

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what payments have been made to individuals following findings of maladministration by ombudsmen with responsibility for agencies under the remit of her Department in the last 12 months; and what plans she has to review the powers to increase the level of awards that can be made. [47945]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* The Department's agencies operate their own complaints procedures. Individual payments resulting from complaints are a matter for the agency chief executives within the limits of their financial delegations and in consultation with the Department as appropriate. I have asked the chief executives to respond to the hon. Member on any such payments made within the last 12 months.

Letter from Chris de Grouchy to Annabelle Ewing, dated 8 May 2002:

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked me to reply on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency to your Parliamentary Question about what payments have been made to individuals following findings of maladministration by ombudsman in the last 12 months.

The Radiocommunications Agency has made no payments to individuals, as there have been no such investigations within the last year.

Letter from Desmond Flynn to Annabelle Ewing, dated 8 May 2002:

Further to the answer given by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to your named day parliamentary question 2001/3729 about payments following findings of maladministration by ombudsmen, in the year ended 27 March 2002 The Insolvency Service, one of the DTI's agencies, made 24 payments totalling £27,280.87 after receiving complaints under its complaints procedure and otherwise.

Of these, 1 payment for £75 was made following the notification of a complaint by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration.

Complaints were not notified by any other ombudsman.

Letter from Roger Heathcote to Annabelle Ewing, dated 8 May 2002:

You tabled a Parliamentary Question on 27 March 2002 to Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, asking what payments have been made to individuals following findings of maladministration by ombudsmen with responsibility for agencies under the remit of her Department in the last 12 months; and what plans she has to review the powers to increase the level of awards that can be made. I have been asked to reply in respect of the Employment Tribunals Service (ETS), which is an executive agency of the DTI.

The Employment Tribunals Service has made no payments in the last 12 months following findings of ombudsmen; and there are no plans currently to review the awards that can be made.

Letter from Peter Bentley to Annabelle Ewing, dated 8 May 2002:

I am replying on behalf of the Small Business Service, since our Chief Executive, David Irwin, completed his secondment to SBS on 28 March, and our new Chief Executive, Martin Wyn Griffith, does not start until 15 April.

There have been no findings of maladministration against the Small Business Service.

Letter from Alison Brimelow to Annabelle Ewing, dated 8 May 2002:

I am replying on behalf of the Patent Office to your Parliamentary Question 3729 to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry relating to payments made to individuals following findings of maladministration by ombudsmen in the last 12 months.

The Patent Office operates its own complaints procedure. Although this procedure gives no automatic right to compensation individuals may be compensated where there is evidence of errors or omissions by Patent Office staff or procedures. In the year 2001–02 a total of £15,000 was made in ex gratia payments. This represented payment on 29 cases out of a total of 70,000 patent, trade mark and design applications processed in the same period.

No maladministration payments relating to cases involving the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (the Ombudsman) have been made in the last 12 months.

Letter from Dr. J. W. Llewellyn to Annabelle Ewing, dated 8 May 2002:

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked me to reply on behalf of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory (NWML) to your question about payments that have been made to individuals following findings of maladministration by ombudsman in the last 12 months.

NWML has not made any payments of this type.

Letter from Claire Clancy to Annabelle Ewing, dated 8 May 2002:

I refer to your Parliamentary Question 2001/3729. I have been asked to respond for Companies House for which the answer is that there have been no such payments.

Fraud

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption was in *(a)* her Department's vote 1 budget and *(b)* her Department's vote 2 budget for (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [54709]

Ms Hewitt: The net losses reported to Treasury as relating to fraud or thefts totalled £18,137 for 1999–2000 and £54,490 for 2000–01. All of these fell to vote 1.

None of these were attributed to corruption.

Military Exports (Israel)

Mr. Galloway: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many SIELs have been issued, and in what categories, for military exports to Israel since 18 February; and if she will make a statement. [54127]

Nigel Griffiths: Between 18 February and 22 April 2002 18 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) were issued covering items on the Military List where the end user is Israel. Individual export licences might cover a range of items with various ratings. Where this is so, the licence is included in the totals for all the relevant ratings. Details are set out in the table.

Rating	*Number of SIELs*
ML1	1
ML4	4
ML5	2
ML9	2
ML10	2
ML11	3
ML15	3
ML18	1

All export licence applications to Israel are assessed on a case by case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria in light of the circumstances prevailing at the time of the application. This means that we will not issue export licences where to do so would be in contravention of the consolidated criteria, including where there is a clear risk that the items might be used in internal repression, international aggression, adversely effect regional stability or prolong internal conflict.

Private Medical Insurance

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many employees in *(a)* her Department and *(b)* her Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have had private medical insurance provided for them in each year since 1997–98; what the total cost is; and if she will make a statement. [32327]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 6 February 2002]:* None in my Department. I have asked agency chief executives to reply to the hon. Member. Information on non-departmental public bodies is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Letter from Barry Maxwell to Mr. David Laws, dated 8 May 2002:

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked me to reply on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency to your Parliamentary Question, for the number of her employees who have or have had private medical insurance provided for them since 1997–98.

I am sorry you have had to wait so long for a reply. I am writing now to say that, as with DTI, the answer is none.

Letter from Desmond Flynn to Mr. David Laws, dated 8 May 2002:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your question on how many employees have had private medical insurance provided for them in each year since 1997–98 and what the total cost is.

The Insolvency Service does not have any employees who have had medical insurance provided for them.

Letter from Peter Bentley to Mr. David Laws, dated 8 May 2002:

I am replying on behalf of the Small Business Service, since our Chief Executive, David Irwin, completed his secondment on 28 March and our new Chief Executive, Martin Wyn Griffith, does not start until 15 April.

No staff in the Small Business Service have had private medical insurance provided for them since it was founded in April 2000.

Letter from Dr. J. W. Llewellyn to Mr. David Laws, dated 8 May 2002:

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked me to reply on behalf of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory (NWML) to your question about the number of employees at NWML who have had private medical insurance provided for them in each year since 1997–98.

No member of staff at NWML has had private medical insurance provided for them in the period specified.

Letter from Roger Heathcote to Mr. David Laws, dated 8 May 2002:

RE: Private Medical Insurance

You tabled a Parliamentary Question on 30 January 2002 to Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, asking how many employees in (a) her Department and (b) her Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have had private medical insurance provided for them in each year since 1997–8; what the total cost is; and if she will make a statement. I have been asked to reply in respect of the Employment Tribunals Service (ETS), which is an executive agency of the DTI.

No employees in ETS have had private medical insurance provided for them in any year since 1997–8.

Letter from John Holden to Mr. David Laws, dated 8 May 2002:

I refer to your named day Parliamentary Question 2001/2501. I have been asked to respond for Companies House. The answer to your question is none.

Letter from Alison Brimelow to Mr. David Laws, dated 8 May 2002:

I am replying on behalf of the Patent Office to your Parliamentary Question 2501 to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the provision of private medical insurance to employees of the Patent Office.

The Patent Office does not provide, or contribute to, private medical insurance for Patent Office employees.

Departmental Policies

James Purnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what impact her Department's policies have had on the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency since 1997. [54336]

Alan Johnson *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* During the last five years, businesses in the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency have received over £148,000 investment via the enterprise grant scheme and SMART/SPUR awards on capital investment of over £600,000. This has contributed, along with other Government policies and the work of Government agencies such as the Small Business Service, to a 38 per cent. fall in the number of unemployment benefit claimants in the constituency since May 1997. Constituents will also have benefited from the introduction of the national minimum wage, which has helped an estimated 230,000 people across the north-west region.

Arms Exports

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement about increased powers which the Export Control Bill will give to her to ensure that exported arms are not used for purposes of which the Government does not approve. [54905]

Nigel Griffiths: The Export Control Bill provides new powers allowing for the imposition of controls on trade from one overseas country to another, intangible technology transfers and the provision of technical assistance overseas. The Bill allows for these controls to be imposed in relation to military, paramilitary and dual-use goods or technology. The new powers will be used to strengthen the UK's domestic export control law, which at present allows only for controls of tangible exports from the UK. In particular, the new power on trade in controlled goods will be used to introduce controls on trade in all military equipment already subject to export control, and also to control, and in effect prohibit, trade in arms to embargoed destinations and trade in equipment used for torture to any destination.

The Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria, as announced to Parliament on 26 October 2000, will continue to be the basis for licence decision-making under the Export Control Bill. Before taking a decision on an export licence under the Consolidated Criteria, Ministers take into account all reliable information about end-users of potential concern, including reporting from other Government Departments and UK posts overseas. The Government will not issue a licence where there is a clear risk that the equipment could be used for internal repression or international aggression, or where there is an unacceptable risk of diversion.

Broadband/Highband

Jonathan Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what meetings her Department *(a)* has had and *(b)* is planning to have with the DTLR regarding the impact of the line rental scheme on Government policies to encourage the roll-out of broad band and high band width networks. [54112]

Mr. Alexander: Officials in my Department, together with regulators responsible for all the utilities, have met with DTLR on a number of occasions to discuss lane rental, and will continue to meet to monitor the effects of the lane rental pilot schemes which are being implemented in Camden and Middlesbrough and will extend until May 2004.

The effects of national implementation of lane rental charging on the roll out of broadband and 3G mobile networks will be taken into account in these reviews.

Departmental Retirement Ages

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the retirement ages that apply to the employees of her Department and its agencies, including how many and which categories of employees are affected by each; and if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on flexible retirement. [32831]

Ms Hewitt *[pursuant to her reply, 6 February 2002, c. 973W]:* Unfortunately due to an administrative oversight the replies from the chief executive to the agencies were not given as part of my answer. These now follow.

Letter from Barry Maxwell to Mr. Steven Webb, dated 8 May 2002:

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked me to reply on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency to your Parliamentary Question, for a list of the retirement ages that apply to the employees of her Department and its Agencies.

I am sorry you have had to wait so long for a reply, but can now say that the retirement ages for Agency staff are the same as that of the DTI.

Letter from Dr. J. W. Llewellyn to Mr. Steven Webb, dated 8 May 2002:

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked me to reply on behalf of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory (NWML) to your question about the retirement ages that apply to the employees of NWML, including how many and which categories of employees are affected by each; and the Agency's policy on flexible retirement.

The normal retirement age in NWML is 65 for staff in Band A (covering administrative and support staff). For all other staff (covering staff at range 5 and above) the retirement age is 60. At 1 April 2001 there were 14 staff in Band A and 45 staff above this level.

Flexible retirement is considered on a case by case basis under certain criteria laid down by the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme.

Letter from John Holden to Mr. Steven Webb, dated 8 May 2002:

I refer to your Parliamentary Question 2001/2571. I have been asked to reply for Companies House.

The retirement age for ranges 1–4 is 65, range 5 and above 60. We have 893 staff in ranges 1–4 and 293 in range 5 and above.

Letter from Roger Heathcote to Mr. Steven Webb, dated 8 May 2002:

You tabled a Parliamentary Question on 31 January 2002 to Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, asking if she will list the retirement ages that apply to the employees of her Department and its agencies, including how many and which categories of employees are affected by each; and if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on flexible retirement. I have been asked to reply in respect of the Employment Tribunals Service (ETS), which is an executive agency of the DTI.

The normal retirement age in my agency is 65 years for staff in Band A (covering administrative and support staff). For all other staff (covering staff at range 5—formerly Executive Officer level—and above) the retirement age is 60 years. At 1 April 2001 there were 559 staff in Band A and 150 staff above this level.

Letter from Peter Bentley to Mr. Steven Webb, dated 8 May 2002:

I am replying on behalf of the Small Business Service, since our Chief Executive, David Irwin, completed his secondment to SBS on 28 March and our new Chief Executive, Martin Wyn Griffith, does not start until 15 April.

The normal retirement age in the Small Business Service is 65 for staff in Band A (covering administrative and support staff). For all other staff (covering staff at range 5—formerly Executive Officer level—and above) the retirement age is 60. At 1 April 2002 there were 61 staff in Band A and 213 staff above this level.

Please note that staff in the SBS Regional teams work to Government Office terms and conditions and they adhere to the same Retirement policy as their Parent Department. SBS Regional Teams have 37 staff at Band A and 99 Staff above this level.

Letter from Alison Brimelow to Mr. Steven Webb, dated 8 May 2002:

I am replying on behalf of the Patent Office to your Parliamentary Question 2571 to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry relating to retirement ages and policy on flexible retirement.

The normal retirement age in the Patent Office is 65 in Band A (covering administrative and support staff). For all other staff (covering staff at B1 formerly Executive Officer level—and above) the retirement age is 60. At 1 April 2001 there were 353 staff in Band A and 566 staff above this level.

Flexible retirement is considered on a case by case basis under the criteria laid down by the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme.

Letter from Desmond Flynn to Mr. Steven Webb, dated 8 May 2002:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your question on the retirement ages that apply to the employees in The Insolvency Service, including how many and which categories of employees are affected by each.

The Insolvency Service does not have delegated authority for retirement policy and so the guidelines are the same as that of the Department of Trade and Industry. The notional retirement age for staff in Band A (administrative and support staff) is 65. For all other staff in Band B and above (formerly Executive Officer level and above) the retirement age is 60. The number of permanent staff in post in The Insolvency Service at 1 April 2001 was 1303 (full time equivalent); of which 580 staff are in Band A and 723 are in Band B and above.

Flexible retirement is considered on a case by case basis under the criteria laid down by the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Damilola Taylor

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Solicitor-General if she will make a statement on the actions that she plans to take as a consequence of the Damilola Taylor case. [54119]

The Solicitor-General: The Attorney-General has asked the Director of Public Prosecutions to look into the handling by the prosecution of the boys charged with the murder of Damilola Taylor, to consider whether there are implications for the conduct of future cases and to make recommendations. The DPP will involve HM CPS Inspectorate in the review. The Attorney-General particularly asked the director to examine whether the time has come to introduce a system where, before trial, interviews of certain key witnesses are conducted by the prosecutor in a limited category of cases.

The review will report to the Attorney-General by mid summer.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Accountancy Services

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the total cost to his Department was for accountancy services in each of the last four years. [34167]

Dr. John Reid: The information requested is not readily available and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

Public Appointments

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the appointments made by his Department since 1 May 1997 of chairmen of *(a)* non-departmental public bodies, *(b)* commissions, *(c)* inquiries, *(d)* agencies and *(e)* task forces; and if he will list their (i) term of office, (ii) salary and (iii) known political affiliation (A) past and (B) present. [33889]

Dr. John Reid: The information is as follows:

(a) Chairs of non-departmental bodies

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Mrs. Joan Harbison

Appointed 2 August 1999 to 1 August 2002

Salary £62,789 per annum

Juvenile Justice Board

Ms E. Martin

Appointed 31 July 2000 to 31 July 2002

Remuneration—£29.38 for up to four hours and £58.77 for over four hours

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Professor S. Brice Dickson

Appointed 1 March 1999 to 28 February 2002

Reappointed 1 March 2002 to 28 February 2005

Salary £57,475 per annum

Northern Ireland Policing Board

Professor Desmond Rea

Appointed 29 September 2001 to 28 September 2005

Salary £45,000 per annum

Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland

Mrs. Nuala O'Loan

Appointed 6 November 2000 to 5 November 2007

Remuneration £77,745 per annum

Probation Board for Northern Ireland

Mr. Brian Rowntree

Appointed 1 December 1998 to 30 November 2004

Remuneration £12,930 per annum

Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland

The right hon. Michael Martin

Appointed 23 October 2000—not time bounded

Salary nil since post is held ex-officio

(b) Chairs of commissions

Parades Commission

Mr. J. Anthony Holland

Appointed 19 February 2000 to 31 December 2002

Salary £50,400 per annum

(c) Chairs of inquiries

Bloody Sunday inquiry

Lord Saville of Newdigate

Appointed on 19 March 1998 to complete the inquiry

No salary for the inquiry

(d) Chairs of agencies

None.

(e) Chairs of task forces

Information on the number, remit and membership of task forces, ad hoc advisory groups and reviews has been published by the Cabinet Office on a regular basis. The first report was published on 11 January 2000 and gives information for the period between 1 May 1997 to 31 October 1999. A second report was published on 27 July 2000, and covered the period 1 November 1999 to 30 April 2000. A third report was published on 13 December 2000, covering the period 1 May 2000 to 31 October 2000. The most recent report, "Task Forces, Ad Hoc Advisory Groups and Reviews", was issued in October 2001 and covered the period of the financial year 2000–01. Copies of these reports have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

For all of the above categories of appointment, information on political affiliation is not collected.

Departmental Website

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the total cost of his Department's website was in real terms in each of the last four years; and how many hits it received in each of those years. [36208]

Dr. John Reid: Information on the cost of the Northern Ireland Office website is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The number of hits received are as follows:

1997—398,832

1998—2,655,045

1999—2,728,304

2000—3,506,310

2001—4,959,502.

Publicity Expenditure

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the total real terms expenditure of his Department, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies on publicity in each of the years *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000, *(d)* 2000–01 and *(e)* 2001–02 (i) to date and (ii) as estimated for the whole of the present year; and if he will break these figures down to indicate expenditure on (A) advertising and (B) press and public relations. [36168]

Dr. John Reid: Details of the Department's (including its agencies, but excluding NDPBs as we do not have access to a breakdown of their expenditure) total expenditure on advertising in each of the last five financial years are:

1997–98—£1,077,706

1998–99—£2,466,691

1999–2000—£695,017

2000–01—£591,075

2001–02—£1,201,623[1]

[1] To date. Estimated total = £1,441,173

Arts

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions he has had with Northern Ireland Ministers and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the arts community there. [36983]

Dr. John Reid: I have held meetings on a number of issues with all Northern Ireland Ministers including Michael McGimpsey, Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, since my arrival as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. However, the Northern Ireland arts community was not an issue specifically discussed at any meetings. The arts is a transferred matter and not, therefore a matter in which I would have great cause to become involved.

However, the Northern Ireland Executive, Belfast city council and Imagine Belfast 2008 are currently working on the Belfast bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2008. I believe that Belfast would be an excellent choice for this accolade, and I have offered the assistance of my Department with the bid to promote all aspects of Northern Ireland, including the arts, cultural diversity, tourism, etc. both nationally and internationally.

Political Dialogue

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he is taking to help prevent Northern Ireland becoming what he has termed a "cold house for Unionists"; and if he will make a statement. [37116]

Dr. John Reid: We are making every effort to tackle the issue in seeking to bring about political advance under the Belfast Agreement. But it is the responsibility, not just of Her Majesty's Government, but of all who are involved in public life in Northern Ireland, to seek to ensure that all parts of the community in Northern Ireland are able to feel fully at home there.

Official Visits

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) if he will list the official visits to *(a)* Paris and *(b)* Brussels made by each Minister in his Department in 2001 and the mode of travel used; and what guidance is provided to Ministers in his Department on the choice of mode of travel for such visits; [38149]

(2) if he will list the official visits within the UK outside London made by each Minister in his Department in 2001, giving for each *(a)* the origin and destination and *(b)* the mode of travel used; and what guidance is provided to Ministers in his Department on choice of mode of travel for official visits. [38185]

Dr. John Reid: Since 1999 the Government have published an annual list of all overseas visits undertaken by Cabinet Ministers costing £500 or more during each financial year. On an annual basis, the Government have also published the cost of all Ministers' visits overseas. Details of travel undertaken during the period during 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 will be published in a similar form to previous years as soon as possible after the end of the current financial year. Copies of the lists will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

The additional information requested on UK travel by Ministers is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Gender Pay Gap

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the extent of the gender pay gap among staff in his Department. [40992]

Jane Kennedy: In response to the Equal Opportunities Commission Task Force "Just Pay" report, the Government have committed Departments and agencies to review their pay systems by April 2003 and prepare action plans to close any equal pay gaps.

The Northern Ireland Office has begun an equal pay review which will be completed within the time frame stipulated.

Relocation Expenses

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what his policy is on the payment of relocation expenses to staff in his Department. [41016]

Jane Kennedy: The Northern Ireland Office comply with the Northern Ireland civil service policy on the payment of relocation expenses to staff laid down in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Staff Handbook, Travel and Subsistence section, Chapters 3 and 4.

Reasonable expenses are reimbursed to Home civil service staff who permanently transfer in accordance with the terms of the Civil Service Management Code and the Northern Ireland Office Terms and Conditions.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which public service agreement targets scheduled to be met in 2002 will not be achieved by the due date. [44816]

Dr. John Reid: PSA target 6 states "Continued protection for the community by ensuring that no high risk prisoner escapes and that the number of prison escapes does not exceed three per 1,000 prisoners".

Targets set in the NI prison service's corporate and business plan 2001–04 are:

100 per cent. security for top and high risk prisoners;

99.7 per cent. security for medium and low risk prisoners.

The second target will not be met in the 2001–02 financial year since there have been three escapes in the medium and low risk prisoner category, which equates to 99.6 per cent. security.

PSA target 6 will therefore not be met in the 2001–02 financial year.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the target is for reducing sickness absence by police officers and civilians in 2001–02; and if he estimates it will be met. [45985]

Dr. John Reid: The targets for the financial year 2001–02 for police and civilian staff are 16 days and 12 days respectively. It is unlikely that those targets will be met as the average sickness absences for the year to date are 22.27 days and 14.78 days respectively.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many times Ministers in his Department have travelled abroad at taxpayers' expense since March 2001; what countries they visited; and what the total cost of each visit was. [47113]

Jane Kennedy: Since 1999 the Government have published an annual list of all overseas visits undertaken by Cabinet Ministers costing £500 or more during each financial year. On an annual basis, the Government have

also published the cost of all Ministers' visits overseas. Details of travel undertaken during the period during 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 will be published in a similar form to previous years as soon as possible after the end of the current financial year. Copies of the lists will be placed in the Libraries of the House. The 1999 list contained information on all such visits undertaken from 2 May 1997 to 31 March 1999.

All travel is undertaken fully in accordance with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers, copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.

Press Office

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the total cost of running the Department's press office was in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* the latest year for which figures are available. [46808]

Dr. John Reid: The following totals show the cost of running the core Department's press office. (Outside the core it includes only the Northern Ireland Prison Service):

£

	Total cost
1996–97	2,091,547
2001–02	[1]1,884,108

[1] To date. Full year estimate £1,970,599.

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people employed by the non-departmental public bodies for which he is responsible under the New Deal for Young People in each of the last four years have subsequently *(a)* found unsubsidised employment for more than 13 weeks and *(b)* returned to jobseekers' allowance or other benefits. [49603]

Dr. John Reid: No New Deal for Young People staff have been employed by non-departmental public bodies in the last four years.

Part-time Employees

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many and what proportion of the staff of his Department are part-time employees. [47195]

Jane Kennedy: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 10 April 2002, *Offical Report*, column 49W.

Forensic Science

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he has made a decision on the future of forensic science in Northern Ireland. [55340]

Dr. John Reid: I have agreed that the executive agency status of the Compensation Agency should be continued until 31 March 2004. My decision follows the completion of Stage 1 of a quinquennial review which examined the past performance of the agency and other organisational arrangements available for the administration of compensation schemes. Stage 2 of the review will look at ways of improving the delivery of services.

Empty Properties

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 4 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 57W, regarding the cost of empty properties, if his Department has owned properties in the last four years that have been empty. [50548]

Dr. John Reid: In the last four years the NIO has owned no properties that have been empty.

Staff Pay

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the cost in 2001–02 was of the pay increase to staff in his Department, agencies and the non-departmental public bodies for which he is responsible; and what the cost of the forthcoming increase will be in 2002–03. [50405]

Dr. John Reid: The information is as follows:

Civil Servants

In 2001–02 the NIO pay group had a remit with a headline settlement of 2.9 per cent., and earnings growth of 4.8 per cent., at a cost of £1,040,770.

The cost of the pay increase in 2002–03 is still being negotiated but it is envisaged that it will be of similar value to 2001–02.

Prison Officers

The prison service has been negotiating a two-year award for 2001–03 for prison grades and this has not yet been agreed.

Petrol Smuggling

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what meetings he and his officials have held with their Irish counterparts since July 2001 to discuss the smuggling of petroleum products into Northern Ireland. [50025]

Jane Kennedy: We have not had a meeting with our Irish counterparts but my officials have held three meetings to discuss a range of security issues including organised crime. At one of these meetings fuel smuggling was an agenda item followed by on-going bilateral contacts between officials. Customs officials have also met with their counterparts.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the *(a)* private finance initiative and *(b)* public private partnership projects which have been delayed. [44879]

Jane Kennedy: There have been no delays in *(a)* private finance initiative and *(b)* public private partnership projects.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Staff

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many staff left the service of her Department and its agencies in the year ended 31 March 2001; how many left before attaining the formal retirement age of 60 years; and in respect of how many her Department and its agencies assumed responsibilities for making payments until retirement age. [37545]

Mrs. Liddell: During the year ended 31 March 2001, 21 staff who had not attained the formal retirement age of 60 left the service of my Department. Those staff either returned to their parent Departments following their loan period or chose to resign. No staff left on early retirement or early severance.

Press and Public Relations

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people were employed in a press or public relations function in her Department on 1 January in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000, *(e)* 2001 and *(f)* 2002. [39944]

Mrs. Liddell: The Scotland Office was established in its present form on 1 July 1999.

The Department had four press officers on 1 January 2000; four press officers on 1 January 2001; and four press officers on 1 January 2002.

Gender Pay Gap

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment she has made of the extent of the gender pay gap among staff in her Department. [41007]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department is currently considering how best to take forward an equal pay review, in conjunction with the Scottish Executive.

Job Advertisements

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list the job advertisements placed by her Department in the last 12 months specifying where the advertisements were placed and the cost in each case. [39059]

Mrs. Liddell: No external advertisements for staff have been placed by my Department in the last 12 months.

Age Discrimination

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what her Department's policy is towards age discrimination. [42569]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department has taken steps to integrate age into equal opportunities policies and is committed to ensuring that there is no unfair discrimination on the basis of age. Action on diversity has and will continue to tackle any negative attitudes towards older staff particularly through the training and development of managers and through the monitoring of recruitment, selection and appraisal statistics.

Accessible Documentation

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if all documentation provided by her Department is available in formats accessible by the visually impaired. [41988]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 11 March 2002]:* My Department is committed to providing information in an accessible form. If information is requested in an alternative format every effort will be made to supply it.

Unpaid Advisers

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list the names of the unpaid advisers appointed by her and her predecessors since June 1997, stating in each case *(a)* the date of their appointment, *(b)* the duration of their appointment and *(c)* the project or projects on which they have been engaged. [43384]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 25 March 2002]:* The Scotland Office was established in its present form on 1 July 1999.

My predecessor had one unpaid special adviser between June 1999 and January 2001. His duties were to provide advice to the Secretary of State across a range of topics within his ministerial responsibilities.

Property Protection

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what new measures her Department took in 2001–02 to protect its property from theft or damage. [47321]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* My Department's security measures to protect its property from theft or damage are reviewed regularly. No additional measures were required in 2001–02.

Television

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list the number of subscriptions to *(a)* digital terrestrial, *(b)* digital satellite and *(c)* digital cable television held by her Department for services in any departmental building from which Ministers work, stating for each subscription its (i) cost and (ii) purpose. [48343]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* My Department has no subscriptions to digital television services.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list the *(a)* number and *(b)* total cost of television licences paid for by her Department. [48342]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* No television licence is required for equipment used for official purposes.

Public Appointments

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to her answer of 22 April, *Official Report*, column 66W, on appointments, whether the only public appointments she makes are to the Boundary Commission for Scotland. [52865]

Mrs. Liddell: Yes.

Digital Equipment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many digital radios are owned by her Department for use in departmental buildings from which Ministers work; and what the *(a)* cost and *(b)* date of purchase of each radio was. [52847]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* No digital radios have been purchased by my Department.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Property Protection

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Advocate-General what new measures her Department took in 2001–02 to protect its property from theft or damage. [47254]

The Advocate-General *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Redundant Churches

Mr. Cox: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, how many redundant churches have been sold in each of the last five years. [54200]

Mr. Bell: Sixty-five redundant churches were sold for alternative uses during the period from 1997 to 2001. The annual breakdown is:

	Number
1997	19
1998	14
1999	11
2000	9
2001	12

A smaller number was leased or otherwise disposed of for alternative use during the same period.

The Commissioners' annual report gives details of the uses found for these buildings and is available in the House of Commons Library.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Entertainment Costs

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list for 1997–98 and each subsequent financial year the amount spent by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies in respect of hotel and other similar privately-provided accommodation (i) in the UK and (ii) abroad for (A) Ministers, (B) staff and (C) other persons; if he will list the proportion of this cost incurred in respect of (x) food and (y) alcohol in each case; and if he will list the average cost per hotel room or similar unit of accommodation provided in each case. [34373]

Malcolm Wicks: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Cabinet Office on 14 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 560W.

Benefit Recipients

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), of 29 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 261W, on benefit recipients, how many and what proportion of pensioner households are expected to be eligible for *(a)* pension credit, *(b)* housing benefit and *(c)* council tax benefit after October 2003. [42565]

Mr. McCartney: Information on the number of pensioner households eligible for housing benefit and council tax benefit is not available. For pension credit estimates, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) on 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 204W.

Equal Treatment

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment; and what progress has been achieved; [44383]

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, indicating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [44385]

Mr. McCartney: Within the Department for Work and Pensions it has been for our separate agencies and businesses to adopt, as appropriate, the Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment guidelines issued in 1998. Detailed information about adherence to these guidelines, and to baselines, is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

However, this Department is fully committed to equal treatment in the conduct of all aspects of its business, be it policy development, staff management, or providing a service to its wide range of customers. Recent reforms to the child support system, bereavement benefits and pension sharing all embrace the principles of equal treatment. Gender is one strand to be considered along with race, disability, age and sexual orientation.

Data Series

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what new data series separated by *(a)* gender, *(b)* race, *(c)* disability and *(d)* age have been commissioned by his Department since August 1997. [44384]

Mr. McCartney: The table shows the information requested for series produced by this Department and published since August 1997 which are split by gender, race, disability or age. Where a series is marked as "ad hoc", the required split is not routinely published but can be provided in response to a specific request.

Data series produced by the Department for Work and Pensions since August 1997, split by gender, race, disability or age.

Date series produced by the Department for Work and Pensions since august 1997, split by gender, race, disability or age

	Figures split by			
	Gender	*Race*	*Disability*	*Age*
National statistics				
Child benefit quarterly statistics[1]	Ad hoc	No	No	Yes
Client group analysis of the population over state pension age (six-monthly)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Client group analysis: Quarterly bulletin on families with children on key benefits	Ad hoc	No	Yes	Yes
Client group analysis: Quarterly bulletin on the population of working age on key benefits	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Contributions and qualifying years for retirement pension (annual)	Yes	No	No	Yes
Disability, care and mobility benefits—Quarterly statistical enquiry[2]	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Employment zones (six monthly)	Yes	Yes	Ad hoc	Yes
Households below average income (annual)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Income related benefits estimates of take-up	Yes	No	No	No
Individual incomes series (annual)[3]	Yes	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Yes
Annual local area labour force survey	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Deal for Lone Parents (quarterly)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Deal for Young People and Long-term Unemployed People aged 25+ (quarterly)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pensioners' incomes series	Yes	Ad hoc	Yes	Yes
Quarterly appeal tribunal statistics	No	No	Yes	No
Second tier pension provision (annual)	Yes	No	No	Yes
Statistical summary (quarterly)[4]	Yes	No	Partly	Yes
Work based learning for adults	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Other data series				
Disability survey (follow up to FRS[5])	No	No	Yes	No
The family and children survey (FACS)[6]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Deal for 50 plus	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Deal for Disabled People	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Neighbourhood statistics	Yes	No	No	Yes

[1] Method of collecting data changed in 1998 to provide significantly more in depth analysis.
[2] Invalid care allowance figures were first published after August 1997 and can be split by age and gender only. Disability living allowance/attendance allowance figures can also be split by disability but were published prior to August 1997.
[3] Race/disability—sample size are generally too small unless 4+ years data used.
[4] The statistical summary provides a summary of key DWP national statistics, some give an indication of the level of disability of the customer.
[5] FRS means "Family Resources Survey".
[6] The survey collects information on gender, ethnicity, disability and age, although it should be noted that respondents are primarily women between the ages of 18 and 50.

Creche Facilities

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what creche facilities are provided by his Department; and at what cost. [44869]

Malcolm Wicks: This Department has a wide range of policies that support work life balance and, in particular, assist those staff with child care responsibilities. It actively supports and encourages the provision of child care for staff throughout the organisation. The provision is mainly in the form of subsidised child care places in nurseries and holiday playschemes.

Currently, this Department and its businesses sponsor 768 places in nurseries, 19 of which are on-site nurseries. This Department also sponsors 1,972 places in holiday playschemes, many of which have been newly set up in partnership with other organisations and with start-up funding. In addition, some staff receive a direct subsidy where childminding is the preferred type of child care.

Financial accountability is mainly at local business unit level and so details of the overall costs incurred in providing assistance with child care is not available centrally. Investment in each child care facility is based on a business case which must demonstrate business viability and value for money, as well as providing parents with the type of child care which is most suitable for them.

Fraud and Error

Mr. Bacon: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his most recent annual estimate is of the accrued amount of benefits overpaid due to *(a)* customer error, *(b)* official error and *(c)* fraud if the cases where there was (i) high and (ii) low suspicion of fraud were well founded. [45252]

Malcolm Wicks: Our most recent estimate is that the total amount of benefits overpaid due to customer error and official error taken together is around £1 billion and the total amount due to fraud is around £2 billion. These are broad order estimates. They are made up of estimates from the continuously measured benefits (income support and jobseeker's allowance), from National Benefit Reviews and from estimated levels of loss in the unmeasured benefits.

Estimates of high and low suspicion fraud have been provided for most of the benefits reviewed. The Department has, however, tightened its approach to recording such cases since the earlier reviews of the 1990s and now makes much greater effort to resolve cases either way.

Further information on the handling of suspicion of fraud in the benefit review process is in The Results of the Area Benefit Review and the Quality Support Team from April 2000 to March 2001, Fraud and Error in Claims for Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, a copy of which is in the Library.

Mr. Bacon: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many cases there were and what the value of cases was where his Department had deemed that there was *(a)* high and *(b)* low suspicion that an overpayment in (i) housing benefit, (ii) jobseeker's allowance and (iii) income support was made due to fraud, but where that suspicion was eventually cleared altogether, in the years (A) 1998–99, (B) 1999–2000 and (C) 2000–01. [45274]

Malcolm Wicks: The information is not available for housing benefit.

We do not have complete information on the number of cases in the Area Benefit Review process which were initially thought to be suspicious between 1998 and 2001. However, analysis of the data we hold from this period provides information on the proportions of high suspicion cases resulting in different outcomes. The analysis indicates that 42 per cent. of those initially deemed 'high suspicion' and subjected to a full further investigation, were found not to require or merit a change to benefit in payment. The corresponding proportion by monetary value is 49 per cent. A further 26 per cent. (21 per cent. by value) were found to be fraudulent. In the remaining 32 per cent. of cases (30 per cent. by value) it was not possible to prove that fraud had occurred, but a strong suspicion remained. It is this final category which is reported as high suspicion in the National Statistics reports "The Results of the Area Benefit Review and the Quality Support Team, Fraud and Error in Claims for Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance".

Low suspicion cases are not subjected to further investigation and are not, therefore, liable to be re-categorised. Since October 2001, in order to streamline data collection processes, the Department no longer records low suspicion as the information is of limited value.

Public Bodies

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the cost in 2001–02 was of the pay increase to staff in his Department, agencies and the non-departmental public bodies for which he is responsible; and what the cost of the forthcoming increase will be in 2002–03. [50411]

Mr. McCartney: In 2001–02 staff within the former Department of Social Security received an overall pay increase of 5.5 per cent., effective from 1 July 2001 and costing some £48.8 million. Recyclable paybill savings of 1.5 per cent. were used to partially fund the pay increase.

Staff within the former Employment Services Agency received an overall pay increase of 5.5 per cent., effective from 1 July 2002 and costing some £13.4 million. Recyclable paybill savings of 0.7 per cent. were used to partially fund the pay increase.

Non-departmental public bodies received pay increases in the range 2.5 per cent.- 6.25 per cent. with various settlement dates.

In 2002–03 there will be a single pay settlement for staff within the Department for Work and Pensions, effective from 1 July 2002. This is subject to negotiation with the trade unions side and details of the settlement are not yet available.

Mobility Allowance (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people in the London Borough of Wandsworth are in receipt of the mobility allowance. [53875]

Maria Eagle: The number of people in receipt of the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance in the borough of Wandsworth on 30 November 2001 was 6,080.

Carers

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions which categories of carer will be credited into the state second pension; and for each of those categories, who will be *(a)* credited automatically and *(b)* need to make a claim. [54516]

Maria Eagle: Carers will qualify for state second pension for each complete tax year they do not work at all, or earn less than the annual national insurance lower earnings limit and they are looking after:

a child under age six and get child benefit for that child; or

an ill or disabled person and are entitled to invalid care allowance or qualify for home responsibilities protection, which they may have to claim.

All qualifying carers will receive an additional pension from state second pension automatically.

Pensions

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many UK pensioners in receipt of pensions are living abroad, broken down by country of residence. [54464]

Maria Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. The available information is in the table.

Number of British pensioners in receipt of pensions living abroad: May 2001, by country of residence

Country	*Number*
All	853,840
Australia	216,870
Canada	141,185
USA	113,420
Republic of Ireland	86,525
Spain	42,190
New Zealand	35,785
South Africa	34,085
Italy	28,300
Germany	25,705
Jamaica	23,230
France	17,505
Cyprus	7,075
Pakistan	5,995
Netherlands	5,755
Other[1]	70,215

[1] All other countries with individual case load less than 5,000.

Notes:

1. Figures may not sum to overall total due to rounding.
2. Figures are for GB pensioners excludes NI pensioners.

Source:

Matching, Intelligence and Data Analysis Service. May 2001.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people have personal pension funds. [46918]

Mr. McCartney *[pursuant to his reply, 16 April 2002, Official Report, c. 892W]:*

The information is in the table.

The number of people who have a personal pension

	Million
Numbers contributing to a personal pension	4.08
Numbers receiving income from a personal pension	0.80
Total number of people with a personal pension	4.88

Notes:
1. Information is drawn from the Family Resources Survey (FRS) for the year 2000–01 and covers Great Britain only.
2. Due to the size of the FRS sample and the fact that the survey relies on self-reporting of pension income the information may be subject to a margin of error.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Local Government Finance

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) what steps he is taking to ensure that the new grant formula that will replace SSA will *(a)* be improved and *(b)* address the needs of all classes of authority; [53637]

(2) what steps he will take to reduce disparity in total external support to local authorities. [53518]

Mr. Raynsford: We are working to develop options for fairer and more intelligible grant distribution formulae. We will consult on options over the summer and will consider the responses when we come to take decisions.

Parish Councils

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assessment he has made of the financial impact on parish councils of the 1996 Accounts and Audit Regulations; and if he will make a statement. [54647]

Dr. Whitehead: I am aware of the impact that accounting and audit requirements can have on parish councils as a consequence of complying with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 1996. For this reason, last year we increased the income threshold, below which local councils are subject to the least onerous accounting regime, from £5,000 to £50,000. In addition, the Audit Commission has introduced a new 'lighter touch' audit framework for local councils, with the aim of making the audit process simpler and therefore cheaper. The new regime should result in lower audit costs for most small councils.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he plans to introduce an internal audit requirement for parish councils; and if he will make a statement. [54648]

Dr. Whitehead: The Accounts and Audit Regulations 1996 already impose a requirement for parish councils and other authorities to maintain an adequate and effective system of internal audit. We plan to consult later this year on proposals aimed at strengthening this requirement by providing for all authorities to follow best practice in carrying out their internal audit role.

Mobile Phone Masts

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will set out his definition of the amenity grounds on which local authorities may refuse planning applications for mobile phone masts. [54442]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Planning decisions are based upon the land-use merits of each proposal; an assessment must be made of the impact of the proposed development on amenity. Each planning case is likely to have a unique set of relevant facts, and the courts are final arbiters of what is material. The Department's advice on materiality is set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note 1 (PPG1), "General Policy and Principles".

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what research his Department has commissioned into planning guidance on the siting of mobile phone masts in other member states in the European Union. [54654]

Mr. Byers: None.

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what action has been taken to carry out the Stewart report recommendation to appoint an ombudsman to examine decisions on the siting of base stations where there is disagreement at the local level. [54504]

Ms Keeble: The Stewart Group's report on mobile phones and health suggested that the appointment of an ombudsman would help with planning decisions on siting of base stations, for example, where agreement could not be reached locally. The Government's response to the report made clear that while the Government are sympathetic to the objectives of the proposal, it feels there are better ways of achieving them, bearing in mind that there is no comparable arrangement in relation to other kinds of development. The role of an ombudsman would not sit comfortably with the existing appeal process within the planning system.

As regards siting, the Government's view is that the objectives are met by the planning process. When considering applications for new development, local planning authorities consult local people and take their views into account in making decisions. Where an authority refuses an application the developer can appeal to the Secretary of State. Pre-applications discussions with authorities and with local people also have an important part to play, providing opportunities to explore alternative approaches to the siting and appearance of masts.

Rural Housing

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 29 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 172W, on rural housing, what representations he has received on the *(a)* proposals for a tariff in rural areas and *(b)* level of such a tariff. [54804]

Ms Keeble: We have received over 500 responses to our consultation on reforming planning obligations. In the consultation we have proposed that planning obligations should take the form of a standardised tariff, set through the local plan process, and to include a contribution towards affordable housing. This could apply in rural as well as urban areas. The consultation document proposes that tariffs would be set by local authorities, subject to safeguards

We are now in the process of analysing these responses, and expect to publish a policy statement setting out the way forward in the summer.

Housing (Redbridge)

Linda Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will list, by project, the total investment in housing capital improvements in the London borough of Redbridge, *(a)* in each of the past five years and *(b)* expected for 2002–03. [54117]

Ms Keeble: Information on local authorities' and other housing providers' investment in housing capital improvements by project is not held centrally.

The table sets out Government and Housing Corporation allocations for housing capital improvements in the London borough of Redbridge for the current year, and each of the past five years.

Housing capital improvements in the London borough of Redbridge

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
Housing investment programme[1]	2.335	1.421	1.729	5.930	3.260	3.753
Capital receipts initiative	0.889	2.275	2.081	—	—	—
Cash incentive scheme	0.171	0.158	—	—	—	—
Major repairs allowance	—	—	—	—	4.483	4.036
Estate action[2]	0.592	0.934	0.257	—	—	—
Disabled facilities grant	0.488	0.851	0.663	0.663	0.747	0.750
Approved development plan[3]	3.749	4.761	3.699	3.612	4.876	19.285

[1] Basic Housing ACG
[2] Expenditure relates to a single estate action project on the Triptree Estate in Barkingside, which received a total of £4.748m in Estate Action funding from 1993–94 to 1999–2000.
[3] Allocated by the Housing Corporation to registered social landlords.

Affordable Housing (South-West)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many affordable housing units in *(a)* south Somerset, *(b)* Somerset and *(c)* the south-west region have (i) been sold under right to buy and (ii) been newly built, showing for each category the net change, in each year from 1991 to 2002. [52612]

Ms Keeble: The available information is presented in the table.

Local authority and registered social landlord affordable housing stock, RTB sales and new build

	Dwelling stock at start of year owned by:			*Activity during year—sales under right to buy*		*Activity during year—new dwellings completed*			*Net stock change during year*		
	Local authority	*Registered social landlord*	*Total social landlords*	*Local authority*	*Registered social landlord*	*Local authority*	*Registered social landlord*	*Total social landlords*	*Local authority*	*Registered social landlord*	*Total social landlords*
South Somerset											
1991–92	10,576	153	10,729	115	n/a	24	0	24	10	13	23
1992–93	10,586	166	10,752	163	n/a	0	46	46	–204	226	22
1993–94	10,382	392	10,774	372	n/a	0	127	127	–266	125	–141
1994–95	10,116	517	10,633	365	n/a	0	56	56	–391	83	–308
1995–96	9,725	600	10,325	183	0	0	71	71	–198	275	77
1996–97	9,527	875	10,402	170	0	0	20	20	–283	152	–131
1997–98	9,244	1,027	10,271	208	0	0	26	26	–221	84	–137
1998–99	9,023	1,111	10,134	195	1	0	90	90	–9,023	9,023	0
1999–2000	0	10,134	10,134	0	350	0	14	14	0	–175	–175
2000–01	0	9,959	9,959	0	157	0	13	13	0	211	211
Somerset											
1991–92	31,607	1,874	33,481	383	n/a	94	79	173	–161	74	–87
1992–93	31,446	1,948	33,394	426	n/a	57	227	284	–496	500	4
1993–94	30,950	2,448	33,398	798	n/a	12	314	326	–776	629	–147
1994–95	30,174	3,077	33,251	702	n/a	0	281	281	–706	534	–172
1995–96	29,468	3,611	33,079	498	0	0	288	288	–691	665	–26
1996–97	28,777	4,276	33,053	427	1	0	230	230	–789	453	–336
1997–98	27,988	4,729	32,717	604	1	0	105	105	–2,454	2,164	–290
1998–99	25,534	6,893	32,427	473	34	0	233	233	–9,376	9,282	–94
1999–2000	16,158	16,175	32,333	391	410	0	236	236	–399	–2	–401
2000–01	15,759	16,173	31,932	339	187	0	92	92	–4,529	4,694	165

Local authority and registered social landlord affordable housing stock, RTB sales and new build

	Dwelling stock at start of year owned by:			*Activity during year—sales under right to buy*		*Activity during year—new dwellings completed*			*Net stock change during year*		
	Local authority	*Registered social landlord*	*Total social landlords*	*Local authority*	*Registered social landlord*	*Local authority*	*Registered social landlord*	*Total social landlords*	*Local authority*	*Registered social landlord*	*Total social landlords*
South West											
1991–92	273,597	35,369	308,966	3,120	n/a	1,096	1,104	2,200	−2,301	2,111	−190
1992–93	271,296	37,480	308,776	3,087	n/a	284	1,791	2,075	−3,785	5,401	1,616
1993–94	267,511	42,881	310,392	4,230	n/a	131	2,425	2,556	−9,960	11,012	1,052
1994–95	257,551	53,893	311,444	4,133	n/a	103	2,841	2,944	−11,033	8,413	−2,620
1995–96	246,518	62,306	308,824	2,769	159	182	2,889	3,071	−14,296	17,050	2,754
1996–97	232,222	79,356	311,578	2,824	288	98	2,477	2,575	−8,486	8,143	−343
1997–98	223,736	87,499	311,235	3,370	480	559	2,246	2,805	−9,604	8,830	−774
1998–99	214,132	96,329	310,461	3,276	454	37	1,615	1,652	−29,900	27,341	−2,559
1999–2000	184,232	123,670	307,902	3,708	1,322	26	1,589	1,615	−14,089	11,870	−2,219
2000–01	170,143	135,540	305,683	3,157	945	23	1,788	1,811	−14,269	12,308	−1,961

Notes:

1. Dwelling stock: Local authority owned dwellings include those outside the authority' geographical area.
2. RTB Sales: (Local Authority) Sales to sitting tenants under RTB legislation; other sales, transfers and disposals are reflected under "net stock change". (Registered Social Landlords) RTB data not collected prior to 1995–96.
3. New dwellings completed: New-build completions as reported by local authorities. Excludes acquisitions of existing stock and "off-the-shelf" purchases of private developments.
4. Net stock change: Calculated as the year-on-year change in reported dwelling stock each April. This reflects all gains and losses arising from sales, transfers and disposals (eg under LSVT arrangements), new construction, acquisitions, conversions and demolitions.

Source:

DTLR Housing Investment Programme returns (annual), P1B returns (quarterly), P2 returns (monthly), Housing Corporation CORE returns

Public Services

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that district authorities have the flexibility to fund and deliver high-quality public services to local people. [53636]

Mr. Raynsford: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Alan Whitehead) to the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mrs. Brooke) on 7 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 26W.

London Underground

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) whether the Government will provide legally binding guarantees to support the finance raised by Metronet and Tube Lines; [54286]

(2) what the maximum amount of financial support for the PPP contractors is that is covered by letters of comfort from the Government. [54284]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 18 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 18W and to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport to the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) on 18 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1107W.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many underground stations will be improved up to 2009; and how many were planned to be improved in the original PPP proposal. [54289]

Mr. Jamieson: The PPP is designed to improve the quality, reliability and capacity of every underground line in a coordinated programme to modernise the entire tube network. Details of the contractual requirements are a matter for London Underground, but I understand that more than 200 stations will be improved by 2009. This is in line with the original objectives for the PPP.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he expects the final safety case for the London Underground PPP to be completed. [54283]

Mr. Jamieson: No timetable or deadline has been set by the Government. The HSE will take the time it needs.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what capacity increases the PPP scheme will lead to during the first seven and a half years of operation. [54288]

Mr. Jamieson: The PPP is designed to improve the quality, reliability and capacity of every underground line in a co-ordinated programme to modernise the entire tube network. Details of the contractual requirements are a matter for London Underground, but I understand that during the first seven and a half year contract period projects to increase the capacity of the Jubilee, Central and Waterloo and City lines will be completed.

In addition, work to increase the capacity of the Victoria, Northern, Hammersmith and City, Circle and Metropolitan lines will be well under way, including the introduction of new signalling and new trains on some lines. Further capacity increases will follow during the second seven and a half year contract period.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what rights the PPP providers have to withdraw from the contracts at the end of the first seven and a half year period. [54290]

Mr. Jamieson: Details of the contracts are a matter for London Underground, but I understand they do not provide infrastructure companies with a unilateral right to withdraw from the contracts at the end of the first seven

and a half year period and that London Underground has a range of contractual rights to ensure the contract continues if it wishes.

Rosemary McKenna: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress with plans for modernisation of the London Underground. [55052]

Mr. Byers: I have been advised by the board of London Regional Transport that London Underground Ltd. has today signed public-private partnership contracts to modernise and maintain London Underground's infrastructure.

There are three contracts, which will each run for 30 years. Those for two of the infrastructure companies will go to Metronet, and the third to the Tube Lines Group.

In my statement to the House on 7 February I set out why the Government supported London Transport's decision that it was minded to proceed with the tube modernisation plans. The Government have consistently set out three key tests that the plans must pass if they are to proceed: that they are not a privatisation; that they should offer value for money; and that they should be safe for both passengers and staff.

I am satisfied that the modernisation plans are not a privatisation. The ownership of the assets, and the operation of the public service, stay in the public sector. It is also likely that the assets will continue to be scored on London Underground's balance sheet, in the public sector.

I am also satisfied that the arrangements offer value for money, when judged against alternative proposals. At my request, Ernst and Young reviewed London Underground's original value for money assessment and confirmed that, overall, London Underground's methodology for assessing value for money was robust, and that London Underground's recommendation that the PPP proposals deliver value for money, while subjective, was supported by its analysis. Since then, Ernst and Young has reviewed the work done by London Underground to update the value for money assessment in respect of material changes to the contracts. They confirmed that London Underground's approach was consistent with that used for the previous report. I have placed a copy of their update in the Library of the House.

The Health and Safety Executive has still to reach a final judgment on London Underground's revised Railway Safety Case. The position therefore remains that the tube modernisation plans will only proceed if the independent regulator accepts the safety arrangements for both passengers and staff.

Subject to approval of the safety case, I share London Regional Transport's belief that the modernisation plans are the right solution and offer significant benefits for Londoners.

Fares will continue to be set by the Mayor of London. The modernisation plans do not require fares to rise faster than inflation.

The three contracts are intended to take effect by the summer. I notified Parliament on 20 March that I was considering issuing a comfort letter in support of each of the contracts. My intention is that such comfort letters should be issued shortly before the transactions are completed.

London Regional Transport's decision has been taken in the light of an extensive consultation with Transport for London. London Regional Transport has accepted some of the points Transport for London has made, and made changes to the contracts accordingly.

I fully support the decision taken today by the board of London Regional Transport and look forward to the modernisation plans coming into operation.

It remains my intention that the ownership of London Underground will be transferred to Transport for London as soon as possible.

West Coast Main Line

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what representations have been received from the Scottish Executive regarding the upgrade of the West Coast Main Line. [54822]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department is in contact with the Scottish Executive on a wide range of issues, including the upgrade of the West Coast Main Line.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what his latest estimate is of the cost of upgrading the West Coast Main Line *(a)* North and *(b)* South of the Scotland/England border. [54824]

Mr. Jamieson: The precise outputs of the West Coast upgrade are currently under review by the Strategic Rail Authority and the key stakeholders. Until the outputs are agreed, estimated costs of the upgrade will not be known.

Rail Freight Operators

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what protection exists, and whether it is his policy that protection should exist, to protect rail freight operators against increases in track access charges by the rail regulator. [54282]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 901W.

Deep Sea Ports

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what guidelines he issues to ensure that planning gain for transport is balanced between rail and road modes when considering the development of deep sea ports. [54604]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Member to the Government's policy paper on ports, "Modern Ports", published in November 2000, a copy of which is in the Libraries of the House.

Bus Services

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many

complaints were registered with each passenger transport authority against bus operators, broken down by name of operator, in each of the last three years. [54265]

Ms Keeble: This information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. Individual passenger transport authorities may, however, be able to provide information about complaints they have received.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the total bus subsidies paid in each of the past four years were in *(a)* urban and *(b)* rural areas. [54814]

Ms Keeble: Data are not collected in the precise form requested. The table summarises the available data on public financial support for local bus services in England.

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Concessionary fares reimbursement by local authorities				
London and metropolitan areas	286	289	289	301
Rest of England	104	103	102	113
Local authority service subsidies[1]				
London and metropolitan areas	99	121	119	209
Rest of England	86	110	127	135
Fuel duty rebate from central Government				
London	30	37	46	47
Rest of England	157	185	231	254

[1] This comprises Revenue Support Grant funding for local authorities, funding from London Transport/Transport for London and expenditure under the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant scheme.

Note:

Data on expenditure on fuel duty rebate to bus services in metropolitan areas are not kept separately.

School Transport (Safety)

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions for what reason the law compelling children on school coaches to wear seat belts does not apply to children on double decker buses when those buses are being used for school transport; and if he will make a statement. [53828]

Mr. Jamieson: The design of many of these bus types makes it technically difficult for them to be fitted with adequate seat belts. Also, the types of passenger journeys on these vehicles are such that the need for belts and the likelihood of their being used are less than on faster long-distance journeys. We would expect the service provider to take into account the type of vehicle and provision of seat belts when specifying the vehicle for the service.

Bus Security

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) if he will introduce regulations to require bus operators to install and keep in good order bus radio/alarm systems; [54874]

(2) if he will take steps to ensure bus companies provide improved security for bus workers against assault by passengers and other drivers. [54875]

Ms Keeble: I refer my hon. Friend to my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray) on 1 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 815W.

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will convene a meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee to ensure a co-ordinated approach with the devolved Administrations to prevent assaults on bus workers. [54873]

Ms Keeble: The Government are committed to raising awareness and addressing the issue of assaults on bus staff through research and good practice guidance for public transport operators and encouraging transport policing initiatives. I can assure my hon. Friend that my Department and the devolved Administrations discuss issues relating to the bus industry, including staff safety and security, when appropriate.

MI (Services)

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions for what reason he is allowing the rebuilding of the motorway services at junction 15A of the M1 motorway on a site which would not permit motorway widening without its subsequent demolition. [54826]

Mr. Jamieson: We have no present plans to widen the M1 at this point. In any case, while the proposed alterations to the service area do involve the replacement of some existing buildings with new ones, we are satisfied that the changes are likely if anything to make future widening proposals more, rather than less, straightforward to implement.

M27

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) when the roadworks on Junctions 2 to 4 on the M27 will be completed; [54845]

(2) if he will make a statement on the reasons for the delay in completing the roadworks on Junctions 2 to 4 on the M27. [54846]

Mr. Jamieson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Sandra Gidley, dated 8 May 2002:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, David Jamieson, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about roadworks on the M27 between Junctions 2 and 4.

Weather permitting, the works will be completed by the end of June. The delay has been due, in part, to technical difficulties encountered during construction. Drainage through the environmentally sensitive River Test Valley proved more difficult than originally anticipated and to make up the time, the contractor has increased his resources and changed his working methods.

MOX Fuel Shipment

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will place in the Library a copy of the approval documents he

has issued to British Nuclear Fuels for the transport package which will be used to transport the faulty MOX fuel it supplied to Japan back to Sellafield. [53137]

Mr. Jamieson: I am arranging for copies to be placed in the Libraries of the House of that part of the approval document certifying approval of design and shipment.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if the approval process for the transport package which will be used to transport the faulty MOX fuel from Japan to Sellafield has taken into account whether the package is filled with argon gas or water; and if he will make a statement. [53138]

Mr. Jamieson: The approval process has taken into account all material within the package.

Dangerous Driving

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will implement the recommendations contained in the report, Dangerous Driving and the Law; and if he will make a statement. [54872]

Mr. Jamieson: The report raises a number of important points about the operation of the law on dangerous driving. We are considering these with other government departments with a view to reaching conclusions on the report's recommendations as soon as possible.

Aviation Industry

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will make an announcement about the provision of new airport capacity in the south-east. [53925]

Mr. Jamieson: We intend to publish a consultation paper the outcome of which will inform the Aviation White Paper, which we hope to publish before the end of the year.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage best practice in the types of airport consultation that are required under section 35 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982. [54505]

Mr. Jamieson: The then Department of Transport produced Guidelines for Airport Consultative Committees in December 1987. These stand as the current DTLR advice, and copies are available free on demand. In the 'Future of Aviation' consultation, we invited and received various views on whether and how it would be useful to update this guidance, and a decision on this will be taken in due course.

Specific guidance is also available about airport transport forums and airport surface access strategies (including recommendations on consultation), on the Department's web site.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what recent assessment he has made of the implications of the practice of foreign airliner wet-leasing by United Kingdom airlines on the economic well-being of the domestic aviation industry; what representations he has received about the practice of foreign airliner wet-leasing by United Kingdom airlines; what proposals he has to introduce regulations to restrict wet-leasing of aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [54690]

Mr. Jamieson: Aircraft leasing by UK airlines is governed by European Community law. My Department continuously monitors wet-leasing applications to ensure compliance with Community law, including the requirement that UK airlines do not become excessively dependent on aircraft registered outside the European Economic Area. There are currently eleven passenger and thirteen freighter aircraft wet-leased to UK carriers for periods approaching a traffic season, of which five passenger and eleven freighter aircraft are registered outside the EEA. Five of these aircraft are in process of transfer to the UK register.

My Department's Transparent Procedures for handling leasing applications include provisions whereby interested parties can make representations about individual applications both to the Civil Aviation Authority and to my Secretary of State. In addition my Department receives regular correspondence on the subject of wet-leasing. I consider that the ability to wet-lease foreign registered aircraft within the constraints of Community law enhances the operational efficiency of UK airlines and contributes to the economic well-being of the UK aviation industry. I have no plans to pursue regulations, which could only be introduced at Community level, to place further restrictions on wet-leasing by UK airlines.

Transport Safety

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what recent guidance he has issued to the operators of public service vehicles in relation to reasonable precautions to be taken to ensure safety of passengers after they have entered a vehicle but before they have become seated. [54988]

Mr. Jamieson: The Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) Regulations 1990 require bus drivers and conductors (where present) to take all reasonable precautions to ensure the safety of passengers who are on, or who are entering or leaving, the vehicle.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's review of the organisational arrangements for transport safety. [55479]

Mr. Jamieson: The review of transport safety was conducted in 1999–2000, in response to important recommendations from the Transport Select Committee. Copies of the report of the review group's analysis and the results of its related consultation were provided to the committee, and put in the Libraries of the House, on 9 June 2000. In a parliamentary reply, that same day, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Keith Hill) advised the House that the Government had concluded that it would be wrong to take a view on possibly fundamental changes to the organisation of transport safety before Ministers had been able to consider the

report of the public inquiry into the Ladbroke Grove crash, which was looking among other things at rail safety management, culture and regulation.

In part two of his inquiry report published in September last year Lord Cullen recommended that a Rail Accident Investigation Branch be established, noting that this would not conflict with a cross-modal accident investigation body if in due course the Government decided one should be pursued. We are very glad to have had the committee's thinking on more integrated arrangements for transport safety, for which there are arguments meriting careful consideration. We have taken the view that the emphasis in the first place should be on getting in place the new Rail Accident Investigation Branch and the new Rail Industry Safety Body. But we will then be returning to the question of new cross-modal safety arrangements, and considering further the views expressed by the committee and by others.

Channel Tunnel

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will bring an action against the French Government for their record in observing the free movement of provisions of the treaty of Rome with respect to freight movements through the channel tunnel. [R] [53646]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The Commission has already invoked the Free Movement of Goods Regulation in this case. We remain in close contact with France and the Commission about action to resolve the problems affecting rail freight traffic through the channel tunnel.

Planning Appeal, Willaton Work House

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will determine the outcome of the appeal on the Workhouse in Willaton, Somerset. [52474]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.
My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has decided not to confirm the compulsory purchase order on the Willaton Work House, Somerset. A formal decision letter has been issued to Somerset county council and the owners of the building.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Policing Costs (London)

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what studies he has recently commissioned regarding the costs of policing the London metropolitan area; and what studies he has taken into account relating to cities of similar size abroad. [40284]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 4 March 2002]:* I have commissioned no specific research but the Metropolitan police service have recently commissioned research from the London School of Economics to establish a list of major cities world-wide against which the MPS could be benchmarked.

Government Funding

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) of 25 January 2002, *Official Report*, columns 1185–86W, on Government funding of the voluntary sector, if he will list the grant schemes and other mechanisms by which *(a)* the Home Office, *(b)* the Youth Justice Board and *(c)* the Probation Service distributes funding to voluntary sector organisations. [51405]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 19 April 2002]:* Information on the main grant schemes for Home Office, Youth Justice Board and Probation Service funding to the voluntary sector is detailed as follows.

(a) Home Office

Active Community Main Grants
Capital Modernisation Programme
Communities Against Drugs Initiative
Connecting Communities Grant
Crime Reduction Partnerships
Crime Reduction Programme
Drug Testing Pilot
Drugs Action Team: Development Funding
Drugs Prevention Advisory Service
Family Support Grants
Mentoring Fund
Organisations for mentally disordered offenders
Positive Futures
Race Equality Grant
Reception and Re-settlement of Refugees
Reducing Racial Disadvantage Grant
Secure Training Centres
Summer Activities Scheme
Time Limited Development Fund
UN Drugs Control Programme
Victim Support Schemes

(b) Youth Justice Board

Round 8: Mentoring Help with Numeracy and Literacy
Dual Bids
Mentoring Plus for Minority Ethnic Young Offenders
Round 9: Small Bids for Voluntary Organisations
Summer Splash Schemes

(c) National Probation Directorate

Central Partnership Grants Scheme
Dangerous Offenders Unit—Project Grant
Hostels Revenue Grant.

Criminal Responsibility

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement regarding the age of criminal responsibility. [52150]

Beverley Hughes: The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10. We need to nip early offending in the bud and reinforce young people's sense of personal responsibility for their behaviour. Timely intervention can make a difference and most young people of that age are mature enough to know the difference between right and wrong, to take responsibility for their behaviour and to cope with the operation of criminal law.

The Government's youth justice reforms ensure that young offenders receive appropriate interventions to make them understand and take responsibility for their offending behaviour, and are subject to programmes which directly tackle the causes of their offending.

Hare Coursing

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will establish a power of arrest for persons found committing an offence under the Game Act 1831; [52287]

(2) what plans he has to amend the Game Act 1831 to give police more powers in relation to illegal hare coursing; [52286]

(3) if he will increase the penalties for illegal hare coursing to over £5,000; [52289]

(4) if he will establish a power of seizure of vehicles being used by illegal hare coursers. [52288]

Mr. Denham: There is no immediate intention to strengthen legislation relating to illegal hare coursing or to increase relevant fines. The police and the courts already have extensive powers and substantial penalties available to them in dealing with this issue.

Depending upon the exact circumstances the police may be able to arrest alleged offenders and a court may have the capacity to order forfeiture of vehicles used in committing or facilitating an offence.

Offences relevant to the disorder sometimes associated with illegal hare coursing are contained in the Public Order Act 1986. They include, for example, an offence of intentionally using threatening, abusing or insulting words or behaviour to cause harassment, alarm or distress. There is also the more serious offence of violent disorder which carries a maximum sentence of five years' imprisonment.

Recruitment

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many net additional staff his Department has recruited in each month since June 2001 at *(a)* executive officer level and *(b)* administrative level. [52428]

Angela Eagle: I am sorry for the delay in replying. For the period June 2001 to March/April 2002 the net additional staff recruited to the Home Office and its agencies in the grades requested are set out in the following tables.

(i) The main Home Office (centrally managed, Immigration and Nationality Directorate, and managed by Merseyside Management unit)

	Entrants to Department				*Leavers*		*Net intake*	
	EOs		*AOs/AAs*		*EOs*	*AOs/AAs*	*EOs*	*AOs/AAs*
	Recruitment	*Other*	*Recruitment*	*Other*				
June 2001	34	54	139	178	19	56	69	261
July 2001	50	9	215	12	14	46	45	181
August 2001	44	7	164	3	34	136	17	31
September 2001	23	13	197	14	46	172	−10	39
October 2001	10	11	145	3	16	60	5	88
November 2001	6	6	107	5	20	55	−8	57
December 2001	5	1	93	2	22	53	−16	42
January 2002	24	11	192	7	40	78	−5	121
February 2002	51	10	182	11	38	85	23	108
March 2002	27	5	185	3	58	142	−26	46
April 2002	33	7	110	2	12	21	28	91
Total	307	134	1,729	240	319	904	122	1,065

Note:
The word recruitment is used in the strict sense and does not include transfers from other Government Departments, transfer of functions, etc., which are in other.

(ii) Forensic Science Service

	Entrants to Departments				*Leavers*		*Net intake*	
	EOs		*AOs/AAs*		*EOs*	*AOs/AAs*	*EOs*	*AOs/AAs*
	Recruitment	*Other*	*Recruitment*	*Other*				
June 2001	6	0	35	0	6	12	0	23
July 2001	1	0	28	0	0	12	1	16
August 2001	2	0	23	0	3	14	−1	9
September 2001	8	0	61	1	5	20	3	42
October 2001	5	1	28	1	5	11	1	18
November 2001	0	0	15	0	5	12	−5	3
December 2001	2	0	7	0	2	9	0	−2
January 2002	1	0	11	1	1	5	0	7
February 2002	19	0	23	1	4	5	15	19
March 2002	1	0	6	0	0	7	1	−1
April 2002	11	0	7	0	3	4	8	3
Total	56	1	244	4	34	111	23	137

Note:
The word recruitment is used in the strict sense and does not include transfers from other Government Departments, transfer of functions, etc., which are in other.

(iii) United Kingdom Passport and Criminal Record Agency

	New recruits		Leavers		Net intake	
	EO grade	Admin grade	EO grade	Admin grade	EO grade	Admin grade
June 2001	3	31	1	23	2	8
July 2001	16	65	3	30	13	35
August 2001	3	39	1	45	2	−6
September 2001	3	22	4	65	−1	−43
October 2001	7	58	2	14	5	44
November 2001	16	29	5	51	11	−22
December 2001	1	25	0	5	1	20
January 2002	3	58	8	22	−5	36
February 2002	2	65	3	15	−1	50
March 2002	3	55	4	17	−1	38
Total	57	447	31	287	26	160

(iv) Prison service agency

	Newly recruited		Leavers		Net intake	
	EOs	AOs/AAs	EOs	AOs/AAs	EOs	AOs/AAs
June 2001	4	100	4	50	0	50
July 2001	5	101	4	57	1	44
August 2001	1	61	9	70	−8	−9
September 2001	2	92	4	97	−2	−5
October 2001	1	80	4	45	−3	35
November 2001	2	87	8	39	−6	48
December 2001	0	53	3	30	−3	23
January 2002	2	93	8	58	−6	35
February 2002	0	77	9	43	−9	34
March 2002	0	73	4	53	−4	20
Total	17	817	57	542	−40	275

Note:
Recruitment would include transfers from other Government Departments, but not from the main Home Office.

Street Crime

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the level of street crime in each Metropolitan Police division between January and March in each year from 1997 to 2002. [52334]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* The Home Office did not collect borough figures prior to April 1999 and does not publish monthly or quarterly statistics. The Home Office will publish national statistics for the year 2001–02 in the summer in its crime bulletin. The Metropolitan police have already published figures for this period, which are available on its website. The table contains figures for total recorded robberies (including robberies of personal property and business property) in London boroughs for 1999–2000 and 2000–01.

The Metropolitan police force area is one of the 10 areas included in the Government's wider street crime initiative, which involves a concerted response to street crime across all the criminal justice and social agencies.

The 10 Force Street Crime initiative began in April 2002 across the 10 force areas with the biggest robbery problem. The police and criminal justice agencies are working together in these areas to target and fast-track all street crime offenders. The initiative also brings together the resources and expertise of non-criminal justice system agencies to help tackle the causes of street crime and take preventative action.

Metropolitan police—total robbery offences by Basic Command Unit (BCU) Financial years 1999–2000 to 2000–01—based on force boundary since 1 April 2000

	Year ending	
BCU	March 2000	March 2001
Barking and Dagenham	514	731
Barnet	876	1,041
Bexley	289	417
Brent	2,014	1,941
Bromley	518	685
Camden	1,645	1,906
Croydon	1,094	1,568
Ealing	1,702	1,510
Enfield	1,013	1,163
Greenwich	471	469
Hackney	2,437	2,275
Hammersmith and Fulham	853	911
Haringey	2,008	2,340
Harrow	607	559
Havering	240	392
Heathrow airport	6	6
Hillingdon	401	472
Hounslow	574	717
Islington	1,761	1,511
Kensington and Chelsea	828	991
Kingston-upon-Thames	175	245
Lambeth	3,390	4,691
Lewisham	1,277	1,547
Merton	321	397
Newham	1,736	2,106
Redbridge	652	900
Richmond-upon-Thames	160	236
Southwark	2,008	2,162
Sutton	228	240
Tower Hamlets	1,589	1,757

Metropolitan police—total robbery offences by Basic Command Unit (BCU) Financial years 1999–2000 to 2000–01—based on force boundary since 1 April 2000

BCU	Year ending March 2000	Year ending March 2001
Waltham Forest	943	1,281
Wandsworth	1,217	1,427
Westminster	2,468	2,397
'Squads'	0	1
Grand total	36,015	40,992

Crime (Wales)

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on trends in crime levels in Wales in the last 12 months. [53310]

Mr. Denham: The most recent data available are for the year ending 31 March 2001. The table compares the number of offences in the main crime categories for that year with the previous year.

Recorded crimes in Wales

Offence group	1999–2000[1]	2000–01[1]	Percentage change
Violence against the person	37,922	38,230	1
Sexual offences	1,749	1,702	–3
Robbery	909	890	–2
Burglary	36,764	32,883	–11
Theft and handling stolen goods	98,727	89,035	–10
Fraud and forgery	11,889	10,449	–12
Criminal damage	54,926	53,287	–3
Drug offences	8,520	8,351	–2
Other offences	4,081	3,622	–11
Total recorded crime	255,487	238,449	–7

[1] Years ending March

Police Powers

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the ability of police officers to cross police authority boundaries when pursuing suspected criminals. [53115]

Mr. Denham: There is no restriction on police officers crossing police boundaries when pursuing suspected criminals. Guidance issued to police forces by the Association of Chief Police Officers advises that when police officers cross boundaries in such circumstances they should hand over the pursuit as soon as possible to the police force whose area they have crossed into.

Wolvercote Clinic

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that the Wolvercote clinic should close. [53222]

Beverley Hughes: It is our intention to maintain the services provided by the Wolvercote clinic but in a new location, as yet to be determined.

Air Weapons

Joyce Quin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the cost of introducing a certification regime for the holding of air weapons. [53453]

Mr. Denham: We have not made a detailed assessment of the costs of introducing a certification regime for air weapons, but as there are an estimated 4 million air weapons in circulation it is clear that the resource implications for police firearms licensing departments would be very substantial.

Antisocial Behaviour

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans the Government have to introduce new measures to tackle antisocial behaviour. [53425]

Mr. Denham: Tackling antisocial behaviour calls for a cross-Government approach. Among the many actions we are taking are the introduction of community safety officers and measures in the Police Reform Bill to enhance the effectiveness of antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs). We are also consulting on further measures to deal with the problems of antisocial tenants and of abandoned vehicles.

Prison Service

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost to public spending was of the diversity training programme within the prison service; and how long it will take for all relevant prison staff to have completed the programme. [53419]

Beverley Hughes: The total cost, met from an award from the Cabinet Office Invest to Modernise fund, was £715,000. All staff should have been trained within the next two to three years.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much his department has contributed to the gays and lesbians in the prison service support group. [53420]

Beverley Hughes: Support from the prison service has largely been advisory for this staff support network. A small amount of funding (less than £2,000) has been given towards the cost of leaflets and posters.

Sentencing

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many men held in prisons in England and Wales who are serving a sentence of over five years were charged with offences involving *(a)* violence and *(b)* non-violent crime. [53686]

Beverley Hughes: The table shows the number of males who were serving sentences of over five years in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales on the 31 March 2002, broken down by offence group.

Offence group	Number of prisoners
Violence against the person	6,126
Sex offences	3,391
Drug offences	3,341
Robbery	2,549
Burglary	845
Other offences	638
Theft and handling	137
Fraud and forgery	76
Offence not recorded	73

Car Theft

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cars have been stolen in the past two years for which figures are available; and what steps he is taking to reduce the incidence of car theft. [53748]

Mr. Denham: During the year 1999–2000 there were 374,686 recorded thefts and attempted thefts of motor vehicles in England and Wales and 338,796 during 2000–01. The information available does not distinguish between cars and other motor vehicles.

The Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team (VCRAT) was set up in September 1998 to develop and oversee the implementation of initiatives to meet the Government's target to reduce vehicle crime by 30 per cent. over five years. They published their proposals for achieving the target on 22 September 1999.

The main proposals include improved security on new and used cars; improved car park security; better policing and community responses which target prolific offenders and crime hotspots; and new procedures at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. The Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001 took forward VCRAT recommendations for regulation of the motor salvage industry and controls on the supply of vehicle number plates and we expect to implement these provisions progressively between August 2002 and April 2003.

Prison Albany

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason the Prison Service's application for planning permission to extend HMP Albany was made under emergency procedures. [53706]

Beverley Hughes: The prison population has risen considerably, and on 30 April 2002 was provisionally estimated at 70,578, an increase of 7.5 per cent. (nearly 5,000 prisoners) on the number held in April 2001. Because of the urgent need to provide additional accommodation at existing prisons, including Albany, applications for planning clearance have had to be submitted under the special urgency procedure of Department of the Environment Circular 18/84 which gives the local planning authority 14 days from the date of receipt to submit any comments.

Planning clearance was requested on 11 April 2002 from the Isle of Wight council for the construction of Albany prison of one, two storey 40-place ready to use unit with a single storey ancillary building, within the secure perimeter of the prison. The council advised us on 24 April 2002 that their Development Control Committee had resolved to raise no objection to the proposal. The Prison Service will be writing separately to the hon. Member with further details of their proposals.

Racial Equality

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what evaluation he has made of the quality of the consultation by the CRE on the draft code of practice on the duty to promote racial equality; how many consultees in each category responded; and what proportion they represented of all consultees. [53465]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 30 April 2002]:* The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) issued about 45,000 consultation packs to all listed public authorities and a range of voluntary sector organisations for information. The consultation pack was accompanied by a consultation feedback questionnaire which could be returned both via surface mail or completed on-line.

We are aware that of the 8,000 packs sent to parish councils, at least 27 were received only shortly before or even after the end of the consultation period. This was unacceptable. All parish councils who contacted the CRE to complain were given a two week extension and could respond until 15 March 2002.

The CRE received 974 responses to the consultation questionnaire including a number of collated responses from representative bodies and Government Departments. 87 parish councils responded.

In terms of clarity 85.6 per cent. of respondents found the draft statutory code mainly or completely clear. 82.8 per cent. of respondents found the draft code fairly or very easy to understand and 77.4 per cent. of respondents found the draft code either very or fairly easy to follow.

A range of promotional and consultative conferences with public and voluntary sector organisations complemented the written consultation exercise. The conferences and seminars were favourably received and were used to both inform the public sector of the new duty and to receive feedback and clarify issues raised in the consultation pack.

The following is the breakdown of the categories of responses to the consultation exercise.

Categories by sector	*Number of responses*	*Percentage*
Central Government	15	1.5
Local government[1]	218	22.4
Health	55	5.6
Police/criminal justice	24	2.5
Schools	403	41.4
Further/higher education	70	7.2
Non-departmental public bodies	27	2.8
Voluntary sector	18	1.8
Trade unions	8	0.8
Other	23	2.4
Unclassified	113	11.6
Total respondents	974	100

[1] Includes parish councils

Anti-Semitism

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the recent anti-Semitic attacks on Jews and Jewish property in London. [54221]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The Government condemn all acts of racism, anti-Semitism and religious intolerance. We are fully committed to tackling these manifestations of a vile hatred. That is why we extended the scope of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to cover religiously as well as racially aggravated offences and why we increased the maximum penalty for inciting racial hatred from two to seven years imprisonment. The investigation of race hate crime is also

a priority for the police, who work closely with the community and who are treating these recent incidents with the seriousness which they clearly deserve.

Europol

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what steps he plans to take to improve the democratic accountability of Europol; [54667]

(2) if he will make a statement on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the democratic control over Europol. [54668]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The Commission's Communication is a welcome contribution to the continuing debate on the democratic accountability of Europol. Under the terms of the Europol convention the Director is accountable to the Europol management board on which the individual member states are represented. The Commission's Communication concludes that the existing controls are not legally insufficient given the limited nature of Europol's powers.

The Government are consulting interested parties and will respond when the matter is next debated within the Council structure.

National Criminal Intelligence Service

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what additional resources are planned to be made available to NCIS for the anticipated increase in money laundering reporting by professionals following the Proceeds of Crime Bill. [53611]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The Home Office made an extra £250,000 available to the National Criminal Intelligence Service in 2000–01 to fund additional staff for the Economic Crime Branch, which handles suspicious transaction reports. The extra funding was increased to £1.8 million last year and will continue this year. The National Criminal Intelligence Service increased the staffing of the branch from 24 in August 2000 to 66 in December 2001, and a further increase of up to 20 staff is planned for 2002–03.

The Home Office and National Criminal Intelligence Service will keep the Service's capacity to deal with suspicious transaction reports under review following commencement of the new money laundering offences in the Proceeds of Crime Bill with a view to ensuring that an effective service is maintained.

The funding referred to above is separate from an additional £1 million which has been provisionally earmarked for 2002–03 for tracking terrorist finances. This will provide funding for a multi-agency unit at the National Criminal Intelligence Service, supported by additional investigative capacity at the Metropolitan Police Service.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the length of time is before solicitors, accountants and financial advisers who report suspected money laundering to NCIS receiving guidance on how to proceed *(a)* on average and *(b)* in the 20 per cent. of cases where NCIS is slowest to give guidance. [53612]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Information is not available in this form. I am informed by the National Criminal Intelligence Service that in all cases where guidance is sought about the making of a suspicious transaction report, advice is immediately available by telephone through the help desk within the Economic Crime Branch. When a report is made and identified by the Economic Crime Branch as requiring a prompt law enforcement response, it is processed under a fast track system within 24 hours and forwarded to the relevant law enforcement agency for any necessary action.

We are considering tabling amendments to the Proceeds of Crime Bill in order to introduce time limits within which law enforcement should either give or withhold consent for a financial transaction that has not yet taken place, where it has been reported as suspicious.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women are on the sex offenders register. [53867]

Beverley Hughes: The Sex Offenders Act 1997 requires offenders cautioned for, convicted of, or found not guilty by reason of insanity of an offence specified in schedule 1 to the Act to provide certain details to the police. There is, however, no "register" of sex offenders, as such; nor are sex offenders subject to the requirements of the Act separately identified as such in criminal statistics.

Until recently, data on the number of sex offenders subject to the requirements of the Act were collated biannually on a national basis from the police national computer. However, this arrangement has been overtaken following guidance issued by the Home Office in respect of the provisions in section 67 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000. The guidance requires information about the number of sex offenders subject to the Act's requirements in each police area to be published on an annual basis starting in 2002 and local systems are being put in place to deliver this. Until these systems are in place information on the number of sex offenders subject to the Act's requirements could be obtained only by a specific exercise by the particular police force concerned. We have no plans to break down published figures further.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women who are on the Sex Offenders Register reside in (i) Spelthorne and (ii) Surrey. [54326]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The Sex Offenders Act 1997 requires offenders cautioned for, convicted of, or found not guilty by reason of insanity of an offence specified in schedule 1 to the Act to provide certain details to the police. There is, however, no "register" of sex offenders, as such; nor are sex offenders subject to the requirements of the Act separately identified as such in criminal statistics.

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on an annual basis starting in 2002 and local systems are being put in place to deliver this. We have no plans to require publication by constituency or to break down published figures further. Until these systems are in place information on the number of sex offenders subject to the Act's requirements could be obtained only by a specific exercise by a particular police force concerned.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many sex offender orders have been made to date in each police force area in England and Wales; how many have been *(a)* discharged and *(b)* breached; and if he will make a statement. [51828]

Beverley Hughes: We have been informed of 96 sex offender orders made by the courts between 1 December 1998, when the provisions were implemented, and 31 December 2001. Figures by police force area are not available for the entire period.

We have been informed of three successful breach prosecutions during 1999 and 21 during 2000, the most recent period for which published data are available. We have a provisional figure of 28 further prosecutions for the first three quarters of 2001. These data are not available broken down by area. Information on discharges of sex offender orders is not routinely collected.

Child Pornography

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the national arrangements are in the gathering of information on children involved in cases of child pornography. [51648]

Beverley Hughes: It is the Government view that every image of child pornography depicts an instance of child abuse. As such, when a child is successfully identified from an image by law enforcement, the relevant local authority will be contacted.

The core interagency child protection guidance: "Working Together to Safeguard Children", sets out the role and responsibilities of agencies and practitioners and how these agencies should work together to promote children's welfare and protect them from abuse. The guidance lays down the procedure to be followed in a case of child abuse form the initial referral of the victim to the local authority right through, where necessary, to registration on the Child Protection Register.

Additionally, the United Kingdom, through National Criminal Intelligent Service, is currently leading the development of an international database of child abuse images, to the held at Interpol. The image database will greatly assist in the identification of victims world wide and will hold all United Kingdom images. The feasibility study supporting the development process will be completed this year.

Asylum Seekers

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the *(a)* nationality and *(b)* future rights of those no longer eligible for the special voucher scheme. [46319]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary during the second reading of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill on 24 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 354.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consultation was carried out prior to the abolition of the special voucher scheme. [46318]

Angela Eagle: We consulted with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and entry clearance posts abroad on the current use of the scheme and the implications of its abolition.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which detention centres for asylum seekers *(a)* provide and *(b)* have provided on-site education; for each centre that provided on-site education which (i) private and (ii) public organisation provided the education; and what elements of the national curriculum are followed in each of the centres. [51136]

Angela Eagle: In addition to the provision of adult education at removal centres, there is provision for on-site education of children at Harmondsworth and Dungavel removal centres. There was also provision for education at Yarl's Wood removal centre.

Harmondsworth removal centre is managed and operated by UK Detention Services. Dungavel removal centre is managed and operated by Premier Detention Services Ltd. In both cases, the contractor makes provision for education and employs suitably qualified staff as managers of education.

The profile and numbers of children at an immigration removal centre changes from day to day. Education provision at the centres needs therefore to be sufficiently flexible to cater for the needs of a variable number of children of variable ages and abilities.

In both Harmondsworth and Dungavel a programme of modular education is delivered. These programmes concentrate on numeracy and literacy and the national curriculum, and the Scottish equivalent for Dungavel, provides the framework from which these programmes have been developed.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost per pupil of education provision in detention centres has been in the last year for which figures are available. [51659]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 23 April 2002]:* No figures are available. The cost of adult and child education provision will differ from removal centre to removal centre and will form just one element of the overall cost of the contracts to run the individual centres.

Prison Population

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes have occurred in the *(a)* numbers and *(b)* percentages of (i) women and (ii) men imprisoned in each of the past 10 years; and what his estimate is of the likely changes in the next three years. [54020]

Beverley Hughes: The information requested in given in the tables.

Male prison population on 30 June 1992–2001, with numerical and percentage changes from previous year

	Population on 30 June	Actual change since previous year	Percentage change since previous year
1992	45,277	1,195	3
1993	42,666	−2,611	−6
1994	47,125	4,459	10
1995	49,088	1,963	4
1996	52,951	3,863	8
1997	58,795	5,844	11
1998	62,607	3,812	6
1999	61,322	1,315	2
2000	61,839	−2,983	−3
2001	62,690	851	1

Female prison population on 30 June 1992–2001, with numerical and percentage changes from previous year

	Population on 30 June	Actual change since previous year	Percentage change since previous year
1992	1,555	11	1
1993	1,580	25	2
1994	1,804	224	14
1995	1,998	194	11
1996	2,305	307	15
1997	2,672	367	16
1998	3,120	448	17

Female prison population on 30 June 1992–2001, with numerical and percentage changes from previous year

	Population on 30 June	Actual change since previous year	Percentage change since previous year
1999	3,207	87	3
2000	3,355	148	5
2001	3,713	358	11

Long-term projections of male and female prisoners, projected through to 2005 (average population)—produced October 2001

Central variant	*2003*	*2004*	*2005*
Total	70,200	72,900	74,900
Male	65,700	68,200	70,000
Female	4,490	4,710	4,910
High scenario			
Total	72,900	76,700	79,600
Male	67,800	71,000	73,600
Female	5,170	5,620	6,050

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the total prison population per 100,000 of the population; and what the comparable figures are for each of the past five years in other Council of Europe member states. [54018]

Beverley Hughes: The information requested appears in the table.

Prison population rate[1] per 100,000 population (Council of Europe member states)

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Albania	[2]—	[2]—	85	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Andorra	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	30	[2]—	[2]—
Armenia	[2]—	[2]—	200	[2]—	[2]—	210
Austria	84	86	85	85	84	[2]—
Azerbaijan	[2]—	325	325	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Belgium	76	82	77	80	83	83
Bosnia and Herzegovina	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	35	45	[2]—
Bulgaria	126	142	[2]—	[2]—	115	[2]—
Croatia	45	47	50	[2]—	[2]—	60
Cyprus	35	40	[2]—	37	43	[2]—
Czech Republic	202	209	217	224	208	188
Denmark	61	62	63	66	61	58
Estonia	[2]—	300	[2]—	303	325	334
Finland	58	56	55	46	56	60
France	90	90	89	91	80	77
Georgia	[2]—	[2]—	190	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Germany	83	90	95	97	97	98
Greece	51	54	68	72	76	76
Hungary	129	136	142	161	157	155
Iceland	[2]—	43	35	[2]—	30	[2]—
Ireland	62	68	71	72	76	82
Italy	85	86	87	89	94	97
Latvia	405	407	[2]—	360	355	368
Liechtenstein	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	75	[2]—	[2]—
Lithuania	323	356	[2]—	385	257	313
Luxembourg	104	[2]—	91	90	92	[2]—
Malta	62	[2]—	70	[2]—	68	[2]—
Moldova	263	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	265	[2]—
Netherlands	75	87	75	84	87	93
Norway	52	53	56	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Poland	148	148	153	142	170	207
Portugal	140	145	144	131	127	131
Romania	194	197	[2]—	[2]—	222	225
Russian Federation	713	[2]—	690	729	[2]—	[2]—
San Marino[3]	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Slovakia	144	138	[2]—	[2]—	132	135
Slovenia	31	39	[2]—	48	57	58

Prison population rate[1] per 100,000 population (Council of Europe member states)

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Spain	[2]—	113	111	111	114	102
Sweden	65	59	60	59	64	68
Switzerland	85	88	79	81	79	71
The Former Yugoslavia Republic of Macedonia	50	49	55	[2]—	70	[2]—
Turkey	87	94	100	[2]—	74	83
Ukraine	425	415	[2]—	[2]—	435	[2]—
United Kingdom:						
England and Wales	107	120	126	125	124	127
Northern Ireland	98	95	91	69	60	51
Scotland	101	119	117	118	115	[2]—

[1] Based on estimates of national population
[2] Data not available
[3] Included in figures for Italy
Source:
Statistical contacts in each country, Council of Europe

Prisoners

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure that the educational needs and progress of prisoners are assessed before they are transferred between prison establishments. [54064]

Beverley Hughes: We will put in place arrangements for all prisoners to have access to a full assessment of learning needs on reception and a supporting individual learning plan. In the longer term we want to make the transfer of records of individual achievement from prison to prison more efficient as part of a wider strategy to support effective management information systems through information technology. This should eradicate the need for prisoners to be re-assessed before of after they are transferred to a new establishment within a reasonable timescale.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to assess the individual educational needs of prisoners when they first enter custody; what plans he has to replace the global education targets set for the Prison Service with incentives for establishment and prison staff to improve the education attainments of individual prisoners; and if he will make a statement. [54065]

Beverley Hughes: All prisoners are offered a basic skills screening test at reception. We plan to improve initial assessment by introducing a greater range of diagnostic tests and are piloting computer-based initial assessment in basic skills for juveniles in selected young offender institutions and secure units.

We are widening education targets at national and establishment level to enable prisons to be more flexible in responding to the learning needs of their population. Prison education is now covered by the Adult Learning Inspectorate, which will monitor teaching and training standards to ensure they meet the needs of learners and enable them to progress. Under the Basic Skills Quality Initiative, all establishments will be supported in producing an action plan for delivering basic skills. We will also provide training to instructors and prison officers to enable them to support prisoners' educational needs.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to give prisoners over 16 years a statutory right to receive education while in custody. [54063]

Beverley Hughes: We have no plans to make education a statutory right to prisoners who are not of compulsory school age. But we will increase access to education for all prisoners through extra resources over the next two years and by continuing to remove barriers to learning.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women were serving custodial sentences in each of the last three years, broken down by location. [53824]

Beverley Hughes: The number of women serving custodial sentences on the 30 June in the last three years, broken down by prison is given in the table.

Establishment	1999	2000	2001
Total	2,436	2,666	2,899
Askham Grange	119	119	134
Brockhill	56	77	68
Bullwood Hall	133	156	161
Cookham Wood	146	141	151
Drake Hall	224	172	232
Durham	100	94	100
East Sutton Park	97	71	91
Eastwood Park	165	221	177
Foston Hall	166	164	155
Highpoint	194	188	229
Holloway	199	210	154
Low Newton	61	161	197
Morton Hall	—	—	185
New Hall	266	279	238
Send	88	198	216
Styal	331	335	320
Winchester	91	79	91

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners who are Irish citizens have died in United Kingdom prisons in each year since 1996. [53245]

Beverley Hughes: The numbers of deaths since 1996 in establishments in England and Wales of prisoners who were Irish citizens are set out in the table.

Year	Self-inflicted deaths[1] Irish prisoners[3]	Natural causes deaths[2] Irish prisoners[3]
1996	0	0
1997	0	0
1998	1	0
1999	3	1
2000	3	0
2001	2	2
2002[4]	1	0
Total	10	3

[1] Not all self-inflicted deaths result in an inquest verdict of suicide.
[2] Not all deaths initially classified as being due to natural causes result in an inquest verdict of natural causes.
[3] Includes only those prisoners who are known to be Irish citizens.
[4] Up to and including 28 April 2002.

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many young prisoners have been subjected to restraint under Rule 52 of the Rules for Young Offenders Institutions since April 2000; and what sort of restraints were used in each case. [52137]

Beverley Hughes: There have been nine young prisoners between the age of 18 and 21 years of age placed in restraint under Rule 52 during the stated period. The only restraint available for use under Young Offender Institution Rules 2000, Rule 52, is the body belt and it was used on 11 separate occasions at the following locations:

Location	Date
Guys Marsh	June 2000
Glen Parva	August 2000
Reading	September 2000
Portland	September 2000
Brockhill	October 2000
Feltham	March 2001, August 2001
Dover	August 2001
Swinfen Hall	March 2002

[1] Three separate occasions

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he has made on developing policies for the aftercare of wrongfully convicted prisoners; and what plans he has to consult on his proposals. [51941]

Beverley Hughes: I have now received the report of the working group established to consider this issue and I am considering its recommendations. I am also considering the extent to which there should be consultation on the proposals contained in the report. I will make an announcement shortly.

Prisons

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to notify hon. Members of proposals for prisons in their constituencies. [53705]

Beverley Hughes: It is already Government policy to notify hon. Members of proposals for new prison accommodation in their constituencies.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which prisons have sprinklers fitted in the residential parts of the prisons. [54324]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* No prisons have sprinklers fitted in the residential areas of prisons. The Prison Service is currently undertaking field trials to evaluate the viability of sprinkler provision.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Departmental Functions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the functions of his Department that have been *(a)* market tested and *(b)* outsourced in each of the last five years, specifying the (i) money saving and (ii) percentage saving in each case. [42999]

Mr. MacShane: The following FCO functions have been market tested and subsequently outsourced within the last five years:

(i) London Press and Pictures Service (LPS), British Satellite News/London Radio Service (BSN/LRS) and British Information Services (BIS) Dispatch of Information Materials. All three services had been provided by the Central Office of Information (COI) and were outsourced in 1997 following a COI review which resulted in their no longer providing such services. Savings were as follows:

LPS: £522,000—a 13.6 per cent. saving per annum

BSN/LRS: £150,000—a 7 per cent. saving per annum

BIS £397,000—a 35 per cent. saving per annum.

(ii) Facilities management of the UK estate was outsourced in 1998 at a saving of £463,000 (30 per cent. per annum).

(iii) Guarding services for the UK estate were outsourced in 1998 at a saving of £340,000 (11 per cent. per annum).

National Insurance Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his estimate is of the cost in a full year of the budget changes to employers' national insurance contributions to *(a)* his Department and *(b)* agencies of his Department. [51953]

Mr. Bradshaw: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 544W.

Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on the reasons for the Government's decision to vote in favour of a vote of no confidence in Jose Bustani, Director General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons; [52578]

(2) if he will make a statement on the decision of Her Majesty's Government to vote to remove the Director General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. [54237]

Mr. Bradshaw: Our policy throughout this matter has been guided by our judgment of what is in the best interests of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Mr. Bustani had lost the confidence of a significant number of the OPCW's Executive

Council. At a Special Conference of the OPCW on 21 April, 48 states parties voted for the resolution to terminate Mr. Bustani's appointment, 43 abstained and only seven voted against. Every European Union country voted for the resolution (except France, which abstained), as did other key countries like India, Australia, Canada and Japan. Mr. Bustani's appointment was accordingly terminated with immediate effect.

The Special Conference also called for states parties to nominate candidates for the vacancy of Director General as soon as possible, and for the Executive Council to meet before 31 May to consider the nominations and decide on a recommendation to put to the conference before 10 June.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reasons the United Kingdom voted on 22 April at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons for the removal of the OPCW Director General from his post; and if he will make a statement on Jose Bustani's replacement. [54168]

Mr. Bradshaw: Our policy throughout this matter has been guided by our judgment of what is in the best interests of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Mr. Bustani had lost the confidence of a significant number of the OPCW's Executive Council. At a special conference of the OPCW on 21 April, 48 states parties voted for the resolution to terminate Mr. Bustani's appointment, 43 abstained and only seven voted against. Every European Union country voted for the resolution (except France, which abstained), as did other key countries like India, Australia, Canada and Japan. Mr. Bustani's appointment was accordingly terminated with immediate effect.

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Jordan

Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Jordanian authorities concerning the case of the Siham Suleiman Moussa Qandah. [53075]

Mr. Bradshaw: The case of Siham Suleiman Moussa Qandah and her family was brought to our attention recently by several MPs and by the NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide. The Jordanian authorities are also aware of our interest in the case. I am very concerned about the unfortunate and distressing situation. The UK is committed to the promotion and protection of religious freedom, and condemns instances where individuals are persecuted because of their faith or belief. The case of Siham Suleiman Moussa Qandah is a complex one and I am seeking further information from our embassy in Amman and from Christian Solidarity Worldwide. Our embassy has already been in touch with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the case. We will need to ensure that any action we take is not counter-productive to the needs of the individuals concerned.

Shafiq Rasul

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the health of Shafiq Rasul in Camp X-ray; and what steps he has taken to ensure that Shafiq Rasul has access to legal advice and assistance. [53346]

Mr. Bradshaw: British officials have paid two visits to British nationals detained at Guantanamo Bay. On both occasions, the detainees, including Mr. Rasul, appeared in satisfactory physical condition and did not complain of any mistreatment.

In response to our approaches, the US Government have given us the assurance that they would treat all the detainees humanely and consistently with the principles of the Geneva Convention.

The question of access to legal representation by the detainees has recently been the subject of judicial review proceedings in the High Court. An application has been made to the Court of Appeal for permission to appeal against the High Court's decision. I am not in a position therefore to comment further on this matter.

Pakistan (Christians)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received concerning the situation of *(a)* Ayub Masih and *(b)* other Christians in Pakistan; and if he will make a statement. [53655]

Mr. Bradshaw: We have received a large number of representatives from hon. Members and members of the public about Ayub Masih. We are deeply concerned about the misuse of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and the fate of many Pakistani citizens, including Christians, imprisoned under these laws. Together with our EU partners, we have raised our concerns at regular intervals with the Pakistani authorities, citing specific cases including that of Mr. Masih. We raised his case again with our EU partners on 10 April 2002 and are now considering what further action we should take.

Gibraltar

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when Her Majesty's Government were informed of the discriminatory pensions practices of Gibraltar that he reported to the House on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 453. [52966]

Peter Hain *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* HCA was introduced in 1989. The then Government first raised in 1990 the concern that such a scheme should not be discriminatory in nature. We have continued to press the Government of Gibraltar for a fuller picture of this scheme and the elderly persons allowance.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the discriminatory pensions practices of Gibraltar that he referred to in the House on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 453. [52964]

Peter Hain *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* We are particularly concerned about the household cost allowance paid to those of pensionable age in Gibraltar. We also have some concerns about the elderly persons allowance.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he was informed that the European Commission was embarking on an investigation into potentially illegal practices in relation to pensions in Gibraltar. [52962]

Peter Hain *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* The European Commission approached Her Majesty's Government on 12 July 2001 in relation to this matter.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions Ministers have informed the Committees of the House about the discriminatory pensions practices of Gibraltar that he reported to the House on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 453. [52952]

Peter Hain *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* As I told the House on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 453, we are concerned that pensions practices in Gibraltar may be discriminatory under EC law. The permanent under-secretary at the FCO briefed the Public Accounts Committee on 15 December 1997. The Secretary of State wrote to the PAC in July 1998. I wrote on 8 March of this year and will be doing so again to provide an update of recent events. I also wrote in confidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee on 17 April.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on which dates the discriminatory pensions practices of Gibraltar have been formally raised with the Gibraltar Government in the past 10 years *(a)* in writing and *(b)* in discussions with Ministers. [52965]

Peter Hain *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* During the period from 1998 the Government have raised the matter with the Government of Gibraltar in writing on the following dates: 17 February 1998, 6 March 1998, 29 July 1998, 31 July 2001, 23 August 2001, 19 September 2001, 20 September 2001 and 8 March 2002.

British Ministers discussed the issue with the Chief Minister of Gibraltar on 28 January 1998. I last wrote to the Government of Gibraltar on this on 8 March 2002.

To obtain the requested information for the period prior to 1998 would necessitate a search of a large number of files which could be carried out only at disproportionate cost.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he informed the Government of Gibraltar prior to referring in the House on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 453, to the discriminatory pensions practices of Gibraltar. [52963]

Peter Hain *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* As I told the House on 16 April, we are concerned that pensions practices in Gibraltar may be discriminatory. We have drawn this concern to the attention of the Government of Gibraltar on numerous occasions. Most recently, I wrote to the Chief Minister on 8 March of this year.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the oral statement of the Minister for Europe on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 433, on pension scams and the Government of Gibraltar, if he will set out his policy in relation to this issue; and what discussions he had with the Government of Gibraltar prior to this statement. [54907]

Peter Hain: As I told the House on 16 April, we are concerned that pension practices in Gibraltar may be discriminatory. The Government continue to urge the Government of Gibraltar to address this matter.

For details of when the Government have raised this matter with the Government of Gibraltar I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) today (UIN 52965).

Israel

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the answer of the Secretary of State for International Development to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on 11 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 684W, what representations have been made by his Department to the Israeli Government to seek financial compensation for EU-financed development projects in Gaza and the west bank damaged and destroyed by Israeli military action. [53472]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The Government have stressed to the Government of Israel that any action they take in self defence must be proportionate. Israel must avoid civilian casualties and avoid damaging civilian property and infrastructure. Together with our EU partners we have raised our concerns about the damage to EU and other donor-funded projects in the west bank and Gaza strip caused by Israeli military actions and demanded that this practice stop. The EU reserves the right to demand compensation in the appropriate fora. The European Commission continues to monitor and cost this damage.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will discuss with the Saudi ambassador to the UK the poem he has published praising a Palestinian suicide bomber; and if he will make a statement; [54195]

(2) what representations he has had from *(a)* the Government of Israel and *(b)* the Board of Deputies of British Jews about the recently published poem and letter to the Board of Deputies by the Saudi ambassador to the UK; [54201]

(3) if he will discuss with the Saudi ambassador to the UK the letter he wrote to the Board of Deputies about a former Prime Minister of Israel; and if he will make a statement. [54196]

Mr. Bradshaw: We have made clear to the Saudi ambassador our well known position on suicide bombings. We condemn them as we condemn all forms of terrorism and indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians.

I have received a letter from the Jewish Board of Deputies to which I will reply. We have received no representations on this subject from the Government of Israel.

East Timor

Ms Munn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how the United Kingdom will be represented in East Timor after independence. [55343]

Mr. Bradshaw: The UK has played a leading role in rebuilding East Timor and preparing for self-government there. We have so far committed more than £30 million for reconstruction and rehabilitation—including £12 million from DFID for the first three years after independence. We will upgrade the existing British Office in Dili to an embassy on independence and Hamish St. Clair Daniel will be the first British ambassador to the Democratic Republic of East Timor. I will represent HMG at the Independence Day celebrations in Dili on 20 May.

St. Helena

Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date and by what means he plans to restore citizenship rights to the St. Helenians. [54909]

Mr. Bradshaw: A Commencement Order giving effect to the citizenship provisions of the British Overseas Territories Act 2002 was signed by the Secretary of State on 1 May and will take effect on 21 May. From that date, which is also the quincentenary of the discovery of St. Helena, St. Helenians will be able to apply for British citizen passports.

British Overseas Territories Act

Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the British Overseas Territories Act 2002 Commencement Order will be made. [54908]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs signed a Commencement Order on 1 May which will bring the citizenship provisions of the British Overseas Territories Act 2002 into force on 21 May 2002.

Arms Exports

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department takes to ensure that the export of arms is to countries which will only use the arms for approved purposes; and if he will make a statement. [54904]

Mr. Bradshaw: Britain has one of the strictest and most transparent arms export licensing systems of any country. We consider all export licence applications on a case by case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria. Our criteria clearly state that we will not issue licences where there is a clear risk that the experts might be used for either internal repression or external aggression.

The British Government has been in the forefront of international efforts to strengthen the regulation of the arms trade and proliferation. We were instrumental in getting agreement for an EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, and we regularly encourage other countries to adopt stricter and more transparent arms export policies. We are active members of all the key regimes that work to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, such as the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and the Australia Group (which deals with chemical and biological weapons). And we are signatories to key arms control treaties, such as the Ottawa Convention on landmines, the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.

The UK's national export licensing criteria were set out in the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Peter Hain) to my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) on 26 October 2000. *Official Report*, column 199–203W.

Lockerbie

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the offer of compensation made by Libya for the families of those killed in the Lockerbie bombing. [54577]

Mr. Bradshaw: The Government do not have a direct role in the discussions concerning compensation by Libya to the families of those killed in the Lockerbie bombing. Negotiations have been taking place between lawyers representing the families and representatives of the Libyan Government. The Government would not find acceptable any outcome under which British families do not receive an appropriate sum in compensation or receive less than others. I have raised the question of compensation for British families with the United States Government, which has raised it in turn with the lawyers directly involved in the discussions.

Libya

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Libya with particular reference to sanctions. [54578]

Mr. Bradshaw: The Government pursue a policy of critical engagement with Libya, through which we hope to continue improving relations. UN sanctions against Libya are currently suspended. The United Kingdom will support a lift once Libya has satisfied the remaining requirements of UNSCRs 731,748,883 and 1192.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which individuals in Zimbabwe have bank accounts which have been frozen by the European Union and the United States, broken down by *(a)* the size of those assets frozen and *(b)* the country in which those assets were held. [48789]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 15 April 2002]:* European Council Regulation 310/2002 requires member states to freeze the assets of Robert Mugabe, immediate members of his family and members of the Government of Zimbabwe. It is for each member state to ensure that the terms of the regulation are implemented. While the regulation does not allow for the disclosure of details regarding accounts and amounts frozen, in the United Kingdom accounts belonging to two individuals listed in the regulation have been frozen.

Actions taken by the United States in respect of individuals in Zimbabwe are a matter for its Government.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Copyright Piracy

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures her Department proposes to take to combat video, DVD and internet piracy. [53442]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

We are supporting the Copyright, etc. and Trade Marks (Offences and Enforcement) Bill which raises the maximum penalty for copyright piracy offences. We will be strengthening copyright law relevant to online use and misuse of copyright material in regulations to implement the EC Directive on copyright and related right in the information society. In addition, our support for initiatives that will raise awareness of and respect for copyright and other intellectual property (IP) rights, such as the Crimestoppers Anti-Counterfeiting Campaign and the CD-Rom for schools that will explain IP issues relevant to e-commerce, are further contributing to the fight against piracy. We will continue to collaborate with representatives from public sector enforcement interests and affected private sector interests in the Counterfeiting and Piracy Forum to identify practical solutions to the fight against all piracy. We have recently arranged for the police National High-Tech Crime Unit to participate in the forum in order to gain from its experience of fighting internet crime.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions her officials have had with officials in other departments on combating video, DVD and internet piracy. [53441]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

My officials are in close contact with officials in other Departments on a regular basis, including those in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Home Office and the Department for Education and Skills.

Tourism

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much was paid from public funds to support the British Tourism Industry in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [54012]

Dr. Howells: The following table sets out moneys paid from public funds to support and compensate the British tourism industry in the years 1999–2000 to 2001–02. DCMS provides funding for the British Tourist Authority (BTA) to promote Britain overseas but other direct public funding to the tourism industry in Scotland and Wales is the responsibility of the devolved administrations, and is not included in the table. Other moneys, mostly administered by the English Tourism Council (ETC), from central Government are included.

£ million

Recipient of Payment	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
British Tourist Authority	37.5	37.02	[1]49.7
English Tourism Council	[2]12.1	10.068	[3]14.869
Greater London Authority (GLA)[4]	—	—	1.9
Other English grants[5]	0.4	0.1	0.057

[1] This £49.7 million includes £14.2 million for foot and mouth disease (FMD) recovery.
[2] Grant in aid paid to the English Tourist Board (ETB), predecessor to the English Tourism Council.
[3] This £14.869 million includes £0.6 million from the Capital Modernisation Fund and £3.8 million to tackle FMD.
[4] As from 2001–02 public funding of tourism in London was granted by DCMS to the GLA—before it had been part of BTA and ETB/ETC grants.
[5] Including Sector Challenge, Invest to Save Budget, and Tourism Strategy Fund.

In addition to this direct Government funding:

(a) Local authorities spend over £90 million per year in England promoting and developing tourism in their areas;

(b) The Regional Development Agencies' Business Recovery Fund made £74 million available in 2001–02 to target help for rural businesses, including tourism businesses, affected by the implications of foot and mouth disease (FMD); and

(c) DCMS's £1 billion expenditure on arts, museums, galleries, sport etc. also directly benefits tourism.

ITV Digital

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations she has received from ITV Digital since the company's entry into administration on 27 March. [53883]

Dr. Howells: I have been kept closely in touch by all sides involved in the ITV Digital negotiations. However the decisions taken by ITV Digital are commercial decisions for them, and them alone, to take.

National Stadium

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she has received *(a)* Patrick Carter's report into the National Football Stadium and *(b)* the other information from the Football Association, WNSL, Sport England and other Government Departments to enable her to make an assessment of Wembley's National Stadium bid in accordance with her statement to the House on 19 December 2001. [54472]

Tessa Jowell: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement I made yesterday, *Official Report*, column 21–22. Further to that statement, I have now received Sport England's athletics study, a copy of which I have placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Rural Awareness

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when her Department will establish rural targets and monitoring as part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report Rural Proofing in 2001–02. [54423]

Dr. Howells: The Department is actively committed to improving policy outcomes through the rural proofing process. The Department's current public service agreement includes a number of targets which will bring

real benefits to rural areas, including ensuring all public libraries have internet access by the end of 2002 and introducing at least 12 Creative Partnerships by March 2004.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when her Department will introduce measures to raise rural awareness through staff *(a)* training, *(b)* development and *(c)* secondments as part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, Rural Proofing in 2001–02. [54415]

Dr. Howells: The Department has taken a number of steps to raise awareness of rural issues among staff and its non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs). The rural proofing checklist has been widely disseminated throughout the Department and to NDPBs and rural proofing has been incorporated into the Department's policy makers' checklist. A central contact point to promote rural proofing has been identified within the Department and officials have worked closely with the Countryside Agency on a number of key policy areas.

Digital Television

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what mechanisms the Government will implement to ensure that *(a)* consumers on low incomes, *(b)* consumers who live in rural areas and *(c)* other consumers who live in areas which cannot presently receive digital terrestrial television will continue to have access to television services after analogue switch-off. [54617]

Dr. Howells: Analogue signals will not be turned off before two conditions are met:

everyone who currently receives free-to-air channels is able, after switchover, to receive the same channels digitally, including in remote and rural areas, and

switching to digital must be an affordable option, within the reach of people on low and fixed incomes. As a key measure of affordability, 95 per cent. of consumers must have access to digital equipment before switchover is completed.

Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment has been made of the impact of the work of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. [54572]

Dr. Howells: Ministers and officials in my Department hold regular meetings with the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) to discuss progress. A funding agreement between my Department and CABE also sets out a range of performance-related targets that CABE is expected to meet.

CABE's key achievements are set out in my Department's annual report.

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what her future funding intentions are for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. [54573]

Dr. Howells: This year (2002–03) the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) will receive £3.53 million in grant-in-aid from my Department. CABE also receives some funding from the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

The details of my Department's future funding for all its sponsored bodies will be announced as part of the Spending Review.

Performance Targets

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent assessment she has made of whether the target for the reduction of running costs as a proportion of the departmental expenditure limit between 1999–2000 and 2001–02 will be met on time. [47255]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* Latest estimates suggest that departmental running costs in 2001–02 represented 2.291 per cent. of the departmental expenditure limit, compared with 2.526 per cent. in 1999–2000. This means we will have exceeded the target to reduce running costs as a proportion of DEL by 4.5 per cent. These figures exclude transfers to the Department following machinery of Government changes in the wake of the general election on 7 June 2001.

Press Subscriptions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will list the newspapers subscribed to *(a)* Monday to Saturday and *(b)* on Sunday by her Department, stating for each subscription (i) the number of copies taken, and (ii) the annual cost. [52815]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* The total annual cost of newspaper subscriptions in 2002–02 was £13,248. The table specifies each title taken, the cost per copy, and the total annual cost per title.

DCMS—Newspaper subscriptions April 2002

Title	*Number of copies*	*Cost per copy (£)*	*Total annual cost (£)*
Daily Express[1]	7	79.47	556.29
Daily Express[2]	1	22.62	22.62
Daily Mail[1]	9	79.47	715.23
Daily Mail[2]	2	22.62	45.24
Daily Mirror[1]	8	72.66	581.28
Daily Mirror[2]	2	14.48	28.96
Daily Star[1]	4	68.12	272.48
Daily Star[2]	2	13.57	27.14
Daily Telegraph[1]	9	102.18	919.62
Daily Telegraph[2]	1	33.93	33.93
Daily Telegraph[3]	1	20.36	20.36
Evening Standard[4]	12	79.47	953.64
Evening Standard[3]	3	79.47	238.41
Evening Standard[4]	12	79.47	953.64
Financial Times[1]	13	204.36	2,656.68
Financial Times[2]	1	40.72	40.72
Guardian[1]	10	102.18	1,021.80
Guardian[2]	1	38.45	38.45
Guardian[3]	1	20.36	20.36
Independent[1]	8	113.54	908.32
Independent[2]	1	40.72	40.72
Independent on Sunday	1	49.76	49.76
International Herald Tribune[4]	1	272.31	272.31
Jewish Chronicle	1	24.88	24.88
Mail on Sunday	2	45.24	90.48
Morning Advertiser	2	67.86	135.72
News of the World	2	27.14	54.28
Observer	1	49.76	49.76
The People	2	29.41	58.82

DCMS—Newspaper subscriptions April 2002

Title	*Number of copies*	*Cost per copy (£)*	*Total annual cost (£)*
The Publican newspaper	2	43.85	87.70
Racing Post[1]	2	238.42	476.84
Sunday Business	1	45.24	45.24
Sunday Express	1	45.24	45.24
Sunday Mirror	2	29.41	58.82
Sunday Telegraph	1	45.24	45.24
Sunday Times	1	49.76	49.76
The Sun[1]	8	68.12	544.96
The Sun[2]	2	18.10	36.20
The Times[3]	11	79.47	874.17
The Times[2]	1	27.14	27.14
Tribune	1	45.24	45.24
Total annual cost			13,168.45

[1] Monday to Friday
[2] Saturday
[3] Wednesday
[4] City edition
[5] News Extra edition
[6] West End final
[7] Tuesday
[8] Monday to Saturday

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Census 1901

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if the costs of enhancement of the 1901 Census website since 2 January will be met by QinetiQ; and if the contract with QinetiQ prohibits an increase in user fees from those already announced. [51562]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The costs of the enhancements to the 1901 census website, which are intended to make the site sufficiently robust to permit general internet access, are being met in full by the contractor QinetiQ. The user fees are fixed by a statutory instrument and therefore cannot be increased.

Family Visitor Appeals

Lynne Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will provide a breakdown of the number of family visitor appeals *(a)* determined, *(b)* allowed and *(c)* dismissed by the Immigration Appellate Authority (i) at an oral hearing and (ii) on the papers only in each month since 1 January. [54061]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The information is as follows:

Month	*Determined*	*Allowed*	*Dismissed*
(i) Oral appeals:			
January 2002	147	97	50
February 2002	148	102	46
March 2002	168	119	49
(ii) Paper appeals:			
January 2002	151	79	72
February 2002	152	54	98
March 2002	198	65	133

Lynne Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will provide a breakdown of the number of *(a)* oral and *(b)* paper-only family visitor appeals received by the Immigration Appellate Authority in each month since 1 January. [54060]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The information is as follows:

	(a) Oral appeals	*(b) Paper appeals*
January 2002	172	196
February 2002	184	172
March 2002	285	213

Bailiff Law

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress has been made on the Green Paper "Towards Effective Enforcement—A Single Piece of Bailiff Law and Regulatory Structure for Enforcement". [55583]

Mr. Wills: I am pleased to announce the publication of (a) the post consultation report for the Green Paper "Towards Effective Enforcement—A Single Piece of Bailiff Law and Regulatory Structure for Enforcement", and (b) the summary of responses following the consultation paper on distress for rent procedures.

The Green Paper, published on 9 July 2001, invited comments on the structure for the regulation of enforcement services, a single piece of bailiff law, fees, information and data sharing and a partial regulatory impact assessment. The 84 respondents came from a wide variety of groups concerned with enforcement, including local authorities, public interest groups and enforcement agents. Consultation showed overwhelming support for most of the proposals in the Green Paper. Copies of both documents have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Delivery will require a legislative opportunity. We intend to publish a White Paper early next year bringing together proposals on both civil enforcement (including regulation of all enforcement agents) and distress for rent.

My noble Friend Baroness Scotland of Asthal QC today launched the publication 'National Standards for Enforcement Agents'. The 'National Standards' identifies duties and responsibilities which creditors and their enforcement agents share. It has been warmly welcomed and endorsed by the enforcement profession. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister by what criteria he judges whether the cost of a parliamentary question is disproportionate; and what guidance he gives to Departments. [52400]

Mr. Leslie: Decisions on whether to refuse to provide information on the grounds of disproportionate cost in response to parliamentary questions are taken in accordance with the requirements of the guidance issued by HM Treasury on "Costing Parliamentary Questions"

and "Guidance to Officials on Drafting Answers to Parliamentary Questions" issued by the Cabinet Office. Copies of both documents have been placed in the Library of the House. The final decision on how to answer the parliamentary question rests with the individual Minister concerned who may decide that a full answer should be provided irrespective of cost.

Age Equality Commission

Linda Perham: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will establish an age equality commission; and if he will make a statement. [53116]

Mrs. Roche: The Government are committed to implementing the European employment and race directives by transposing the directives into UK law.

The recent consultation, 'Towards Equality and Diversity', sought views on the most appropriate arrangements for advice and support for all the new equality strands covered by the employment directive, including age. We are currently considering the strategic and practical issues for all these strands in the light of these responses.

Expenditure Authorisation

Mr. Bacon: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on *(a)* the circumstances in which an accounting officer should seek a direction from a Minister before authorising expenditure, *(b)* the number of occasions since 1 May 1997 that such directions have been sought by accounting officers and *(c)* the Department and sum involved and the purpose of the expenditure for which a direction was sought in each case. [54833]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have been asked to reply.

The circumstances in which an accounting officer should seek a direction from a Minister before authorising expenditure are set out in paragraphs 14–17 of the Treasury document, "The Responsibilities of an Accounting Officer", of July 2001. A copy of the document is available in the Library of the House. The number of occasions since 1 May 1997 that such directions have been sought by accounting officers is 13. The Departments concerned, together with the general subject matter of each direction, are as follows:

1998—DSS: Benefits Agency/Post Office Counters Ltd (BA/POCL Automation Ltd);

1998—DSS: Benefits Agency/Post Office Counters Ltd (BA/POCL Automation Ltd);

1998—Northern Ireland Court Service: an individual's personnel records;

1998—MOD: sale of cadet property in Moffat;

1998—DSS: benefits integrity project;

1999—DSS: benefits integrity project;

1999—DSS: benefits integrity project;

1999—ECGD: cashmere exporters;

1999—ECGD: ECGD cover Indonesia;

2000—ECGD: ECGD cover Romania;

2000—MOD: financial assistance to meet cost of flight to Croatia for member of public to attend trial of those accused of murder of his son, a British service man;

2001—MOD: RoRo ferries;

2001—DTLR: Silverstone bypass.

The Treasury is advised when a ministerial direction is issued, but comprehensive information on the sums involved and the purpose of the expenditure related to the direction is not provided to the Treasury by Departments.

HEALTH

Digital Equipment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many digital radios are owned by his Department for use in departmental buildings from which Ministers work; and what the *(a)* cost and *(b)* date of purchase of each radio was. [52861]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* No digital radios are owned by the Department for use in the building from which Ministers work.

Three radio channels (BBC Radio 3, 4 and 5) are available on television receivers fed from the Central Office of Information cable television system.

Recombinant Factor VIII

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the charging mechanisms for providing recombinant factor VIII to haemophiliacs under the age of 20 but over the age of 16. [47846]

Yvette Cooper: If the product is supplied to a patient and administered at a hospital it is free of charge. If the product is supplied otherwise than for administration at a hospital normal prescription arrangements apply. No charge will be payable if the patient is under 19 and in full-time education, or qualifies for free prescriptions on other grounds, such as low income.

Patients who have to pay and need frequent prescriptions may benefit from purchasing a prescription pre-payment certificate.

Riding for the Disabled Association

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what role his Department envisages for the Riding for the Disabled Association in the rehabilitative treatment of children with musculo-skeletal disorders. [47020]

Jacqui Smith: The decision on what treatment to offer an individual patient is one for the clinicians involved in the case. They are responsible for deciding the best treatment for the patient. Doctors are required to exercise their clinical judgment in consultation with the patient and informed by a patient's medical history.

Genito-urinary Medicine

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been spent on genito-urinary medicine in each of the past five years. [47869]

Yvette Cooper: Spending on genito-urinary medicine by national health service trusts in each of the past five years are shown in the table.

Year	£000
1996–97	117,910
1997–98	137,367
1998–99	151,745
1999–2000	171,593
2000–01	156,955

Note:

In 1999–2000 one NHS trust recorded expenditure on HIV/ AIDS within the speciality genito-urinary medicine. However, in 2000–01 the trust reclassified this expenditure and recorded it within the speciality infectious diseases. This accounts for an approximate decrease of £17 million in 2000–01 and also demonstrates that recording of expenditure on genito-urinary medicine can vary from year to year.

Source:

1996–97 to 2000–01 NHS Trust financial returns.

Hearing Aids

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason analogue hearing aids continue to be fitted in hospitals involved in the modernising hearing aid services projects. [47835]

Jacqui Smith: The majority of hearing aids fitted in hospitals involved in the modernisation project are digital hearing aids. However, some of these hospitals are still fitting analogue aids as part of the continuing Medical Research Council research project, which is testing out the advantages of analogue and digital aids provided as part of a modernised service. The research project report is due at the end of 2002. In the meantime, hospitals can decide which hearing aids to fit, taking account of patient preference and exercising clinical judgment.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when PCTs and NHS trusts in the south-east that have been allowed to make digital hearing aids available will be given another chance to bid for that provision; [53880]

(2) for what reasons digital hearing aid services have not been made available in Essex. [53922]

Jacqui Smith: Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS trust and Barking, Havering and Redbridge NHS trust are both among the thirty new sites I announced in my reply to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 466W). We have been able to involve all those sites who, having the support of their local health communities, submitted applications.

The project managers at Royal National Institute for the Deaf are now looking towards identifying those sites to be provided with training and equipment to allow them to be ready to join in the Modernising Hearing Aid Services Project from April 2003. They will be contacting all those sites not yet involved in the project and encouraging those with an interest to have discussions with their health community and put forward a bid.

MMR

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he intends to give to nursery schools and other providers of early years education on accepting children who have not received their MMR inoculations. [47840]

Yvette Cooper: General guidance on infection control in schools and nurseries has been issued by this Department, the Department for Education and Skills and the public health laboratory service in the form of a poster. Copies of this have been distributed to all schools and it is also available on the wired for health web site, specifically at www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk//healthy/images/INFECT—POSTER.PDF

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the level of MMR vaccination is in Darlington. [53295]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* Information about children immunised against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) in County Durham and Darlington health authority by their 2nd birthday is contained in the Statistical Bulletin "NHS Immunisation Statistics, England: 2000–01". A copy of the bulletin is in the House of Commons Library and can also be found on the Department website www.doh.gov.uk/public/sb0121.htm.

Alcohol Awareness

Miss Begg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his Department's procedures are for ensuring that every woman is made aware of the dangers of drinking alcohol while pregnant. [51822]

Ms Blears: The Pregnancy Book, which is given free to all first time mothers, contains a section on alcohol consumption during pregnancy. It warns women that heavy or frequent drinking can seriously harm the baby's development, and they are encouraged to talk to their doctor or midwife if they need help to reduce their alcohol consumption. It also provides contact details for seeking further help and support.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Nottingham university CHP generator for the Queen's Medical Centre by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative; [49512]

(2) what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the elderly mental health for the Rotherham Priority Health NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative; [49522]

(3) what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Queen's Medical Centre ENT Ophthalmology Capital Scheme for the Queen's Medical Centre NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative. [49544]

Yvette Cooper: The business case justifying the individual schemes estimating the net savings in present value terms (ie all future costs and benefits discounted to their present values) compared with publicly funding the scheme are shown in the table.

Net present costs of PSC v PFI option

£000

Trust	PFI	Public	Savings in net present value terms	Percentage difference
Rotherham Priority Health Services—Elderly mental health 'Swallownest' scheme	8,166	9,517	1,351	14
Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham—combined heat and power generator	20,932	21,397	465	2
Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham—ENT ophthalmology	24,284	28,226	3,942	14

Note:
Published guidance on Public Sector Comparators notes that: "Accounting Officers should not rely solely on a straight comparison of a PFI bid to its PSC, which should never be regarded as a pass/fail test but instead as a quantitative way of informing judgment". (Treasury Taskforce Technical Note No. 5: How to construct a public sector comparator

National Insurance

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost to the care home sector of additional employers' NI contributions as summarised in the Budget statement. [51914]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 23 April 2002]:* It is estimated that the changes to employers' national insurance contributions announced in the Budget will increase pay costs on average by 0.7 per cent. next year.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the cost in a full year of the Budget changes to employers' national insurance contributions to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* agencies of his Department, *(c)* local government carrying out functions within the responsibility of his Department, *(d)* the national health service and *(e)* contractors supplying services to the national health service. [51972]

Ms Blears: I refer you to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 544W.

Dental Care

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent assessment he has made of the dental care plans by dental practitioners and the impact this has on access to dental care; [52284]

(2) what guidelines exist to guarantee a minimum level of access to NHS dental care within each health authority area. [52283]

Ms Blears: Health authorities in England are currently responsible for planning, and ensuring access to national health service dental services. "Modernising Health and Social Care-National Priorities Guidance 2000–01 to 2002–03" and subsequent guidance required health authorities to publish an externally assessed dentistry action plan to enable patients to access NHS dentistry through NHS Direct within locally agreed time and distance standards.

Provision of NHS dental services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is a matter for the devolved Administrations.

Clinical Data

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what income his Department *(a)* has received and *(b)* plans to receive from the sale of anonymised clinical information. [52262]

Ms Blears: The Department does not receive income from the sale of anonymised clinical data. Where data or other information is made available there may be a charge to cover administrative costs.

Eastbourne and Hastings Hospital Trusts

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how much the newly merged Eastbourne and Hastings hospital trusts will pay in additional national insurance contributions in the year 2002; [52226]

(2) how much he estimates the merged Eastbourne and Hastings hospital trusts will pay in additional national insurance contributions in 2003. [52561]

Ms Blears: The increases in national insurance, announced by my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 17 April, will come into effect in April 2003. The East Sussex Hospitals NHS Trust will have a gross annual pay bill of approximately £100 million, one per cent. of which would be £750,000 for April to December 2003 or £1 million for 2003–04.

Exact figures are not available as individual NHS staff members' pay and deductions are not collected centrally.

Mixed Wards

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS patients were treated in hospital in mixed wards in each year from 1995 to 2001; and if he will make a statement. [52588]

Ms Blears: This information is not collected centrally.

Hospital Waiting Times

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people were waiting more than six months to see a consultant for the first consultation in Lancashire in each year since 1997. [53108]

Jacqui Smith: Three health authorities, East, North West and South Lancashire, were responsible for commissioning health care on behalf of the majority of

the population of Lancashire. The following data are an aggregate of those three organisations. On 1 April 2002, health authorities in Cumbria and Lancashire merged to form Cumbria and Lancashire health authority.

The total number of patients, following a general practitioner referral, waiting over six months (26 weeks) for a first out-patient consultant appointment, is set out in the table:

	Number of patients
December 1997	918
December 1998	2,716
December 1999	3,176
December 2000	2,016
December 2001	1,021

Reconfiguration Panel

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on how many occasions the independent reconfiguration panel has met. [53228]

Ms Blears: None. The Independent Reconfiguration Panel, which will offer authoritative advice to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on referred proposals for NHS service change, is expected to start work in autumn 2002.

Mental Health

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the availability of the latest generation of medicines to those who suffer mental illness. [53011]

Jacqui Smith: There has been a consistent increase in the numbers of prescriptions for atypical antipsychotic drugs over the past five years. In 1997 atypical antipsychotic prescription items dispensed in the community in England accounted for 257,000 or 6.2 per cent. of the total of 4,157,000 prescription items for all antipsychotics. In 2001 the figures were 1,842,000 or 39 per cent. out of 4,718,000.

Endometriosis

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will make a decision on the application by the SHE Trust for DOH Section 64 funding of a comparative survey of endometriosis. [53447]

Yvette Cooper: Notification of the decision on this application was posted to the SHE Trust on 11 April 2002. The SHE Trust were not successful in their application.

Learning Disabilities

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department is taking to encourage the involvement of the *(a)* independent and *(b)* charitable sectors in the provision of care for adults with learning disabilities. [53602]

Jacqui Smith: Our policy for improving services for people with learning disabilities is set out in the White Paper "Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21 Century" published in March 2001. It is based on the four principles of rights, independence, choice and inclusion. We recognise that effective partnerships are key to the delivery of our policy. We work closely with all the key interests including the charitable and independent sector to provide new opportunities for people with learning disabilities to lead full and active lives.

"Valuing People" required local councils to establish Learning Disability Partnership Boards by 31 October 2001. Partnership Boards are required to ensure that local independent providers and the voluntary sector are fully engaged in their work. The "Valuing People" support team is working with Partnership Boards to help build strong partnerships locally.

Representatives of voluntary organisations were actively involved in developing the White Paper and we continue to work with them in its implementation through their membership of the Learning Disability Task Force. We also provide funding from the Implementation Support Fund announced in "Valuing People" and from the discretionary programme of section 64 grants (approximately £1.3 million in 2002–03) from the Department to voluntary organisations to further our objective of achieving social inclusion for people with learning disabilities.

Sellafield

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what dates *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials in his Department held meetings with the Irish Government to discuss the British Nuclear Fuels plant at Sellafield between 1 January and 5 October 2001; where each meeting took place; which Ministers were involved in each meeting; and which Irish Government Departments were involved in each meeting. [53382]

Yvette Cooper: For details of the two officials' meetings since 1 January 2001, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 442W.

Lung Cancer

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been spent on lung cancer treatment in each year since 1997. [53594]

Yvette Cooper: The Department does not collect figures on the cost of NHS services in a way that enables an accurate figure to be calculated for the cost of a particular disease.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of cases of lung cancer in the last five years can be attributed to smoking. [53595]

Yvette Cooper: These data are not routinely collected. The latest estimate of the proportion of deaths from lung cancer was made by the Health Education Authority who estimated in their 1998 report, "The UK Smoking Epidemic: Deaths in 1995", that in 1995 84 per cent. of all deaths from lung cancer (90 per cent. men, 73 per cent. women) in the United Kingdom were caused by smoking.

Care Homes

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many nursing home residents previously funded under preserved rights have moved from their existing care home as a result of their reassessment; [53769]

(2) how many nursing home residents previously assisted under preserved rights qualify for the direct payments scheme. [53763]

Jacqui Smith: Information on the outcomes of care assessments of those people whose care was previously funded under preserved rights is not available.

Direct payments cannot be used to purchase long term residential care. We expect that the majority of people who had preserved rights will continue to receive their existing care packages. However, for those that have been assessed as not needing residential care, direct payments will be available as an alternative.

Oxfordshire SSA

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations his Department have made to other Departments on the SSA in relation to Oxfordshire. [54155]

Jacqui Smith: I have made no such representations about the personal social service standard spending assessment formulae as they relate specifically to Oxfordshire.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations his Department has made to other Departments on funding for social services spending by counties in preparation for the Comprehensive Spending Review. [54156]

Jacqui Smith: No specific representation has been made in respect of counties over and above other local authority groups. However there is regular dialogue with representatives from other government departments, and local authorities, throughout the spending review process so that the views of all local authorities, including counties, can be taken into account.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had with representatives of general practitioners in respect of the additional costs related to the healthcare of the families of asylum seekers; and what plans he has to recognise such costs in the allocation of funds to primary care trusts. [54270]

Jacqui Smith: I have had no recent discussions with representatives of general practitioners (GPs) in respect of costs related to the healthcare of the families of asylum seekers. Allocations made to health authorities and primary care trusts include resources for all their population including the families of asylum seekers. To support their work with asylum seekers, GPs can also bid for extra resources through personal medical service pilots, or local development schemes can be initiated to provide for the payment of fees under Section 36 of the NHS (Primary Care) Act 1997.

NHS Appointments Commission

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 120W, what discussions he has had with the NHS Appointments Commission on the reason the application from Mrs. L. Irving of Culcheth, Warrington was not acknowledged; and if he will make a statement. [54733]

Ms Blears: The National Health Service appointments commission has confirmed that, because of a clerical error, candidates not called for interview for non-executive appointments to Warrington Primary Care Trust have still not been properly informed that they had been unsuccessful. One of the candidates involved was Mrs. L Irving. The chief executive of the appointments commission will shortly be writing a letter of apology to all the candidates involved.

NHS Plan (Newcastle)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what reasons underlay the rejection of the bids from Newcastle Primary Care Trust and the City of Newcastle upon Tyne for support from the NHS Plan intermediate care funds. [53535]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 1 May 2002]:* In November 2001, Department of Health Regional Offices were invited to submit bids against £66 million of capital funding available for intermediate care. Unfortunately, owing to the large number of bids received, it was not possible to fund all the bids from the funding available.

I announced allocation of the "first phase" of £46 million to 80 projects on 6 March 2002. The bid from Newcastle was not included among the bids that could be funded at that time. However, it may be possible to fund further bids as part of a further phase of funding yet to be allocated.

Lymphoedema

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what training doctors receive in the diagnosis and treatment of lymphoedema; and if he will make a statement. [50489]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 April 2002]:* The content and standard of postgraduate medical training for specialist medicine is the responsibility of the United Kingdom competent authority, the specialist training authority (STA). The STA takes advice from the appropriate Royal College, who appreciate the requirements presented by different conditions and develop their training curricula as appropriate. Doctors increasingly recognise that lymphoedema requires skilled management to maximise the quality of life for people with this condition.

Wheelchairs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many adverse incidents involving *(a)* electrically powered and *(b)* manual wheelchairs have been reported to the Medical Devices Agency in each of the past three years; and what steps he is taking to improve (i) the comprehensiveness of such reports and (ii) their utility in identifying and remedying systematic faults. [48818]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 17 April 2002]:* The Medical Devices Agency (MDA) has a specific section that deals with adverse incident reports relating to all wheeled mobility equipment. The numbers of reports received by MDA held on their database relating specifically to manual and powered wheelchairs are as follows:

Year	*Manual*	*Powered*
2001	641	471
2000	624	466
1999	598	374

A specific detailed form has been compiled and is widely available to assist reporters in providing sufficient detail on each adverse incident. The format and layout is regularly reviewed to ensure that changes are made when appropriate. The form is available from the MDA web site.

MDA issue guidance at the beginning of each year on the incident reporting system to provide details on how to report an incident, what other action to take and what action MDA may take following up on the report. The content is reviewed each year to allow updates to be made where necessary. In addition, MDA meet regularly with professional, service, user groups and manufacturers and periodically use these meetings to promote the need for reporting incidents and emphasising the need to provide comprehensive information on the product, its service and usage history as well as details of the incident itself.

To assist in identifying trends of problems with specific equipment, root cause analysis is used on all reports on the MDA database. Any trends found are then investigated and corrective action initiated where necessary.

Press Subscriptions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the magazines and periodicals subscribed to by his Department, stating for each subscription (i) the number of copies taken, and (ii) the annual cost. [52832]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* The Department's library and information service is responsible for central purchasing of magazines and periodicals for library use and for retention by individual units. Suppliers, who have been chosen via competitive tendering every three to five years, are used. New supply contracts were awarded in October 2001, for the supply of newspapers and weekly magazines and for journals.

The Department's regional offices have their own libraries with separate purchasing arrangements, and there are small direct purchases by individual units. Expenditure details for the whole Department are kept on a central system held by the Department's finance division, but do not differentiate between newspapers and magazines/journals.

The approximate total annual cost is £317,000 for about 680 titles and 1,500 copies. Discounts have been included where known.

Anti-TNFa Drugs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice he has issued to strategic health authorities and primary care trusts on *(a)* the implementation timetable for anti-TNFa drugs and *(b)* the implications for budgets. [52253]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* There has been no guidance issued for the implementation of NICE appraisal of anti-TNF drugs. However, on 5 December 2001, the Government announced that it would meet its commitment to ensure that patients receive drugs and treatments recommended by NICE on the national health service if deemed appropriate by their clinicians. Directions have been issued obliging health authorities and primary care trusts to provide appropriate funding for recommended treatments. The overall expected costs of NICE guidance are taken into account when NHS budgets are set.

Non-executive NHS Trust Directors

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the requisite period of notice is for non-executive directors of acute NHS trusts in cases of trust merger. [53131]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 1 May 2002]:* There is no standard period of notice. Non-executive posts on national health service boards are public appointments, not jobs. They are made for a fixed period, normally no longer than four years. Where a trust is dissolved as a result of a merger, non-executive appointments are automatically terminated. Serving board members will normally be aware well in advance of mergers taking place.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who the non-executive directors of each of the strategic health authorities are; and how many and what percentage of the total are members of ethnic minorities. [53132]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 1 May 2002]:* The names of those appointed have been placed in the Library. Of the 155 non-executive board members so far appointed, nine (5.8 per cent.) are from ethnic minorities.

Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the cost has been to date to the Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS trust of the suspension of the transfer of health services between Crawley Hospital and East Surrey Hospital; [51929]

(2) if he will publish the advice given to the south east region NHS Executive by the Surrey and Sussex healthcare NHS trust before his decision to suspend the transfer of services between Crawley and east Surrey hospitals announced on 27 March 2001. [51931]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* As indicated in the written answer given to the hon. Member on 3 April 2001, *Official Report*, volume 366, column 140W, the total cost of maintaining services at both sites was approximately £239,000 up to January 2002 and approximately £53,000 per month thereafter. This would give a total approximate cost of £292,000 up to the end of April 2002. Negotiations on the service and financial

framework for the Surrey and Sussex health authority are still on-going therefore it is not possible, at this time, to give a final confirmation of the total cost.

Information provided to Department officials and the subsequent advice those officials provide to Ministers is confidential.

Wessex Neurological Centre

Mr. Butterfill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he will take to restore operations on the neurosurgical lists of the Wessex Neurological Centre; and if he will make a statement. [54030]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* A clinical governance review by Southampton University Hospitals NHS trust identified the need to strengthen senior anaesthetic cover in the neurosciences intensive care unit at the Wessex Neurological Centre. In the short term this could only be achieved by redeploying anaesthetists from the neuro-operating theatres. This necessitated a temporary reduction in operating time. From 15 April only emergency surgery and urgent cases from the waiting list have been treated. The trust envisages that a full service will resume on 13 May.

The trust is taking action to recruit additional anaesthetists.

Anthrax Vaccine

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what facilities are available in the United Kingdom for anthrax vaccine production; and if it is produced by biotechnological methodologies. [53900]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Anthrax vaccine in the United Kingdom is produced at the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research at Porton Down.

It is produced from the vaccine strain of Bacillus anthracis (known as the Sterne strain) using biotechnological methods, but is not a recombinant product.

Coronary Care

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients who received a bare stent in a percutaneous coronary intervention were readmitted for a repeat re-stent or coronary bypass grafting procedure in the last five years for which figures are available; and what estimate he has made of the total cost to the NHS of such readmissions. [54349]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The Department does not collect the data relating to the number of patients who received a bare stent in a percutaneous coronary intervention and were later readmitted for a repeat re-stent or coronary bypass graft. It is not possible, therefore, to estimate the cost to the national health service of such readmissions.

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if readmission procedures for in-stent restenosis are recorded as separate patient episodes. [54350]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* I can confirm that readmission for in-stent restenosis are recorded as separate patient episodes.

Heart Bypass Operations

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many heart bypass operations have been carried out in the NHS in each of the last 10 years. [53283]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* Patients who need revascularisation may be treated by angioplasty (PTCA) a non-surgical intervention to open arteries that have become blocked, or by coronary artery bypass graft (CABG), a surgical procedure which bypasses blocked arteries. As the technology has improved angioplasty has become the appropriate treatment for an increasing proportion of patients. A table providing data on the number of finished consultant episodes for angioplasty and coronary artery bypass in England for the last 10 years has been placed in the Library.

Information about operations undertaken in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the devolved Administrations.

Diabetes

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what projections were provided by his Department to the Wanless Review Team for *(a)* the prevalence of diabetes in the years to 2010–11 and *(b)* the reduction in the number of people with undiagnosed diabetes by 2010–11; [54653]

(2) what assumptions underlie the Wanless report concerning the relationship between more effective care for diabetes and lower expenditure on coronary heart disease and renal disease; [54650]

(3) what proportion of the cost of implementing the NSF for diabetes, as projected by the Wanless report, is attributable to *(a)* expanded treatment programmes and *(b)* an increase in diagnosed prevalence. [54651]

Jacqui Smith: During the early years of implementation of the diabetes national service framework (NSF) we would expect the majority of available resources to be directed towards improvements in treatment for those people with diabetes who have not received systematic high quality treatment in the past. In subsequent years, the cost of implementing the NSF is likely to be increasingly attributable to the rising prevalence of diabetes and the maintenance of a high quality of care across the patient population.

Optimal blood glucose control and tight blood pressure control are two key interventions in the diabetes NSF. Evidence indicates that these interventions may reduce the rate of certain complications of diabetes, including renal failure and heart attack, which might therefore lead to reduced expenditure on coronary heart disease and renal disease.

The Department provided the following prevalence projections to the Wanless review team for diabetes in England for the years up to 2011:

Year	*Diagnosed prevalence*	*Total patients (million)*
2002	2.63	1.316
2003	2.70	1.355
2004	2.78	1.399
2005	2.87	1.448

Year	Diagnosed prevalence	Total patients (million)
2006	2.97	1.502
2007	3.07	1.561
2008	3.19	1.624
2009	3.31	1.689
2010	3.44	1.759
2011	3.57	1.832

Additionally, officials undertook some sensitivity analysis on the prevalence rates for the Wanless team that focused on different scenarios regarding the size and integration of the undiagnosed diabetes population into the system.

The Wanless report has informed decisions about the overall level of funding that the national health service has received. The Budget provides the highest sustained growth in NHS history, with annual average increases of 7.4 per cent. a year in real terms over the five years 2003–04 to 2007–08. Decisions about the allocation of the increased funding will be announced later this year.

Renal Failure

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the principal causes for the increase in end stage renal failure in the last five years. the Minister of State, Department of Health. [54652]

Jacqui Smith: There is a world-wide increase in end stage renal failure, although the number of new patients in England still falls behind other European countries. The principal causes of end stage renal failure include diabetes and hypertension, and the effects of increasing age. As the incidence of diabetes and hypertension (which are both major risk factors) increase so does the number of people who develop renal complications. People with diabetes make up 16 per cent. of all new patients with end stage renal failure. Additionally people from ethnic minority groups are at greater risk of developing the disease and the number of patients being treated in these groups is rising as the ethnic population ages.

Warrington Primary Care Trust

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many applications were received for the post of Chairman of Warrington PCT from *(a)* Warrington, North constituency and *(b)* Warrington, South constituency; and what percentage of applicants from each constituency were interviewed. [54227]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Ten applications were received, four of which were from candidates living in Warrington, North and six living in Warrington, South. All of the three candidates interviewed lived in Warrington, South.

Ambulances

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received from local authorities on the funding of the ambulance services; and if he will make a statement. [54441]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The Department is not aware of any representations that have been made by local authorities on the funding of the ambulance service.

Building Projects

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the building projects under construction; and what coolant will be used for the building services water chilling system for such projects. [52052]

Ms Blears: A list of building schemes currently under construction and with a total cost of over £2.5 million, including VAT, is given in the table. Information on the coolant used in building services chilled water systems is not collected centrally. However, all refrigerants used in chilled water systems should comply with EC Regulation EC 2037–2000 which came into force on 1 October 2000. The NHS Estates Model Engineering Specification Rev 3 November 1997, MES C10 Refrigerant Plant—General advises the use of refrigerant R134a or 407c and its associated blends, which are ozone friendly.

NHS trust name	Scheme description
University College London Hospitals	Acute rationalisation
The Dudley Group of Hospitals	New DGH
South Tees Acute Hospitals	Single site development/centralisation of acute hospital services
Bromley Hospitals	New DGH
Swindon and Marlborough	New DGH for Swindon
Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital	Reconfiguration of services
Royal Berkshire and Battle Hospitals	Consolidation project
King's Healthcare	New block
West Middlesex University Hospital	Acute rationalisation
St George's Hospital	Neurol Cardiac Unit
South Durham Health Care	Redevelopment of Bishop Auckland General Hospital
Leeds Community and MH Services Teaching	Reprovision of mental health services, High Royds
Royal United Hospital Bath	Royal United Hospital Bath redevelopment
Blackpool Victoria Hospital	Blackpool Victoria Hospital—Phase 5
Berkshire Healthcare	Prospect Park mental health redevelopment
Northumbria Health Care	Redevelopment of Hexham General Hospital
Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh	Royal Albert Edward Infirmary, Phase 4
Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals	Centralisation of acute services
Barnet PCT	Edgware Community Hospital
Bury Healthcare	Fairfield reprovision
Mayday Healthcare	New ward block and day surgery unit
Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals	Maternity and acute development, Hull Royal Infirmary
Isle of Wight Healthcare	Development at St. Mary's, IOW
Southampton University Hospitals	Southampton General—cancer care relocation

NHS trust name	Scheme description
Northumbria Health Care	Phase II Development of Wansbeck GH
Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals	Newcastle strategic review
Surrey Hampshire Borders	Farnham Community Resource Centre
West London Mental Health	Charing Cross Mental Health Unit
West London Mental Health	Security Fencing at Broadmoor
Royston Buntingford and Bishop's Stortford PCT	Herts and Essex Hospital
Luton and Dunstable Hospitals	St. Mary's Wing
Northern Lincolnshire and Goole Hospitals	Women's and Children's and Day Surgery Units
United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust	Façade renovation at Pilgrim Hospital
Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health	Enfield Community Medium Secure Unit
The Royal Wolverhampton Hospitals	Radiology Unit
East London and the City Mental Health	Mental health reprovision
North Staffordshire Hospital	Critical Care/UGMS
Nottinghamshire Healthcare	New entry building at Rampton Hospital
Thames Gateway	Sheppey Community Hospital
Cornwall Healthcare	Bodmin Hospital
Bromley Hospitals	Managed Equipment Service
Central Manchester and Manchester Children's University Hospital	Clinical Science extension
Greenwich Healthcare	Managed Equipment Service
Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals	Hull Royal Infirmary—maternity and acute development
Leicester and Rutland Healthcare	Loughborough Hospital Phase II
Birmingham Heartlands and Solihull	Medical wards development—Phase 2
Nottingham City Hospital	Staff residences
Parkside Healthcare	Kingsbury Hospital Learning Disabilities Reprovision
West London Mental Health	Sports and Visitors Centre at Broadmoor
North Durham Healthcare	Redevelopment of Shotley Bridge Hospital to Community Hospital
Cornwall Healthcare	Liskeard Community Hospital
Newcastle-upon-Tyne Hospitals	Replacement of existing energy centre, RVI
South Durham Health Care	Sedgefield Community Hospital
Queens Medical Centre Nottingham University Hospital	A&E modernisation
Wolverhampton Healthcare	Penn redevelopment
Princess Alexandra Hospital	Staff accommodation
Hammersmith Hospitals	Critical Care Unit
Parkside Healthcare	Paddington Community Hospital Elderly Continuing Care
Parkside Healthcare	Princess Louise Hospital Elderly Continuing Care
Countess of Chester Hospital NHS Trust	Day Case Unit
Mid Devon Primary Care	New Centre for Health, Okehampton
University Hospitals of Leicester	Extensions and alterations to A&E Department
South Downs Health	Mill View Hospital Phase 2
Cornwall Healthcare	Western Mental Health, Cambourne and Redruth
Royal Devon and Exeter	Haematology Unit
Bexley PCT	Erith Health Centre
Luton and Dunstable Hospitals	Out-patient Department
Local Health Partnerships	Mental health unit
Poole Hospitals	Refurbishment of operating theatres
Whittington Hospital	Whittington Hospital—enabling works
University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire	Walsgrave Hospital—Radiotherapy Department
Worthing and Southlands Hospitals	Catering Service
North West London Hospitals	ACAD Equipment
Trafford Healthcare NHS Trust	Re-development of surgical facilities
Mid-Sussex	Residential accommodation
West London Mental Health	Security scheme at Broadmoor
Royal Orthopaedic Hospital	Radiology Department

Value for Money

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list, in percentage terms, the value for money changes in the operation of his Department in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [52275]

Ms Blears: The 1998 public service agreement set targets for efficiency and other value for money gains in departmental operations for 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02. Information about progress on meeting this PSA target was published in the Department's 2001 departmental report, a copy of which is in the Library. This recorded that we were on course to deliver the target.

NHS Prescriptions

Angela Watkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was *(a)* the income from those NHS prescriptions which are paid for and *(b)* the cost of administering free NHS prescriptions during the last year for which figures are available. [52590]

Ms Blears: Income from prescription charges in 2000–01 in respect of prescriptions written by general practitioners and dispensed in the community in England, was £389 million. Income from charges collected by national health service trusts is not separately identifiable.

These costs are not identified separately within the administrative costs of the Department and NHS bodies in England.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 9 May 2002

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Correspondence

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the average response time was for responding to departmental correspondence; what percentage of letters took longer than one month for a response; and what percentage took longer than three months for a response in each of the last five years. [37442]

Mr. Morley: Our Minister's correspondence database does not record details of response times and percentages of response times for the last five years. We can only provide this information for letters answered for the period since the formation of DEFRA on 8 June 2001 to 31 March 2002.

The DEFRA service target is 15 working days.

Letters answered from 8 June 2001 to 31 March 2002

Mean response time was 48.14 working days

Percentage of letters that took longer than one month for a response: 64.58

Percentage of letters that took longer than three months for a response: 24.18.

The Department suffered severe disruption last year due to allocating top priority to defeating the foot and mouth epidemic. Furthermore the sheer volume of correspondence received following the creation of DEFRA had a major impact on the Department's performance, resulting in a large backlog of letters. We have devoted more resources to clearing the backlog and we are making progress in improving response times.

Rio Earth Summit (Implementation)

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which members of *(a)* her Department and *(b)* the Government are planning to attend the Rio+10 Summit in Johannesburg in 2002; and on what dates these individuals are expected to be in attendance. [44358]

Mr. Meacher: The final decision on the make-up of the delegation to the summit will rest with the Prime Minister nearer the time. However, both the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will attend the summit. We are keen to ensure that all three pillars of sustainable development are represented in the ministerial element of the delegation.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps have been taken by the Government since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 to *(a)* set goals on environmental protection and *(b)* improve eco-efficiency and resource productivity relating to mountain issues; and what these (i) goals and (ii) improvements have been. [44343]

Mr. Meacher: The majority of the montane area in the UK occurs in Scotland. Although montane habitats are very scarce in England there are 33 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) with an estimated 26,000 ha of land above 600 m. Several of these are also Natura 2000 sites designated in accordance with the EC wild birds and habitats directives.

In addition to protection measures afforded by notification as special sites (SSSIs, Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas), actions in hand include the establishment of six upland habitat action plans under the UK biodiversity action plan.

In England the hill farm allowance (HFA) was introduced in 2001 to provide support to beef and sheep producers in the less favoured areas in recognition of the difficulties they face and the vital role they play in maintaining the landscape and rural communities of the hills. Similar schemes operate in the devolved Administrations. HFA is linked to sustainable farming practices, forms part of the wider rural development programme and is WTO compatible.

Sellafield

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much technetium has been discharged from Sellafield in each year since 1992. [53650]

Margaret Beckett: Annual discharges of technetium-99 to sea from BNFL Sellafield since 1992 were as follows:

Year	*Discharge in terabecquerels (TBq)*
1992	3.2
1993	6.1
1994	75
1995	190
1996	150
1997	84
1998	53
1999	69
2000	44
2001	79

Meat Imports

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what percentage of meat imports were subject to random checks in the last 12 months. [53702]

Mr. Morley: All commercial consignments of meat from third countries are required to be presented to border inspection posts where they undergo 100 per cent. documentary and identity checks. Physical checks are undertaken on a minimum of 50 per cent. of consignments of poultry and game meat, with a minimum level of 20 per cent. on other meats.

In addition HM Customs and Excise have also participated with local and port health authorities in targeted exercises on air passengers and deal with meat found in baggage in contravention of our imports rules as part of their normal controls. In cargo, meat found in

Customs examinations which was not declared in freight would be drawn to the attention of the local and port health authorities.

Chernobyl

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what research projects are continuing on the environmental impact of Chernobyl on the United Kingdom. [54171]

Mr. Meacher: There are no current research projects on the environmental impact of Chernobyl on the United Kingdom. A great deal of work has been done in the past to understand and ameliorate the effects of radiocaesium on the environment and the food chain. The Food Standards Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs continue to monitor the effects of the radioactive fallout from Chernobyl in sheep and fresh water fish. Details of the latest monitoring results can be obtained from the Food Standards Agency's annual report "Radioactivity in Food and the Environment".

Egg Labelling Directive

Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received from small producers on the implementation of the European Directive on the Compulsory Labelling of Eggs. [54161]

Mr. Morley: Comments were received from the main representative bodies and two producers during the negotiations on the proposal to amend Council Regulation (EEC) No 1274/91.

Rural Awareness

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) when her Department will have rural proofing embedded in policy-making procedures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, Rural Proofing in 2001–02; [54429]

(2) when her Department will implement proofing and checklist measures as part of overall rural proofing measures set out in the Countryside Agency's report, Rural Proofing in 2001–02. [54434]

Alun Michael: The Government have made a firm commitment to rural proof all relevant policies and for performance to be monitored independently by the Countryside Agency. This innovative approach—described as "courageous" by the agency's chairman Ewen Cameron, when his first report was published on 11 April this year—applies across Government and to agencies and other Government bodies.

The first report concludes that a great deal has been achieved since this approach was proposed in the Rural White Paper in November 2000, but that much more needs to be done to make rural proofing fully effective. The report sets out details of the checklist devised by the Countryside Agency as an appendix.

Following the decision to implement the strong rural agenda set out in the White Paper, a number of other changes have taken place. In June 2001, the new Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs came into being. For the first time, there is a Minister of State for Rural Affairs and a director general within DEFRA backed by a team with a clear focus on rural social and economic issues and on implementation of the Rural White Paper. A Cabinet sub-committee, chaired by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has a specific focus on rural affairs. The Minister of State for Rural Affairs has met Ministerial colleagues across Government to discuss the challenges of delivering services in rural areas.

The implementation of rural proofing is a process across Government. Responsibility lies with each individual Department but DEFRA and the Countryside Agency are working together to develop rural-proofing strategies and to rural proof individual policies.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when her Department will introduce measures to raise rural awareness through staff *(a)* training, *(b)* development and *(c)* secondments as part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, Rural Proofing in 2001–02. [54417]

Alun Michael: The Government have made a firm commitment to rural proof all relevant policies and for performance to be monitored independently by the Countryside Agency. This innovative approach—described as "courageous" by the agency's chairman, Ewen Cameron when his first report was published on 11 April this year—applies across Government and to agencies and other Government bodies.

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Each Government Department has put in place arrangements to respond to the requirements of rural proofing and the Treasury, for instance, has a secondee from the Countryside Agency working with their officials on rural proofing work. Rural proofing is also one of the forms of policy assessment that the Centre for Management and Policy Studies in the Cabinet Office introduces as appropriate during its training for civil servants on policy making.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when her Department will establish rural targets and monitoring as

part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report "Rural Proofing in 2001–02". [54424]

Alun Michael: The Government have made a firm commitment to rural proof all relevant policies and for performance to be monitored independently by the Countryside Agency. This innovative approach—described as "courageous" by the agency's chairman, Ewen Cameron, when his first report was published on 11 April this year—applies across Government and to agencies and other Government bodies.

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The Rural Services Standard, as set out in the Rural White Paper (Our Countryside: the future (Cm4909)) sets targets for the individual services delivered by Government. It is monitored for DEFRA by the Countryside Agency, and its content is currently being reviewed. Some individual Departments also have their own rural targets within their public service or service delivery agreements. Proposed public service agreement targets for 2003–04 and beyond are under discussion as part of the current Spending Review.

As the agency's annual report recommends, the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Rural Renewal will review progress in the autumn, and take a close and continuing interest in the subject generally. The Countryside Agency will report again next year on progress with rural proofing, so there is a regular external monitoring and evaluation process.

Waste Composting

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent research her Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the various potential uses of compost produced from household waste. [54588]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have set up and are funding the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to promote sustainable waste management by working to create stable and efficient markets for recycled materials and products and removing barriers to waste minimisation, re-use and recycling. Part of this work is to tackle issues relating to composting waste. Currently WRAP is working with the Composting Association to develop the existing industry standard for compost, to achieve British Standards Institute (BSI) accreditation. The delivery of these industry standards for compost will help to create markets for organic waste derived products.

Pets

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the cost to local authorities of dealing with stray dogs in the last 12 months. [54693]

Mr. Meacher: This information is not collected centrally. The most recent information on the cost to local authorities of dealing with stray dogs dates from a 1997 MORI poll. The assessment of cost to local authorities then was £11.3 million per year.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many people have been taken on by the State Veterinary Service since the end of the foot and mouth outbreak; and how this has affected the establishment figure. [54519]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* FMD related work still continues, however, for the purpose of my response, figures have been calculated from 22 January 2002. This is when FMD status (without vaccination), for the purpose of international trade was restored by the OIE.

At the start of the outbreak a total figure of 1,064.4 veterinary, technical and support staff were employed by the field service element of the State Veterinary Service (SVS), compared with 1,247.66 at the end of January 2002. This indicates an increase of 183.26.

A high proportion of this increase relates to the creation of an enhanced personnel and IT unit, the creation of the National Scrapie Administration Centre at Worcester along with recruitment of fixed term veterinary appointees and other staff at most levels.

WEEE Directive

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps her Department is taking to encourage the development of a market for recovered waste electrical and electronic equipment. [54553]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

Markets already exist for a range of waste electrical equipment such as mobile telephones and large household appliances where there is a high metal or precious metal content. The Government are encouraging the development of new recyclate markets through the not-for-profit company the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP). WRAP is jointly funded by the DEFRA, DTI and the devolved Administrations. The budget for the three years commencing 1 April 2001 is £40 million.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the statistics for waste recovery in the United Kingdom for the categories of WEEE as outlined in Annexe I of the common position on WEEE (2000/0158(COD), Doc 11304/1/01 + ADD1). [54554]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

In the UK, waste electrical equipment is not currently separated into the categories defined in the draft WEEE Directive. These statistics are not therefore available. To establish current recovery rates for a selection of individual products DTI has commissioned work from PriceWaterhouseCoopers. This can be viewed on the departmental website.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what consultations she has had with producer and sectoral groups about the practical implications and likely cost of compliance with the EU WEEE directive; and if she will make a statement. [54558]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

DTI carried out a formal consultation on the Commission's proposal in autumn 2000. There were 70 responses representing over 340,000 organisations. A summary of the results was published on the website. There has been a regular on-going dialogue with stakeholders from all sectors. A new partial regulatory impact assessment that considers costs in detail was placed on to the DTI website in April 2002. Over 700 organisations, including major trade associations and local authorities were alerted to this by letter this month. A small business consultation group and informal retailer group have also been established.

A series of over 20 information seminars are planned across the UK over the next four to five months.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if her Department intends to make use of the optional five-year exemption for SMEs from the provisions of the EU WEEE directive relating to producer responsibility. [54556]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

The Common Position text allows member states the option of exempting SME manufacturers from the financing requirements of Articles 7 and 8 for a period of up to 30 months after the commencement of this obligation for other producers. The Government support this flexibility and will wish to take up this opportunity to exempt SME manufacturers if this is permitted under the directive finally adopted and if practicable within the implementing legislation developed.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the derogations granted to Greece and Ireland in Article 15.4(a) of the Common Position on WEEE (2000/0158(COD), Doc 11304/1/01+ ADD1). [54560]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

The Common Position text would allow Greece or Ireland up to a further 24 months in which to reach the recovery and recycling targets set out in Article 6 and the collection target specified in Article 4. They are required to notify the Commission of their intention to use these derogations by the time required for completion of the transposition process.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what strategies her Department intends to adopt to communicate to the public the need to sort and recover WEEE. [54555]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

These will be considered alongside the development of implementing legislation and are a requirement of the draft directive.

Affordable Housing

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to increase the uptake of affordable housing in rural areas by key sector workers; and if she will make a statement. [54816]

Ms Keeble: Our overall strategy is: to ensure that the housing needs of people in rural area, including key workers, are properly identified; to increase investment in new social housing; to maximise delivery of affordable housing through the planning system; and to make the best use of existing property. We expect to deliver around 9,000 affordable homes annually in rural areas by 2003–04 through these measures as announced in the Rural White Paper. This should provide greater opportunities for key workers in rural areas where local authorities have identified affordable key worker housing as a priority need.

Our Starter Home Initiative (SHI) is specifically helping key workers in England to buy a home in urban and rural areas where the high cost of housing is undermining recruitment and retention. £230 million SHI funding was allocated to local scheme providers in September 2001, including some £8.7 million to help around 360 key workers to buy homes in rural settlements with a population of 3,000 or less. We expect to announce the allocation of a further £20 million SHI funding to successful bidders later this month.

Energy Conservation

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what assessment she has made of the impact on carbon dioxide emissions of the exemption from the climate change levy of electricity from combined heat and power plants sold through licensed electricity suppliers; [53734]

(2) what assessment she has made of the impact on the total level of generation from combined heat and power sold through licensed electricity suppliers of its exemption from the climate change levy. [53733]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

Granting Good Quality Combined Heat and Power (GQCHP) a full exemption from the Climate Change Levy (CCL) will encourage the use of this energy-efficient technology, and support the achievement of the Government's target of at least 10 gigawatts (GW_e) of GQCHP by 2010. GQCHP achieves a 25 to 35 per cent. reduction in primary energy use relative to traditional forms of electricity generation, and therefore produces less carbon emissions per GW_e. The amount of carbon saved depends on which technologies and fuels are displaced by GQCHP.

The DTI and DEFRA are assessing the economic and environmental potential of GQCHP under various energy price and policy scenarios, including the full exemption from CCL. This work will be published shortly, alongside the Government's CHP Strategy.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures her Department has taken since 1997 to encourage energy efficiency in *(a)* the domestic sector, *(b)* the commercial sector, *(c)* the industrial sector and *(d)* the public sector; and how much Government financial support has been made available. [50435]

Mr. Wilson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on 8 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 155W.

Business Links

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate she has made of the productivity and profitability of *(a)* businesses assisted by business links (i) in the Milton Keynes, Oxford and Buckinghamshire area and (ii) nationally and *(b)* businesses not assisted by business links in the latest year for which figures are available. [51391]

Nigel Griffiths: Business link operators are required to submit data on those clients receiving the most intensive level of support in order to track changes in their growth and performance.

(a) (i) 7,000 individual business have been assisted by business link Milton Keynes, Oxford and Buckinghamshire, helping on average almost 700 people per quarter interested in or thinking about starting a business in 2001–02.

(a) (ii) Among small businesses with between 10 and 49 employees assisted by business link nationally the average productivity increase was 19 per cent.

(b) Among small businesses not assisted by BL, but which were otherwise similar, the average productivity increase was 15 per cent.

Electricity Industry

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations have been *(a)* sought and *(b)* received from the Scottish Executive on new UK-wide electricity trading arrangements. [52903]

Mr. Wilson: I have been in close contact with colleagues in the Scottish Executive and they fully support moves to create a British electricity trading and transmission market. The project is being taken forward with the full involvement of the Scottish Executive who are represented at my regular meetings with the industry in this issue. Scottish Executive officials also attend the monthly steering group.

Energy Industry

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the impact on the total level of generation of electricity from coal mine methane sold via licensed electricity suppliers of its exemption from the climate change levy. [53731]

Mr. Wilson: The Government do not have their own estimate for the extra sites which would be developed as a result of the CCL exemption, but the Association of Coal Mine Methane Operators has estimated that around 30 new sites could be made viable as a result. It is for the operators to respond to the incentive that has been provided, but if all the association projects went ahead this would add something in the region of 175 MW of electricity generating capacity with the electricity produced per annum totalling about 1.4 terawatt hours.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the impact on carbon dioxide emissions of the exemption from the climate change levy of electricity from electricity from coal mine methane sold via licensed electricity suppliers. [53732]

Mr. Wilson: Using methane from abandoned mines will reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the atmosphere and therefore has a significant environmental benefit. The scale of the environmental benefit cannot be precisely quantified at present, because the effect of pumping the gas leads to some acceleration in the extraction rate beyond the level of natural leakage from abandoned mines. Work is in hand to inform these estimates.

Small Businesses

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assistance the Government have provided since 1997 to small businesses starting up. [54193]

Nigel Griffiths: Creating new businesses is important to achieving a vibrant economy. The Government are committed to creating an environment that encourages more people to think about setting up a business, and to provide them with easy access to the information and support available that will help them to be successful and grow. Since 1997 the Government have introduced through the Small Business Service (SBS) a range of measures to assist small businesses to start up including:

At the heart of the SBS is the Information and Advisory Service, which provides start-ups and other small businesses with access to information and advice on a wide range of business topics. This is focused at a local level through the SBS's business link operators (BLOs), which provide tailored high quality business support to meet the needs of all small businesses in their areas. Each BLO is required to provide a local service for pre start-ups and start-ups brokering specific help when appropriate from local partners;

People thinking of starting in business or who are already trading have easy access to information about all aspects of starting and running a business from the business link website (www.businesslink.org) and National Contact Centre (0845 600 9006).

The Business Volunteer Mentoring (BVMA initiative) provides mentoring advice to pre and early start-up businesses from a core of volunteers (retired or otherwise) drawn from all sections of the business community. With support from the SBS, the National Federation of Enterprise Agencies, is overseeing the co-ordination of the initiative for delivery at local level through local enterprise agencies and other business link local partners. There are currently approximately 900 volunteers operating within the BVMA initiative.

High Growth Start-up (HGSUs)—a high-quality advice service to pre-start and start-up businesses in England who are identified as having high growth potential. The service is part of the start-ups services delivered locally via business link operators in England. Support is being provided, across a variety of business sectors, to people who are traditionally considered to face barriers in starting

and growing a business including women, ethnic minorities and young entrepreneurs. Around 7,000 pre and early start businesses have been assisted since October 1999.

The £75 million SBS Business Incubation Fund opened for business on 1 October 2001; the fund is providing loans to developers of business incubators to help those starting up in business and early stage SMEs to survive and grow.

96 projects supported by £30 million from the Development Fund element of the Phoenix Fund, bringing enterprise projects to disadvantaged areas and groups.

However the Government are committed to continue finding ways of increasing the numbers of new businesses, and of helping them to be successful and grow. In response to the joint Treasury/DTI paper "Productivity in the UK", which was published on 16 June 2001, the SBS is currently consulting on developing a comprehensive strategy for supporting business start-ups. A consultation document was published on 6 May 2002, setting out some concrete proposals and recommendations for areas where further work is considered necessary. The consultation period will run until 31 July 2002.

Coal Health Claims

Rachel Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much has been paid by her Department in coal health claims for *(a)* occupational respiratory disease and *(b)* vibration white finger in fees and other charges to (i) her Department's legal advisers and counsel, (ii) her Department's claim handlers, (iii) the medical service providers (A) Healthcall Ltd. and (B) SEMA, (iv) external and seconded consultants, (v) other contractors and (vi) claimants' solicitors, in the period up to 31 December 1997 and in each subsequent year. [54839]

Mr. Wilson: The Department is unable to provide figures relating to contractors' fees, as the details of these payments remain commercially confidential.

Figures for the period prior to 1 April 1999 are not available in time allowed. However, from 1 April 1999 to 31 December 2001 the Department has paid out the following on administrative costs (medical, records collection, defendant legal and claims handling costs) broken down by financial year and scheme:

£ million

Financial Year	*Respiratory disease*	*Vibration white finger*
1999–2000	4.6	1.1
2000–01	19	8.4
April to December 2001	43.8	5.6
Total from April 1999 to December 2001	67.4	15.1

The cost of administrative expenses for the Department on this work cannot be separately identified.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she will make her decision regarding ECGD support for United Kingdom commercial interests in the proposed Bo NoK power plant in Thailand; and which companies have expressed an interest to her Department. [55058]

Ms Hewitt: ECGD has not received a formal application in respect of Bo Nok power project. However, an initial inquiry was received over a year ago. The identity of the UK company involved is commercially confidential and, in line with ECGD's normal policy relating to discussions prior to issue of guarantees, cannot be disclosed.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which UK companies the ECGD is supporting in connection with *(a)* the Sual coal plant in the Philippines and *(b)* its associated transmission networks. [55061]

Ms Hewitt: ECGD supported Alstom Power Plants Ltd. (then GEC ALSTHOM Power Plants Ltd.) and Alstom Power Plants Services Ltd. (then GEC ALSTHOM Turbine Generators Ltd.) in relation to the Sual coal plant. ECGD did not provide any support for the associated transmission networks.

DEFENCE

Defence Estates Agency

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Defence Estates Agency for financial year 2002–03. [55841]

Dr. Moonie: As detailed in the Defence Estates Corporate Plan 2002–07, the following key targets have been set for the agency.

Key Target 1:

Disposal Receipts—to accrue gross disposal receipts of at least £185 million.

Key Target 2:

Prime Contracting—to award the initial Regional Prime Contract for Scotland.

Key Target 3:

Project SLAM—to award the contract by 30 September 2002.

Key Target 4:

Project Aquatrine—to award the contract for Package A.

Key Target 5:

Estate Strategy Core Sites process—to have a proposed set of categorised core sites ready for publication to TLBs by 31 December 2002.

Copies of the new Defence Estates Corporate Plan will be placed in the Library of the House.

Retirement Ages

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department introduced a normal retirement age of 60 years for senior and professional technology officers; whether his Department has completed its review of its age retirement policy; and if he will make a statement. [55023]

Dr. Moonie: The normal retirement age for senior professional and technology officers, and a number of other grades, was changed from 65 to 60 in 1992 as one of the measures needed to manage the "Options for Change" reduction in the size of the Ministry of Defence's civilian work force which became possible following the end of the cold war.

The MOD has completed its further review of age retirement policy. The conclusions are being considered and we shall make an announcement about them as soon as we can.

West Freugh

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many military aircraft movements have taken place at the West Freugh new DEFRA facility in Wigtownshire in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [55106]

Dr. Moonie: I have taken the question to refer to the Defence Evaluation Research Agency at West Freugh. DERA was, as previously announced, subsumed in QinetiQ and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory in July 2001. The number of military aircraft movements that took place at West Freugh in each of the last 10 years, is listed. These figures do not include overflights or range runs.

	Number
1992	'—
1993	3,868
1994	1,666
1995	5,253
1996	4,501
1997	5,946
1998	4,636
1999	7,236
2000	5,976
2001	3,861

' Not available

Our records are not in a form that readily enables provision of the figures as far back as 1992. I will write to the hon. Member following further analysis of the available data to see what information can be provided and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Debt

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the lending policies of *(a)* the World Bank, *(b)* the IDA, *(c)* the Asian Development Bank and *(d)* the EBRD. [53623]

Clare Short: The multilateral development banks make a unique contribution to international development and poverty reduction. Each of these institutions have different, complementary lending policies. Further details of these are publicly available through the following websites: www.worldbank.org (for World Bank and IDA); ww.adb.org; and www.ebrd.com.

My Department has published institutional strategy papers for the multilateral development banks which set out how the UK Government can work in partnership with each of these institutions to maximise the effectiveness of our combined development efforts (available www.dfid.gov.uk or through our public inquiry point, tel. 01355 843132). These papers outline our views on the effectiveness of these institutions and how we intend to ensure that their lending contributes to poverty elimination.

Tanzania

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her Department last discussed the political situation in Tanzania with *(a)* the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *(b)* the Department for Trade and Industry and *(c)* the Ministry of Defence; and what was discussed. [54262]

Clare Short: DFID maintains a regular dialogue with other Government Departments on all aspects of our work.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the Government of Tanzania regarding the purposes of the air defence system recently purchased by the Tanzanian Government. [54255]

Clare Short: We have had various discussions with the Government of Tanzania regarding the proposed air traffic control system. The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) is currently undertaking a review of Tanzania's civil aviation requirements and will report to the World Bank and Government of Tanzania.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to promote good governance in Tanzania. [54261]

Clare Short: Governance is a core element of the DFID programme in Tanzania, which supports the Government of Tanzania's Poverty Reduction Strategy. DFID supports several programmes aimed at improving governance. Some of these are with the Government of Tanzania and include financial management reform and financial accountability, decentralisation through local government reform, public service reform and civic education. We are also working with civil society at local and national levels, disseminating information and supporting networks for advocacy and lobbying.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact of her decision to withhold aid from Tanzania; and when she expects aid to resume. [54254]

Clare Short: In October 2001 DFID provided £35 million budget support to Tanzania. We have delayed disbursement of the next tranche of £10 million budget support pending the Government of Tanzania's response to the review of the country's civil aviation requirements. The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) has been in Tanzania to undertake this review and will report to the World Bank and Government of Tanzania.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with the Government of Tanzania regarding the peace process in the DRC. [54256]

Clare Short: I have not had discussions recently with the Tanzanian Government regarding the peace process in the DRC, but my Department and the FCO maintain a regular dialogue with the Tanzanian Government on all regional issues including the Great Lakes. We have encouraged them in their attempts to bring the Burundian

rebels to agree a ceasefire and join the political process under the Arusha Peace Accords, and have offered to help with the costs of these meetings. We have encouraged them to continue to link their efforts in this regard to those of the Burundian peace facilitation team under Vice-President Zuma of South Africa and President Bongo of Gabon, to whose team we are giving technical support. We are also in close touch with the Governments of Tanzania and Burundi, and with UNHCR, on resolving the question of the large number of Burundian refugees still in refugee camps in Tanzania.

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 24 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 1002, on Tanzania, what further information she has collated on the impact of the purchase of an air traffic control system on the sustainability of Tanzania's debt servicing obligations and the achievement of anti-poverty targets. [54842]

Clare Short: The Government of Tanzania agreed with the World Bank to review its civil aviation requirements in consultation with the International Civil Aviation Organisation. The ICAO has been in Tanzania to undertake this review and will report to the World Bank and Government of Tanzania. It is not possible to determine the impact of the purchase of an air traffic control system until the ICAO report is issued and the Government of Tanzania and the World Bank have considered it.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with the Government of Tanzania regarding good government in Zimbabwe. [54258]

Clare Short: Neither my Department nor I have had discussions with the Government of Tanzania regarding good government in Zimbabwe.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of business links between Tanzania and Zimbabwe and their impact on *(a)* political stability and *(b)* international development. [54253]

Clare Short: I have made no recent assessment of the business links between Tanzania and Zimbabwe but the Zimbabwe crisis is impacting on the region.

United Nations Population Fund

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much was given by the EU to the UN population fund in each of the last 10 years. [54481]

Clare Short: This information is not readily available and to obtain it would involve disproportionate cost.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the policy of the UN population fund with respect to the Chinese one child policy. [54482]

Clare Short: Like the Government, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) does not support China's one child policy. The objective of UNFPA's programme in China is to demonstrate that a voluntary, non-coercive approach to family planning can be effective in promoting sustainable population growth. UNFPA report that birth quotas and targets have been abolished, and abortion rates have fallen in the areas of China where UNFPA is working.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what oversight and scrutiny her officials have over the funding of the UN population fund; and if she will make a statement. [54485]

Clare Short: My Department's level of funding for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is based on an assessment of its performance in contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals—particularly those relating to HIV/AIDS, maternal and child health—and other international development targets. Our assessment of UNFPA's performance is based on regular feedback from DFID's offices in developing countries, and on studies by external evaluation experts. In addition, the UK (DFID) is a member of UNFPA's executive board which carefully scrutinises the fund's activities and performance.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the level of funding made available to the United Nations population fund in *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1984, *(c)* 1988, *(d)* 1992 and *(e)* 2000. [54480]

Clare Short: The UK's contributions to the United Nations population fund (UNFPA) in the years referred to were:

(a) £2 million
(b) £3 million
(c) £2.625 million
(d) £9 million
(e) £15.05 million.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what funds are being made available by *(a)* the United Nations Fund for Population Activities and *(b)* the International Parenthood Federation to fund population control in Peru. [54483]

Clare Short: Neither the United Nations population fund (UNFPA) or the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) support population control programmes in Peru or elsewhere.

In 2002, UNFPA's US$1.4 million programme in Peru is supporting action to reduce maternal mortality and to improve access to reproductive health information and care for young people. IPPF's US$246,716 programme in 2002 is supporting the promotion of a range of quality and affordable sexual and reproductive health services and information for poor people, including improving access to modern methods of contraception and support to combat gender-based violence.

Great Lakes Region

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she last discussed political security in the Great Lakes region of Africa with the UN. [54257]

Clare Short: I am in frequent contact with the UN about the security problems of the Great Lakes region and the means of ending the conflict there. I spoke to the

Secretary General again this last weekend when we usefully were able to talk through a broad range of current issues on the Great Lakes.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the peace process in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with respect to *(a)* Tanzania and *(b)* Zimbabwe. [54259]

Clare Short: The peace process in the DRC falls within the framework of the 1999 Lusaka Peace Agreement to which Tanzania was not a signatory. However Tanzania is clearly interested in the stability of the Great Lakes region as a whole, particularly in relation to Burundi because of the large number of Burundian refugees currently in camps in Tanzania. The Tanzanian Government are active in seeking to persuade the Burundian rebel groups to agree a ceasefire with the Burundian Government. We continue to press for a full and inclusive settlement to the DRC conflict within the framework of the Lusaka Agreement, which inter alia provides for the withdrawal of all foreign forces in the DRC including those of Zimbabwe.

Pacific Regional Programme

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the total value was of aid and assistance given to her Department's regional programme in the Pacific in each of the last five years. [54465]

Clare Short: Funding to the Pacific provided through DFID's bilateral programme and through multilateral agencies, especially the EU, World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the UN is as follows:

DFID bilateral programme

Financial year	*£ million*
1996–97	8.552
1997–98	5.765
1998–99	4.941
1999–2000	4.193
2000–01	3.831

£ million

Calendar year	*EC*	*World bank*	*UN*	*Others*
1996	3.8	0.1	0.7	1.1
1997	6.0	0.1	0.7	1.4
1998	6.1	0.1	0.6	3.2
1999	0.9	0	0.7	0
2000	7.0	0.1	1.0	2.0

Note:
Multilateral agencies (these are UK multilateral shares—'Others' includes the Asian Development Bank for which separate figures are not available)

Malawi

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much food aid *(a)* her Department and *(b)* the EU has provided to Malawi in the last six months. [54252]

Clare Short: Since January, my Department has spent £4.6 million on direct food relief in Malawi. In addition, DFID approved £1.2 million on 26 April to help raise domestic food production over the winter season. The latter is expected to yield 75,000 metric tonnes of maize by September.

The EC has provided £0.3 million in direct food relief.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what further help she will give to Malawi to alleviate its famine. [55001]

Clare Short: Since January, we have spent £4.6 million on direct food relief in Malawi. At the end of April we released a further £1.2 million to help raise domestic food production over the winter season (expected to yield 75,000 metric tonnes of maize by September). A much larger programme to boost domestic food production, and timed to coincide with November rains, is in preparation.

We have also worked hard with other donors to help the Government of Malawi to develop a long-term national food security strategy. A working group made up of donors, government, civil society and the private sector is urgently considering how to improve food production, storage and marketing, all with the aims of preventing a recurrence of the current crisis.

Women's Organisations

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the women's organisations which have been consulted over the proposed legislation by her Department during the *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02 Sessions; and if their responses have been published. [54831]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development has undertaken no public consultation over proposed legislation.

Equal Treatment

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment; and what progress has been made. [54829]

Clare Short: DFID is committed to a policy of equal treatment. In relation to DFID's role as an employer, we have adopted a Diversity Action Plan, put in place staff consultative groups to assist in promoting diversity in the Department, undertaken equality-proofing of our pay and appraisal systems, implemented positive action measures in the form of a bursary scheme for staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, and have published targets for improving representativeness of our staffing in respect of race, gender and disability. We are implementing diversity training as part of our management development programmes, have adopted a requirement for all senior staff to have a diversity component in their personal objectives, and have continued to insist on the application of an equal opportunities policy in respect of a wide range of other criteria (including age and sexual orientation) in all aspects of our employment policies.

These initiatives, which represent only the key measures in a wide range of on-going actions on equal treatment, will be monitored and reported on in our 2002 departmental report and other systems including the Department's Service Delivery Agreement. It is not easily possible to summarise progress to date in terms of the impact of these initiatives. But the policy is one of continuous improvement and in October (in advance of the operative date of the EU equal treatment directive) the Department expects to implement a new personnel database system which will provide important baseline data against which overall progress can be measured in more quantitative terms thereafter.

In terms of our work to eliminate poverty, we work through our programmes and at the international level to address discrimination in legislation, policies and society so that excluded people have more control over their lives. Our work in this regard is set out in our strategy papers: "Realising Human Rights for poor people" and "Poverty elimination and the empowerment of women". These are available at www.dfid.gov.uk or through our public inquiry point, tel. 01355 843132. The empowerment of women is an essential precondition for the elimination of world poverty. This goal is recognised in the internationally agreed set of development targets which provide the core framework for DFID's programme. Related to these, we have a number of gender equity targets in our Public Service Agreement. Progress against these is set out in our 2002 departmental report.

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what new data series separated by gender, race, disability and age have been commissioned by her Department since August 1997. [54830]

Clare Short: DFID does not maintain any central record of data series in respect of its programme activities. As an employer, DFID maintains and analyses for internal purposes a range of human resources data on its staff, including gender, ethnic origin, disability and age. Since August 1997 this has been expanded to include analysis of our staff appraisal and promotion systems by, among other things, gender, ethnic origin, disability and age. The principal indicators, such as staff in post, are contained in DFID's departmental report 2002, a copy of which can be found in the House of Commons Library.

Implementation Group

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the Implementation Group meeting in Kabul on 10 and 11 April. [54597]

Clare Short: The first meeting of the Implementation Group for Afghanistan's Reconstruction took place in Kabul on 10 and 11 April, hosted by the Afghan Interim Administration (AIA). The Afghan Finance Minister chaired the meeting, and discussions centred on presentations of the recurrent budget of the AIA, the draft National Development Framework, and the establishment of practical aid co-ordination mechanisms between donors and the AIA. My Department was represented by senior officials.

Humanitarian Assistance (Middle East)

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what plans her Department has for providing *(a)* water, *(b)* food and *(c)* medication to the Palestinian civilian population once access to the whole of the West Bank can be secured; and if she will make a statement; [55159]

(2) what medical supplies her Department has *(a)* pledged and *(b)* delivered to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society since 1 April; and if she will make a statement; [55161]

(3) how much money her Department has *(a)* pledged and *(b)* given to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society for the purchase of ambulances and medical supplies since 1 April; and if she will make a statement; [55163]

(4) what assistance her Department has provided the Palestinian Red Crescent Society since 1 April; and if she will make a statement. [55162]

Clare Short: We are working closely with our development partners to try to determine the full extent of the damage and the humanitarian consequences and priority needs arising from the current conflict. It is important that assistance is fully co-ordinated.

Our bilateral assistance programme is planned at £12 million this year. This includes support, through local NGOs for a number of emergency programmes in health, trauma counselling and special education needs which have been able to respond to the intensified crisis. We have also disbursed £12 million of our annual contribution to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees' General Fund, and made a £5 million contribution to UNRWA's 2002 Emergency Appeal. We are providing direct assistance to help set up a Humanitarian Information Centre and have provided £500,000 to the World Food Programme for emergency needs. We are discussing with UNRWA further support to help clear and rebuild Jenin refugee camp. In addition we contribute substantially through our share of EC and World bank activities. We have not provided any direct support to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society since 1 April.

We are monitoring the situation closely and aim to continue to respond appropriately.

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what reports she has received on the status of the Save the Children Fund water and sanitation projects in *(a)* Dura, *(b)* Anabta, *(c)* Jabalia and *(d)* Rafah; what the impact of the current campaign of the Israeli Defence Force has been (i) on the operation of the projects and (ii) on the piped water supplies, sewerage pipes and drains associated with them; and if she will make a statement. [55160]

Clare Short: Save the Children Fund reports continued steady progress and expects to meet the overall objectives on time. The projects are leading to improvements in both the quality and quantity of water for household consumption, and better sanitary standards as the majority of homes are connected to new sewage networks. The continued conflict and closures has inevitably had an impact on the project communities where homes and infrastructure have been damaged and destroyed. Project equipment has also been embargoed by the Israeli authorities, but it has often been possible to circumvent this by creative means.

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what publicly owned accommodation is made available to her in her official role; how many nights she has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost is of maintaining each of these properties. [55096]

Clare Short: There is no publicly owned accommodation available to me in my post except when I stay at ambassadors' residences when travelling abroad.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Amy Gehring

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will make a statement on actions taken by her Department as a result of the Amy Gehring case. [52542]

Mr. Timms: My Department reviewed its procedures following this case. That review shows that our procedures were not at fault. However, in order to improve safeguards for children we have laid amendments to the Education Bill in the Lords, which will strengthen still further requirements to report instances of misconduct to the Department. These will extend the existing responsibility on employers, including agencies, to schools and other education institutions using a person's services. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, whose Department regulates agencies under the Employment Agencies Act 1973, is reviewing the Conduct regulations under that Act. My Department is engaged in that process.

Teaching Assistants

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures she has introduced to encourage schools to employ teaching assistants on all-year-round contracts. [54097]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) on 8 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 626W.

London Weighting

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans she has to ensure that the central London weighting allowance applies to teachers living in outer London boroughs. [54596]

Mr. Timms: Decisions on London allowances for teachers in 2002–03 have now been taken in the light of advice from the independent School Teachers Review Body and consultation. The levels of the allowances were increased by 3.5 per cent. from 1 April, further to the 30 per cent. increases in 2001, and the structure of the allowances was unchanged. The level for inner London is £3,105 and the level for outer London is £2,043. London allowances will be kept under review for future years. Schools are free to make use of recruitment and retention allowances as circumstances demand.

Early Retirement (Teachers)

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many teachers *(a)* applied for and *(b)* were refused early retirement on the grounds of ill health in (i) 1992–93, (ii) 1993–94 and (iii) 1995–96. [54613]

Mr. Timms: The numbers of members of the Teachers' Pension Scheme who retired on the grounds of ill health in each of the years in question were:

	Number
1992–93	4,867
1993–94	5,565
1994–95	6,075
1995–96	5,980

Information about the number of applications that were rejected is available only from 1996 when an electronic handling system was introduced.

Teachers' Pension Scheme

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will make a statement about the accountability to her Department of Capita Business Services Ltd. regarding the administration of the teachers' pension scheme. [54805]

Mr. Timms: The responsibilities of Capita Business Services Ltd. for the administration of the teachers' pension scheme are set out in a detailed contract and statement of service requirements. Performance against service standards, together with compliance with legislative and other requirements, is actively managed by the Department's finance, contract and internal audit teams. The teachers' pension scheme accounts and administration are also subject to annual scrutiny by the National Audit Office.

Individual Learning Accounts

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will compensate bona fide learning providers who can demonstrate that they have been financially disadvantaged by the accelerated date of closure of the individual learning accounts scheme. [55054]

John Healey: There are no plans to pay compensation to ILA registered learning providers. The Education and Skills Select Committee report about ILAs contains no new arguments or evidence on the case for compensation; the Department's position therefore remains unchanged.

Local Education Authority Finance

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the spending is *(a)* per head of population and *(b)* per pupil in each local education authority in England for 2001–02. [55107]

Mr. Timms: The information requested is not yet available. The Department is due to collect data relating to the 2001–02 financial year from this September. I shall write to the hon. Member when the information for 2001–02 is to hand.

Broadband

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what proportion of schools have access to broadband internet access in *(a)* Lancashire, *(b)* the north-west of England and *(c)* England. [55112]

John Healey: Broadband internet access (2mbs or better) is provided through regional broadband consortia (RBCs). The target for August 2002 is for 20 per cent. of all schools (including 100 per cent. of secondaries) to have broadband connections. From the latest consortia returns (28 February 2002):

13 per cent. of schools in Lancashire LEA already have broadband connections and this is expected to rise to 26 per cent. by August 2002;

23 per cent. of schools within the north-west of England (covered by two RBCs) already have a broadband connection and this is expected to rise to 41 per cent. by August 2002;

Nationally, approximately 14 per cent. of schools across England already have a broadband connection and this is expected to rise to 32 per cent. by August 2002, exceeding the current target.

Youth Projects

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans she has for the future funding of the work done by Neighbourhood Support Fund youth projects. [55019]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: A total of £60 million was made available to the Neighbourhood Support Fund spread over three years. The current programme comes to an end in September 2003 and it has been successful in reaching out to some of the most disadvantaged young people in our communities. I will review the programme in the light of the departmental spending review.

Truancy

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will estimate the number of school days lost to truancy each year in *(a)* the Lancashire education authority area and *(b)* England. [55109]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The number of days missed due to unauthorised absence in the last three years are presented in the table. Data are based on the annual pupil absence survey that is conducted at the end of May and is based on the first five half-terms of the school year. We can not estimate the figures for the final half-term of the year as year 11 students attend irregularly while they take their GCSE examinations.

Number of school sessions (half-days) missed due to unauthorised absences in maintained schools in Lancashire and England

	Lancashire	*England*
2000–01		
Day pupils of compulsory school age	160,768	6,698,285
Total possible pupil sessions[1,2]	49,196,000	1,987,849,000
Total sessions missed	271,216	14,833,790
Total number of days missed	135,608	7,416,895
1999–2000		
Day pupils of compulsory school age	162,979	6,636,828
Total possible pupil sessions[1,2]	50,834,000	1,990,299,000
Total sessions missed	281,090	14,479,457
Total number of days missed	140,545	7,239,729
1998–99		
Day pupils of compulsory school age	162,583	6,607,438
Total possible pupil sessions[1,2]	51,067,000	2,005,657,000

Number of school sessions (half-days) missed due to unauthorised absences in maintained schools in Lancashire and England

	Lancashire	*England*
Total sessions missed	301,308	15,053,051
Total number of days missed	150,654	7,526,526

[1] Rounded to nearest 1,000

[2] Total pupil sessions are calculated as (total number of pupils) × (total possible school sessions between September and May census date)

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Street Crime Initiative

Vera Baird: To ask the Solicitor-General whether she will make a statement on the role of the Crown Prosecution Service within the Government's Street Crime Initiative. [55975]

The Solicitor-General: As part of the cross-Government strategy to reduce street crime, a premium service will target likely offenders and crime areas and will ensure that offenders are investigated and prosecuted with skill and determination. Victims and witnesses will be given extra support. Experienced lawyers and detectives will handle cases and they will work closely together. An extra £6 million is being allocated to the Crown Prosecution Service to free up experienced lawyers to concentrate on this work.

Sentence Referrals

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Solicitor-General when she last considered extending the 28-day period for references back to the Crown Prosecution Service of unduly lenient sentences; and what her conclusions were. [55081]

The Solicitor-General: The Criminal Justice Act 1988 (schedule 3) prescribes that notice of an application for leave to refer a case to the Court of Appeal, under section 36 of the same Act, shall be given within 28 days from the day on which the sentence was passed. Legislation would be required to amend this time limit.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Solicitor-General how many sentence referrals to the Court of Appeal on the grounds of undue lenience have resulted in sentences being increased in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [53399]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The following figures are available. These figures represent the number of offenders whose cases were referred to the Court of Appeal:

	Number of:	
Year[1]	*References to Court of Appeal*	*Sentences increased*
1997	70	47
1998	96	69
1999	88	51
2000	93	64
2001	154	[2]71

[1] 1 January to 31 December

[2] There are still cases from 2000 and 2001, which are yet to be heard by the Court of Appeal

Consultants

Mr. Gray: To ask the Solicitor-General how many contracts the Law Officers Department has with consultants; what level of professional indemnity insurance is standard in contracts with small consultants; whether she can make exceptions to the level of professional indemnity insurance; and what recent discussions she has had with other Government Departments about the level of professional indemnity insurance. [50841]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 18 April 2002]:* My own Department, the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers, has no current contracts with consultants.

The Crown Prosecution Service in common with other Government Departments employs the services of consultants from time to time. However, the information requested as to the number of such contracts is not recorded centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The Department's standard terms and conditions of contract for consultancy work only necessitate consultants to hold professional indemnity insurance where this is required by law. The level of indemnity insurance is not specified and where required would be subject to negotiation and agreement prior to the award of any contract.

The Treasury Solicitor's Department has 28 current contracts with consultants who are assisting it on a range of issues. The level of professional indemnity insurance required is related to the nature of the work required and the assessment of risk attached to it.

At the present time the Serious Fraud Office has nine contracts with small or sole trader consultants covering a range of issues, including information technology and security. In addition there are other specific contracts for expert advice related to operational cases.

Professional indemnity insurance levels are not standardised and are set at a level appropriate to the size of the contract and the risk involved.

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has one current contract. The contract does not provide for professional indemnity insurance.

It is not the Government's practice to provide details of discussions which form part of the process of policy development and analysis, therefore I am unable to answer your final question.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Best Value

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Audit Commission in respect of the guidance contained in its publication Competitive Procurement relating to the operation of best value to the categorisation of the overall performance of local authorities; and if he will make a statement. [53918]

Dr. Whitehead: My Department has had no formal discussions with the Audit Commission about its publication Competitive Procurement. The Audit Commission acts independently of Government, and the views expressed in its publications are its own. Having said this the Government welcome the Audit Commission's report, which is based on the evidence of audit and inspection, and recognises it as a valuable contribution to our drive to improving public services. I expect local authorities will find it useful.

Railways

Rachel Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on recruitment levels and recruitment processes for railway maintenance workers in the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. [54854]

Mr. Jamieson: Recruitment levels and processes are matters for those in the rail industry.

Road Links (Newcastle to Edinburgh)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) what work is planned on the A1 between Newcastle and Edinburgh; [54606]

(2) what major infrastructure work has been carried out on the A1 between Newcastle and Edinburgh in the last 15 years; and in each case *(a)* what the aim and nature of the works were, *(b)* which Government body was responsible, *(c)* how long the works took and *(d)* how much the works cost; [54605]

(3) what recent analysis has been carried out into alternative routes for traffic using the A1 between Newcastle and Edinburgh. [54608]

Mr. Byers: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from David York to Mrs. Theresa May, dated 9 May 2002:

Tim Matthews has been asked by the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about the A1 between Newcastle and Edinburgh. I am replying since Tim is currently away on Highways Agency business.

The Highways Agency has responsibility for this route between Newcastle and the Scottish Border.

Works currently planned by us for that length of the road include improvements to the A1 Stannington Grade Separated Junction and widening the Newcastle Western Bypass to take account of planning conditions imposed on development at Newcastle Great Park. The latter scheme is funded wholly by the developer.

In addition, we will be carrying out maintenance work including resurfacing north of Morpeth, improving the Seven Mile Bridge north of Seaton Burn and repainting Clifton Bridge at the south end of Morpeth Bypass.

The Government Office led A1 Multi-Modal study is looking at alternatives to the A1. The study is expected to report very shortly.

A number of works have been carried out on this length of road over the last 15 years. Prior to 1994 schemes were handled by the Department of Transport. Since 1994 the Highways Agency has been responsible. A list of those works is attached.

If you require any further information, David Harvey in our Leeds office will be happy to assist you. He can be contacted at the Highways Agency, City House, New Station Street, Leeds, LS1 4UR or by telephone on 0113 283 5814.

Aim and nature of scheme	*Duration (if known)*	*Cost (if known) (£)*
A1 Stannington Diversion (Clifton to Stannington Bridge)—dual carriageway bypass of Stannington Village	2 years	6.4 million
A1 South of Alnwick—upgrading to dual carriageway	7 months	0.8 million
A1 Newcastle Western Bypass—6.9 miles of dual carriageway with grade separated junctions	4 years	116.3 million
A1 Marshall Meadows Improvement—1.7 miles upgrade to dual carriageway	15 months	4.1 million
A1 Brownieside Improvement—dual carriageway bypass	17 months	5.5 million
A1 Blagdon Bridge—new overbridge and grade separated junction	10 months	1.4 million
A1 Hitchcroft to Cawledge—upgrade to dual carriageway	15 months	2.8 million
A1 Felton to Lanehead—upgrade to dual carriageway	9 months	2.3 million
A1 Willowburn to Denwick—upgrade to dual carriageways (currently on site)	Under construction	8 million
A1 Newcastle Great Park—Brunton Interchange improvements[1]	9 months	800,000

[1] The scheme at Newcastle Great Park is being funded by a private developer. All other schemes have been funded by central Government.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what estimate he has made of the increase in traffic on the A1 between Newcastle and Edinburgh over the lifetime of the 10-year plan. [54609]

Mr. Byers: The 10-year plan applies to England. As part of the work carried out in connection with the A1 multi-modal study, consultants have assessed potential traffic growth on the A1 between Newcastle and the Scottish border just north of Berwick on Tweed.

Flows on the A1 are currently:

New Morpeth—16,200 vehicles per day

Alnwick to Berwick on Tweed—8,600 vehicles per day.

Estimates show that in 2011 flows on the A1 are expected to be in the region of:

New Morpeth—19,100 vehicles per day

Alnwick to Berwick on Tweed—10,100 vehicles per day.

Fire Service College

Phil Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what targets he intends setting to assess the performance of the fire service college during 2002–03. [55627]

Dr. Whitehead: The work of the fire service college contributes directly to the Department's aim of safe communities and its objectives of improving health and safety by reducing risks from work activity, buildings and fire. Its role is to deliver modern vocational training to the fire service of a type and to a standard that fully meets brigades' needs. The college should operate cost-effectively and should enthusiastically meet the diversity requirements of its customers and employees. In this context, I have agreed the following six targets for the fire service college in 2002–03.

1. To maximise the fire service college's contribution to the Government's programme to improve health, education and transport and reduce crime by:

   equipping 100 per cent. of the trainers the fire service college trains to disseminate best practice and verify that by post-course assessment;

   maintaining the quality of the fire service college's education, training and service delivery as externally assessed to the same or a better level of conformance achieved in the previous year, in every case; and

   ensuring that the wider relevance to the community of fire prevention and fire safety is embedded in the fire service college curriculum to the extent that it features in 100 per cent. of appropriate courses.

2. To accommodate 100 per cent. of bids from UK fire brigades for courses published in the fire service college prospectus.

3. To develop within a year a capability for delivering to customer satisfaction risk management training and e-learning programmes for retained officers and for responding to any centrally determined need for decontamination training.

4. To have a series of Integrated Personal Development System compliant modules linked to five roles ready for delivery by April 2003, having obtained full stakeholder endorsement.

5. By April 2003 to further improve the agency's financial performance by:

   increasing surplus by at least 2 per cent. in real terms;

   achieving 6.5 per cent. return on capital employed; and

   maintaining wider market business in support of UK fire brigade business by contributing 20 per cent. to overall business and creating a net contribution to fixed costs of at least £1.3 million.

6. To obtain a favourable assessment in year from Quality South West for progress towards recovering Investor in People status in 2003–04 and to make progress on diversity issues by:

   increasing the percentage of women at middle and senior level in the fire service college; carrying out an equalities audit of the fire service college climate, facilities and products; and

   equality proofing the pay system.

New Dimension Group

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what levels of additional funding have been allocated to fire services to meet the needs identified by the New Dimension Group arising from the increased level of threat from terrorism since 11 September. [55022]

Dr. Whitehead: In answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow), 27 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1373, I said that we were providing £53 million funding for the fire service to give further protection to the public and

emergency services in the event of a major chemical, biological or radiological attack. We are continuing to consider the case for additional resources in the light of the information provided by the New Dimension Group.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions whether membership of New Dimension Group includes representatives of the Chief Fire Officers Association from *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales, *(c)* Scotland and *(d)* Northern Ireland; and whether the Fire Brigades Union is represented on the group. [55021]

Dr. Whitehead: Yes. The chief and assistant chief fire officers associations from Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales are represented on the New Dimension Group, as is the Fire Brigades Union.

Housing

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assessment was made of congestion levels in each region when determining the level of provision made for new additional housing; and what influence this had on the final level of provision made for new additional housing outlined in regional planning guidance. [54911]

Mr. Byers: Annual rates of housing provision are established through regional planning guidance and the spatial strategy it sets out. The strategy is prepared having regard to a number of matters including the capacity of urban areas to accommodate more housing, the physical and social infrastructure needed to support additional housing and the environmental implications of doing so.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the estimated environmental costs is to each local authority arising from the level of provision made for new additional housing; and what influence this had on the final level of provision made for new additional housing as outlined in regional planning guidance. [54912]

Mr. Byers: Annual rates of housing provision are established through regional planning guidance and the spatial strategy it sets out. The draft strategy is subjected to a sustainability appraisal in accordance with good practice guidance issued by my Department. A report outlining the findings of this appraisal is published prior to the public examination of the draft strategy. This report is an important consideration for the panel that holds the public examination and for me in considering what changes, if any, to make to the draft strategy following receipt of their report.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to the answer of 10 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 976W, on affordable housing, what the proportion of affordable homes in rural areas was to the total number of affordable homes for each year since 1990. [54853]

Ms Keeble: The table shows the number and proportion of affordable homes in rural areas (with a population of 3,000 or fewer) funding through the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme and by local authorities compared with the total number of affordable homes funded by the same means in England in each year since 1990.

Year	*Rural*	*All (England)*	*% of completions that are rural*
1991–92	803	31,504	2.6
1992–93	2,268	50,045	4.5
1993–94	1,567	64,834	2.4
1994–95	1,341	70,781	1.9
1995–96	1,811	68,790	2.6
1996–97	1,678	51,412	3.3
1997–98	2,020	45,765	4.4
1998–99	1,792	42,011	4.3
1999–2000	1,533	33,808	4.5
2000–01	1,278	30,931	4.1
2001–02	1,371	29,846	4.6

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to the answer of 10 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 976W, on affordable housing, how many affordable homes in rural settlements in England with a population of 3,000 or less were completed and funded by 31 March. [54852]

Ms Keeble: 1,371 affordable homes in small settlements with a population of 3,000 or fewer were completed and funded through the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme and by local authorities from 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to the answer of 31 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 448W, on affordable housing, what the Housing Corporation's budget was in each of the last 10 years; and what amount was allocated to its *(a)* revenue and *(b)* capital programmes. [54910]

Ms Keeble: The table shows the Housing Corporation's capital and revenue expenditure for the years 1993–94 to 2001–02. The figures for 2002–03 are the budget figures for the current year.

Housing Corporation expenditure

Outturn £ million

	Capital	*Revenue*	*Total*
1993–94	1,796.4	136.0	1,932.4
1994–95	1,483.5	146.1	1,629.6
1995–96	1,142.2	199.9	1,342.1
1996–97	1,044.4	198.8	1,243.2
1997–98	683.8	217.3	901.1
1998–99	606.5	207.6	814.1
1999–2000	637.8	149.3	787.1
2000–01	717.0	154.0	871.0
2001–02	774.6	143.0	917.6
2002–03	917.6	184.3	1,101.9

Notes:

1. Capital outturn is for ADP funding only.
2. Revenue funding includes Supported Housing Management Grant, Innovation and Good Practice Grants, Supplementary Management Grant, Tax Relief Grant, Hostel Deficit Grant, Revenue Deficit Grant, Rough Sleepers Initiative and Estate Renewal Challenge Fund Grant.
3. This table does not include local authority social housing grant funding.

Martin Sixsmith

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to his oral statement of 26 February 2002, *Official Report*,

column 563, if he will make a statement on Mr. Sixsmith's agreement to resign; and when he was told, and by whom, that Mr. Sixsmith had resigned. [55622]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the oral statement I have made in the House today.

Fraud

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption was in *(a)* his Department's Vote 1 budget and *(b)* his Department's Vote 2 budget for (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [54708]

Mr. Byers: The only proven loss due to fraud or corruption for which my Department is accountable is a theft of £20 from a cash box. This was accounted for in the Class III Vote 1 Appropriation Account for 1999–2000.

This does not include any loss suffered by any non-departmental public body funded from either vote where their accounts are prepared separately and laid before Parliament and published separately.

Nor does it include any losses due to fraud in rent rebates. Rent rebates granted to local authority tenants are reimbursed through Housing Revenue Account Subsidy, for which this Department has overall responsibility. Rent rebates are analogous to rent allowances paid in respect of tenants of private landlords, and together they comprise housing benefit.

Responsibility for housing benefit policy, including policy on fraud, lies with DWP. A full note on the implications of housing benefit fraud for HRA subsidy is appended to the Appropriation Account for Vote 1 for each of the years concerned.

Mobile Phone Masts

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in *(a)* other member states of the European Union, *(b)* Australia and *(c)* New Zealand on the safe levels of radiation from mobile phone masts. [54440]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* I have been asked to reply.

Ministers have not had recent discussions with their respective counterparts. However departmental officials and the National Radiological Protection Board are supporting international electromagnetic field standardisation activities in terms of reviewing the fundamental science, providing advice on guidelines to protect people from adverse health effects and assisting in the development of technical standards.

The United Kingdom contributes to the development of European and international technical standards concerning the safety of mobile telephony through the European Committee on Electrotechnical Standardisation (CENELEC) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC).

United Kingdom delegates are members of the CENELEC mobile telephone project team that have developed standards for mobile phones and produced draft documents on mobile phone base stations (phone masts). The documents provide standardised methods by which compliance with health-based guidelines can be assessed.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Golden Jubilee

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what rent is being paid for the Golden Jubilee Office in 85 Buckingham Gate; what the prevailing average rent per square foot in the building was prior to this rent being negotiated; and which firm advised on the negotiations. [53956]

Mr. Caborn: The office at 85 Buckingham Gate was taken over from the Home Office at an annual rental of £165,000 net, as a result of the Machinery of Government changes. The DCMS were not a party to any negotiations on rent. The prevailing average rent for that particular building prior to this rent being agreed is not known, as this figure is a matter between the landlord and the former tenants. However, the rental figure was in line with the average market rent for the properties in that area. Lambert Smith Hampton, Property Management, acted for the Home Office in the lease negotiations.

Portable Antiquities Scheme

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement about the future funding of the Portable Antiquities Scheme. [54806]

Dr. Howells: The Heritage lottery fund trustees met on 23 April to consider a bid for the three-year funding of a full network of finds liaison officers to cover the whole of England and Wales. The fund has now informed the scheme officials of the outcome, and will announce the details of its decision later this week.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations she has received regarding the future of the Portable Antiquities Scheme. [54807]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for the Arts have received 19 letters commenting on the success of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, and calling for its long-term funding to be secured. Most of these representations have been submitted by metal detectorists.

National Lottery

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the distribution of the reserve funds for National Lottery good causes in the last two years; and if she will make a statement. [55015]

Mr. Caborn: Funds generated by the National Lottery for good causes are held in the National Lottery Distribution Fund (NLDF), until distributing bodies need to draw them down to meet expenditure incurred by grant recipients. Under Government accounting rules, and under their financial directions, distributing bodies may not draw down moneys from the NLDF in advance of need. Any interest earned on money held in the NLDF is added to the amount available for distribution to good causes.

Commitments by distributing bodies collectively at 31 March 2002 totalled £4.12 billion, some £568 million more than was in the overall NLDF balance (£3.55 billion). This compares with commitments of £3.66 billion at 31 March 2001; £212 million more than the total NLDF balance at the same date (£3.45 billion).

Royal Parks Agency

Mr. Mark Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if she will reserve a place for a representative of the Friends of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens on the board of trustees of the new non-departmental public body which is to replace the Royal Parks Agency; [54994]

(2) what her policy is on the representation of the interests of public users of the Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens on the new non-departmental public body which is to replace the Royal Parks Agency. [54997]

Dr. Howells: The board of trustees will comprise a number of trustees with different skills and experience. There will not be a specific trustee position on the board for a representative of the Friends of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. To reflect the parks' links with a variety of organisations, not just the Friends, a trustee post will be created titled 'Community Relations' which will be responsible for developing links with the whole community.

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what publicly owned accommodation is made available to her in her official role; how many nights she has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost was of maintaining each of these properties in the last 12 months. [55105]

Mr. Caborn: None.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will place in the Library copies of each version of the internal guidance which have been drawn up by his Department since 1 January 1999 to assist staff in his Department to answer subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 1998. [53379]

Jane Kennedy: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills) gave to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) on 25 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 446W.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

EU-Israel Association Agreement

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 21 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 583W, on the EU-Israel Association Agreement, what progress has been made in resolving the rules of origin issue under the EU-Israel Association; and whether the EU is reviewing its position on the continuance of the agreement. [45203]

Peter Hain: There have been further contacts between the EU and Israel with a view to resolving the rules of origin issue. These have not yet led to any significant progress. The EU has not changed its position on the continuation of the EU-Israel Agreement.

Chemical Weapons

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries are the main contributors to the funding of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons; which of them are in arrears with their contributions; and by how much. [53458]

Mr. Bradshaw: The major contributors to the funding of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) amounting to approximately 70 per cent. of the OPCW's budget are: the United States (22 per cent.), Japan (20 per cent.), Germany (10 per cent.), France (7 per cent.), UK (6 per cent.) and Italy (5 per cent.). The UK, France and Italy have paid their contributions for 2002 in full. The United States and Germany usually make staged payments and have so far paid approximately 50 per cent. of their 2002 contributions. Japan is expected to pay the entire amount of its 2002 contribution around the middle of this year.

Cambodia

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met representatives of the Cambodian Government; and if he will make a statement on UK-Cambodian relations. [53392]

Mr. Bradshaw: Opportunities for British Ministers to meet representatives of the Cambodian Government are limited. Cambodia does not have an embassy in London and plays only a limited role internationally. The last Foreign Office Minister to meet representatives of the Cambodian Government was the late Derek Fatchett in May 1998 during a visit to Cambodia. But British officials are in regular contact with the Cambodian Government through our embassy in Phnom Penh. We are keen to enhance UK/Cambodian relations and the Foreign Secretary wrote to his Cambodian counterpart in November 2001 encouraging the Cambodian Government to re-establish an embassy in London.

International Terrorism

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 828–29W, on international terrorism, if he will list the UN member states which have not fulfilled the obligation to submit a report to the Counter-Terrorism Committee on terrorist financing and providing safe havens for terrorists. [53605]

Mr. MacShane: As of 30 April 2002, 142 of the UN's 189 member states had submitted a report to the Counter-Terrorism Committee. The following 47 states had not:

Afghanistan
Antigua and Barbuda
Brunei
Central African Republic
Chad
Comoros
Republic of Congo
Dominica
Equatorial Guinea
Eritrea
Fiji
Gambia
Ghana
Guinea-Bissau
Guyana
Haiti
Kenya
Kiribati
Lesotho
Liberia
Mali
Marshall Islands
Mauritania
Micronesia
Nauru
Nicaragua
Palau
Papua New Guinea
Rwanda
St. Kitts and Nevis
St. Lucia
St. Vincent
Sao Tome and Principe
Seychelles
Sierra Leone
Solomon Islands
Surinam
Swaziland
Togo
Tonga
Turkmenistan
Tuvalu
Uganda
Tanzania
Vanuatu
Zambia
Zimbabwe.

Information on which states have submitted reports can be obtained from the Counter-Terrorism Committee's website: http://www.un.org/docs/sc/committees/1373.

Government Information (Access)

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his Department's target time is for completing internal reviews under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information; when this target time was established; if he is aiming to improve this target time; and if he will make a statement. [53357]

Mr. MacShane: The FCO's target time for completing internal reviews under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information is 20 working days. This target was established in 1997 and is in line with practice in other Government Departments. I have no present plans to deploy extra FCO staff and resources which are needed elsewhere to reduce this target time which I consider reasonable. Information on the FCO's response to requests and reviews under the code of practice is given in the monitoring report published by the Lord Chancellor's Department (LCD) in September 2001, available on their website or from them direct.

National Missile Defence

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions his Department has had with UK firms bidding for work on the US-initiated programme of national missile Defence; and if he will make a statement. [53597]

Mr. Bradshaw: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has not had any direct discussions with UK firms in relation to specific bids related to current US proposals for missile defence. Staff at the British embassy in Washington regularly give general advice to UK firms wishing to do business with the US Department of Defense (including the Missile Defense Agency) but have not had any discussions on specific bids on the US missile defence programme.

Taiwan

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have taken place in the European Parliament about granting Taiwan observer status at the annual World Health Assembly. [53634]

Mr. MacShane: We understand that the European Parliament has recently passed a resolution calling upon the World Health Organisation to grant observer status at the World Health Assembly to Taiwan.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations have been made to the World Health Organisation to re-admit Taiwan to the organisation. [53633]

Mr. MacShane: The United Kingdom has not been involved in any direct representations to the World Health Organisation on this issue and will continue to work with other EU partners on a common position.

Gibraltar

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the risk to the security of Gibraltar from Spain. [53881]

Peter Hain: As I said in the House on 31 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 137WH, the aim of talks under the Brussels Process is to ensure a stable, prosperous and secure future for Gibraltar. And as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said in the House on 5 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 735, we are convinced that this dialogue represents the best way forward for the people of Gibraltar.

Liaison Officers

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 26 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 815W, if he will provide a breakdown of the former occupations of the liaison officers indicating *(a)* how they are recruited, *(b)* their level of remuneration and *(c)* the restrictions on them taking up other appointments. [54100]

Mr. MacShane: In accordance with good employer practice and under exemptions 8a and 12 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, it is not appropriate to release such information into the public domain.

World Service

Mr. Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met representatives from the World Service to discuss its plans for the future. [54428]

Mr. MacShane: FCO Ministers meet the director of the BBC World Service formally every year to discuss World Service plans. The next such meeting will be in June. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary last met Mr. Byford on 11 October 2001. I last met Mr. Byford on 3 October 2001. The last meeting between an FCO Minister and the World Service was on 10 January 2002, when my noble Friend Baroness Symons met Mr. Byford on 10 January 2002. I am scheduled to meet with him on 13 May 2002 in a formal meeting but there are other occasions for informal meetings with Mr. Byford at which we discuss the excellent work of the World Service.

Iraq

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on involving the United Nations in a decision to take military action against Iraq. [54291]

Mr. Bradshaw: Iraq's obligations are unambiguously set out in the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions. No decision has been taken on military action against Iraq.

Israel

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether advice to UK citizens intending to travel to the middle east has been amended as a result of the wounding of Kate Edwards in Israel. [54211]

Mr. Bradshaw: Kate Edwards is an Australian national who was injured in Bethlehem. Our travel advice continues to strongly advise against travel to this area because of the continuing clashes between Israelis and Palestinians throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy towards export control licences for arms sales to Israel. [55025]

Mr. Bradshaw: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) on 15 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 722–23W.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Lyons: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to Saudi Arabia over the case of Mr. Alexander Mitchell. [54126]

Mr. Bradshaw: FCO Ministers and officials have made repeated representations about Mr. Mitchell's case from the outset, including at the highest levels. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made representations on numerous occasions directly with the Saudis. We will continue to do all we can for Mr. Mitchell and the other detained British nationals accused of involvement in bombings in Saudi Arabia.

Greece

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what help the Government have given to the British planespotters in Greece *(a)* in assisting with providing expert witnesses for their case, *(b)* in helping them to meet their legal costs and *(c)* in ensuring that all relevant parties were aware of cultural differences that might be relevant to the case; and if he will make a statement. [54218]

Mr. Bradshaw: The case referred to by the hon. Member is a legal matter. The group since conviction have lodged an appeal. It would not be appropriate, therefore, for me to comment on the details of the case. The group are fully aware that the British Government do not pay legal costs for British nationals overseas, whether detained, convicted or acquitted. Through FCO travel advice we endeavour to inform the general public as best we can about potential risks when travelling overseas. We continue to offer full consular assistance to the group.

China

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his EU counterparts regarding the Chinese one child policy; and if he will make a statement. [54484]

Mr. MacShane: We have not discussed this subject with EU partners recently. We have expressed our concerns to the Chinese authorities, including through the UK-China human rights dialogue, over abuses associated with the one child policy. We believe that coercion has no place in family planning programmes.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have taken place within the UN during the last two years about the Chinese one child policy. [54506]

Mr. MacShane: We are not aware of any recent discussion of China's one child policy at the executive board of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) or any other UN body. However monitoring of UNFPA's engagement with the Chinese Government on policy issues has taken place through at least two visits to China in the last two years by members of UNFPA's executive board.

Visa Appeals

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many people exercised their right of appeal in visitor visa cases in 2001. [54502]

Mr. Bradshaw: 11,847 applicants appealed during 2001 (this figure is made up of 5,203 family visit appeals and 6,644 other non-settlement appeals).

Statistical information on the number of applicants who exercised their right of appeal in visitor visa cases is only available from those entry clearance posts that provide monthly statistical information (110 posts in 2001).

The remaining entry clearance posts submit information on an annual basis. To answer this question for all 166 posts the additional posts would have to extract the information requested manually, which could be done only at disproportionate cost.

Entry Clearance Decisions

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many decisions by entry clearance officers he has overturned since 7 June. [54501]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not overturned any entry clearance decisions. As Minister responsible for entry clearance, I have overturned nine decisions since 7 June 2001.

Indonesia

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met representatives from Indonesia; and what was discussed. [54248]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met Hasan Wirajuda, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, in the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York in November 2001. They discussed a wide range of issues affecting the UK's bilateral relationship with Indonesia, including the coalition against terrorism and the need for economic and political reform in Indonesia.

East Timor

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on *(a)* the activities of the UN force in East Timor and *(b)* the elections there. [54249]

Mr. Bradshaw: UN Security Council Resolution 1272 of 25 October 1999 established the UN Transitional Administration for East Timor (UNTAET), with a military component of up to 8,950 troops. These troops have carried out the full range of peacekeeping duties and contributed to a large number of reconstruction projects in East Timor. The successor mission to UNTAET, the UN Mission to East Timor (UNMISET) will come into effect on 20 May 2002 when the UN will hand over sovereignty to the democratically elected Government of East Timor. The downsizing of the UNMISET military component (from 5,000 troops) will take place gradually over two years.

More than 90 per cent. of eligible voters turned out for the 30 August 2001 elections for the constituent assembly and more than 80 per cent. of eligible voters turned out for the Presidential election held on 14 April 2002. The campaigns were well run, the elections free and fair and the high turn outs demonstrated a determination to participate fully in the democratic process.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will initiate a further inquiry into the deaths of Malcolm Rennie and Brian Peters in East Timor in 1975; and if he will make a statement. [54247]

Mr. Bradshaw: Following the arrival of the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), a number of people volunteered fresh information about the events in Balibo in 1975. In the light of this, in August 2000, the UN Prosecutor General took the decision to open an investigation into the deaths. The investigation continues. We will continue to monitor developments closely.

Tanzania

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 30 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 649W, on Tanzania, for how long it has been the practice of the Department not to disclose details of individual entry clearance cases in a public forum. [54866]

Mr. Bradshaw: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 29 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 1080W, when he asked the same question.

Zimbabwe

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contingency arrangements he has made for the possible arrival in the UK of British passport holders currently living in Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [54098]

Maria Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

There are no specific contingency plans in place for the possible arrival in the United Kingdom of UK passport holders currently living in Zimbabwe.

The Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate, regularly liaise with other Government Departments, non-government organisations and the voluntary sector, in updating contingency plans which may be implemented in an emergency in the event of an influx of persons arriving in the United Kingdom.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many pensioners in Spelthorne claim the minimum income guarantee. [55037]

Mr. McCartney: As at November 2001 there were 1,800 pensioners claiming the MIG in the parliamentary constituency of Spelthorne.

Source:
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Inquiries, November 2001.

Catering Services

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the cost was of *(a)* in-house canteen and *(b)* other catering services provided by his Department in each of the last four years. [38916]

Maria Eagle: Subsidies of various sizes for canteen facilities are provided in around 150 of our offices at a cost in 2001–02 of £3.5 million.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people *(a)* have been eligible for a winter fuel payment and *(b)* have received a winter fuel payment, including those eligible for backdated payments, in each year since 1997. [46463]

Maria Eagle: Winter fuel payments were issued automatically to around 10 million people receiving certain social security benefits for each of the winters 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000. Following the extension of the entitlement conditions to most people aged 60 and over, regardless of whether they were receiving a social security benefit, around 1.1 million further payments covering one, two or all three of these years have been issued following successful claims. It is not possible to relate these payments to specific years.

In excess of 11.1 million payments were issued for winter 2000–01. Figures for winter 2001–02 are not yet available but are expected to be similar.

The vast majority of those eligible in each year since 1997 have received payment.

Television Licences

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the *(a)* number and *(b)* total cost of television licences paid for by his Department. [48354]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* The BBC has confirmed that the number of free licences issued was 3.1 million in 2000–01, and 3.8 million in 2001–02, (the latter figure remains subject to audit).

For the costs to the Department, I refer the hon. Member to my reply to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 14 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 1237W.

Pension Trustees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what obligations on pension trustees are imposed by the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority to notify changes in status of schemes; and how many such changes *(a)* overall and *(b)* involving closure have been so notified in each of the last three years. [47657]

Mr. McCartney: In almost all cases it is a legal requirement for pension scheme trustees to register details of their schemes with the Pension Schemes Registry which is run by the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority (Opra). On registration, trustees are required to tell the Registry for example: whether the scheme is an open, closed or frozen scheme; and whether the scheme provides money purchase benefits, benefits other than money purchase benefits, or a combination of both. Trustees must, by law, notify the Registry of any change to this information within 12 months of the occurrence of that change. If trustees, without reasonable cause, fail to comply with this requirement Opra can fine them.

The numbers of schemes reporting *(a)* any status change and *(b)* closure, in each of the last three years, are shown in the table.

Pension schemes that have reported (a) any change of status and (b) closure in each of the last three years

	(a) Total number of schemes reporting any changes in status during the year	*(b) Numbers of schemes closed during the year*
1999–2000	3,233	308
2000–01	2,080	336
2001–02	1,703	245

Notes:
1. The information is based on data held by the Pension Schemes Registry (PSR). It covers all schemes including those offering salary-related benefits, money-purchase benefits and mixed benefits as well as schemes where the benefit type is not recorded in the PSR system.
2. A scheme's status will be one of the following. Open schemes admit new members. Closed schemes do not admit new active members, but allow existing members to continue to accrue benefits. Frozen schemes do not allow any future accruals. Schemes starting to wind up are also frozen. Schemes that have completed wind up have no members—all assets are realised and all liabilities are discharged. Column (a) shows all changes in status with an effective date during the specified year.
3. The PSR system holds information on the most recent change in scheme status and the effective date of the change. Because of the way the data are held a later change will overwrite an earlier change, so data for earlier years become increasingly inaccurate. Trustees are required to report changes within 12 months so there is likely to be a lag before the data reflects what is happening currently.

Long-stay Patient Benefit

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to raise the level of benefit given to long-stay patients. [51545]

Mr. McCartney: There are no plans to change the level to which benefits are reduced for hospital in-patients who have been in hospital for more than 52 weeks.

The hospital downrating rules prevent double provision from public funds as the publicly funded NHS maintains people while they stay in hospital as well as providing free treatment. Social security maintenance benefits are also paid from state funds.

The double provision principle is a key cornerstone of the system of national insurance introduced over 50 years ago.

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people in the United Kingdom are in receipt of long-stay patient benefit because they suffer from mental illness. [51542]

Mr. McCartney: The information requested is not available.

Hospitalisation (Benefit Downrating)

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many disabled adults have their disability living allowance withdrawn because they have been in hospital for four weeks or longer. [51575]

Maria Eagle: When disability living allowance recipients aged 16 or over have been in hospital for 28 days, payments are suspended pending their discharge. This is because DLA is paid as a contribution towards the extra costs faced by severely disabled people as a result of their disabilities. In hospital, the disability related needs giving rise to those costs are met free of charge, and to continue payment of DLA in these circumstances would amount to duplicate provision from public funds. Information is not available on the annual number of suspensions resulting from these circumstances. The latest available information is that, at 30 November 2001, about 11,700 claims were at that time recorded as suspended as a result of a stay in hospital.

This figure is based on 5 per cent. data and rounded to the nearest hundred.

Employment Statistics

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the participation of workers aged over 65 years in paid employment for OECD countries, by occupation type and average earnings. [53764]

Maria Eagle: The information is not readily available. Such information as is available is in the table.

Employment rate of those aged 65 years and over for OECD countries, 2000

Percentage

	OECD data	*Eurostat data*
Australia	5.9	—
Austria	—	2.9
Belgium	1.6	1.6
Canada	5.9	—
Czech Republic	3.9	—
Denmark	2.5	2.5
Finland	3.9	2.3
France	1.3	1.1
Germany	2.8	2.6
Greece	5.3	5.3
Hungary	2.7	—
Iceland	31.6	35.3
Ireland	—	8.0
Italy	3.2	3.1
Japan	22.1	—
Korea	29.0	—
Luxembourg	1.7	1.6
Mexico	31.3	—
Netherlands	3.2	2.6
New Zealand	7.6	—
Norway	10.8	10.5
Poland	7.6	—
Portugal	18.4	18.4
Slovak Republic	0.7	—
Spain	1.6	1.6
Sweden	10.2	4.9
Switzerland	10.3	9.4
Turkey	20.2	—
UK	5.2	5.2
US	12.4	—

Notes:

1. The employment rate is the proportion of all those aged 65 and over who are in employment. Persons in employment are defined as those who, during the reference week, did any work for pay or profit, or were not working but had jobs from which they were temporarily absent. Family workers are included.
2. As OECD data are not available for all OECD countries, Eurostat data have also been provided to give a more comprehensive picture.
3. Figures are rounded to one decimal place.
4. OECD data for Hungary and Iceland show employment rates for those aged 65 to 74 only and not for all those aged 65 and over.

Source:

OECD data are calculated from OECD Labour Market Statistics; Eurostat data are from European Social Statistics—Labour Force Survey Result 2000, Table 4, European Communities, 2001.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, pursuant to the answer of 18 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1120W, on housing benefit, in what format information is available. [53046]

Malcolm Wicks *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Under Best Value, the time taken by local authorities to process housing benefit claims is collected as an average number of calendar days. There is no measure of the proportion of claims processed within a set period from date of receipt to date of determination.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Libra Project

Mr. Todd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will place copies of OGC Gateway reviews of the Libra project in the Library. [53459]

Mr. Wills: I am unable to place copies of these OGC reviews in the Library given the commercial sensitivity involved. Compliance with my hon. Friend's request would impair the value added by the Gateway Review process. This relies on the provision of an in-depth, commercially confidential, report for the sole use of the senior responsible officer for the project under review.

The Government remain determined to provide magistrates courts with modern computer equipment and the standardised IT systems that they need and we believe the outcome of discussions currently under way with Fujitsu Services (formerly ICL) will ensure their earliest delivery and provide value for money to the tax payer. These will be concluded shortly, and the House will be informed of the outcome.

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his answer of 19 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 188W, regarding the Data Protection Act 1998, since when his Department has conducted a review of the operation of the Data Protection Act 1998; and if he will place copies of the results of these reviews in the Library. [53426]

Mr. Wills: The Government started an appraisal of the Data Protection Act 1998 in September 2000 with a public consultation exercise. The timing was geared to the European Commission's first report on the implementation of the EC Data Protection Directive which was due in October 2001. That report has been delayed, and the Government have deferred completion of the appraisal of the 1998 Act until its timing is clearer. In December 2001 the Government published a summary of the responses to the September 2000 consultation. I am placing a copy in the Library.

Building Projects

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the building projects under construction; and what coolant will be used for the building services water chilling system for such projects. [52046]

Mr. Wills: While there are no building projects currently in construction, there are a number in the planning and development stages, including private finance initiative and private developer schemes. We have excluded any magistrates court schemes, as local authorities are responsible for these.

The Department's Environmental Policy for Building Requirements applies to all major construction projects. The Department's policy is for natural ventilation for buildings whenever possible and only to install cooling systems where absolutely necessary. Where cooling cannot be avoided, designers are required to investigate systems which minimise environmental impact in terms of ozone depletion and global warming, using refrigerants with a zero ozone depletion potential (ODP) such as R134a and R66. Where, for technical or other reasons, it is necessary to utilise refrigerants with an ODP greater than zero, designers are required to check that the plant can be easily and cheaply retrofitted with a zero ODP refrigerant in the future.

Additionally, all major schemes are certified under the requirements of BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method). BREEAM is a system for assessing the environmental performance of buildings. I am placing further information in the Libraries of both Houses.

Housing Benefit Departments (Summonses)

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many summonses using Civil Procedure Rules in possession cases have been issued to local authority housing benefit departments in each year since 1997. [53045]

Mr. Wills: Figures showing the number of mortgage and rent possession actions entered in the county courts of England and Wales involving local authorities are provided in the table. However it should be noted that social landlord rent possession action statistics are collected only as combined figures involving local authorities and housing associations and no figures are held centrally exclusively for local authorities.

Local authority mortgage and social landlord[1] rent possession actions entered

Year	*Number*
1997	109,932
1998	141,224
1999	147,485
2000	151,709
2001	151,841

[1] Figures include both local authorities and housing associations

Census Online

Mr. Brady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps have been taken to ensure that 1901 Census Online will, when re-launched, be able to accommodate peaks of demand. [52920]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The new system will incorporate a "cookie counter", by which users will be referred to a simple page with a "site busy" message at peak times. This will enable peaks of demand to be managed successfully.

Press Office

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many staff in his Department's press office have received *(a)* termination and *(b)* redundancy payments in each of the last four years. [41089]

Mr. Wills: One member of LCD press office staff received a termination payment (in 1998–99) on resignation from the civil service. There have been no redundancy payments.

WALES

Public Appointments

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the *(a)* non-departmental public bodies and *(b)* task forces to which he has appointed members since the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales. [46144]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Information about the number of ministerial appointments to non-departmental public bodies is included in the Cabinet Office's annual report

"Public Bodies". Copies are placed in the Library of the House and the report is published on the Cabinet Office website.

Copies of the annual report on task forces and similar bodies have also been placed in the Library of the House and it is being made available on the Cabinet Office website.

I have appointed one member to the Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Wales since the establishment of the National Assembly.

Welshpool Airport

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had about the future capacity of Welshpool airport. [53104]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with Assembly and UK Government ministerial colleagues on a wide range of transport matters, including regional airports in Wales.

Aviation is a matter reserved to the UK Government. However Assembly officials have had close contact with DTLR colleagues over the Wales Air Services study, the on-going UK Regional Air Services Co-ordination study and the Wales Air Services consultation documents which are to be published shortly. These consultation documents will form the basis of a major public consultation exercise informing preparation of an Air Transport White Paper and will:

look at a range of policy scenarios;

set out options for development of capacity at regional airports such as Welshpool and associated surface access improvements in light of these scenarios;

report key findings of the economic, environmental, social and airspace appraisal of these options which have been undertaken; and highlight interactions between different regional airports, and the various possible roles each might play.

Correspondence

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many and what proportion of letters received by the Department in each of the last six months, were replied to in *(a)* under 15, *(b)* under 20, *(c)* under 30, *(d)* under 40 and *(e)* over 40 working days. [53100]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information is contained in the following table:

Month	(1) 15 days	(2) 1 month	(3) 2 months	(4) 3 months	(5) 3+	Total
October	39	1	0	0	0	40
November	37	5	3	0	0	45
December	8	4	1	0	0	13
January	26	4	1	0	0	31
February	34	3	0	0	0	37
March	23	2	0	0	0	25

Note:

Columns 1 and 2 above are consistent with the requirements of the question but columns 3, 4 and 5 vary from it as the Wales Office collates its correspondence statistics slightly differently.

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what publicly owned accommodation is made available to him in his official role; how many nights he has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost is of maintaining each of these properties. [55089]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what publicly owned accommodation is made available to him in his official role; how many nights he has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost was of maintaining each of these properties in the last 12 months. [55091]

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I refer the hon. Member to the answer that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave to the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) on 28 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1443W, and the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) on 21 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 599 and 28 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 91W.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the President of the Council what publicly owned accommodation is made available to him in his official role; how many nights he has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost was of maintaining each of these properties in the last 12 months. [55092]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer the hon. Member to the answers given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker), 28 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1443W and by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins), 21 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 599 and on 28 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 91W.

To date, my Department has met no expenses on No. 1 Carlton Gardens since I became Leader of the House of Commons, although we await a transfer of costs from the Foreign Office.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many known illegal immigrants have reached the UK after travelling through the channel tunnel on freight trains in 2002. [50878]

Angela Eagle: It is not possible to establish precisely how many illegal entrants have reached the United Kingdom after travelling through the channel tunnel on freight trains. Some are detected inland and cannot be attributed to a particular port of entry and some claim to use the channel tunnel but have in fact entered by a different route.

Information on the known number of illegal entrants who have arrived in the United Kingdom in 2002 is not yet available.

Provisional management information for 2001 indicates that a total of 1,552 illegal entrants, who had been concealed on board freight trains, were detected on arrival at Dollands Moor freight yard.

The locally collated figures show this total is broken down over the calendar year as follows: 504 (January–March), 240 (April-June), 183 (July-September) and 625 (October-December).

Complaints

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints were registered against his Department in *(a)* 1990 to 1996 and *(b)* 1997 to 2002; how many are current; and what proportion were (i) taken up and (ii) upheld by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration in those periods. [51221]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 19 April 2002]:* Complaints are handled initially by the area of the Home Office or by the agency against which the complaint has been made, many of which have their own complaints procedures. Information about the main complaints procedures operating in the Home Office and its agencies is publicised on the internet, including the Home Office main website at www.homeoffice.gov.uk

Information on the outcome of statutory investigations is set out in the Parliamentary Ombudsman's annual reports, copies of which are available in the Library, and for annual reports from 1997–98 to 2001–02, on the Parliamentary Ombudsman's website at www.ombudsman.org.uk/pca/document/par01/index.htm.

Mrs. L. Odedra

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the appeal papers in respect of Mrs. L. Odedra, a constituent, were received by the Appeals Registry at the Home Office; and when they were despatched to the Immigration Appeals Office Authority tribunal ref: ECR/419/00 104792. [51522]

Angela Eagle: I understand that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Bradshaw) will be writing to my hon. Friend about this matter shortly.

Dungavel

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how the Committee of Visiting at Dungavel was arranged; who was appointed to sit upon the Committee; what criteria are used in deciding who can act as a visitor; and what the total cost was for the conversion of Dungavel from a prison to a detention centre. [53217]

Angela Eagle: Applications to be considered for appointment to the Dungavel House Visiting Committee were invited in an advert placed in the local press on 10 August 2001. Eleven individuals were appointed to the committee on 27 March 2002. Successful candidates were selected on the basis of the experience and abilities they could bring to the committee and to ensure a reasonably balanced membership. It is not the practice to publish the names of visiting committee members and we have no plans to change this policy.

The total cost of converting Dungavel House to an immigration removal centre is expected to be in the region of £3.5 million.

Teachers

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* teachers and *(b)* teaching professionals were awarded work permits for UK recruitment during *(a)* 2001, *(b)* 2000 and *(c)* 1999. [52972]

Angela Eagle: Work Permits (UK) do not differentiate between teachers and teaching professionals.

The numbers of work permits issued for teachers and teaching professionals are:

	Number
1999	696
2000	1,444
2001	5,888

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how the Work Permit Initiative will ensure that agencies observe the requirement to secure contracts of employment for work permit applicants; what checks Work Permits UK will have in place to ensure that a contract of employment exists; and for what reason *(a)* overseas teachers will require a contract of employment and *(b)* other agency staff are supplied on a contract-for-services basis. [53522]

Angela Eagle: Work Permits (UK) require any employer or agency acting as the employer to sign the "Employer's Declaration" on the work permit application form, which binds them to the criteria of the work permit arrangements. In this way, teacher agencies are treated in the same way as any other United Kingdom employer in ensuring that a contract of employment for the individual is in place.

Details of employment contracts between an individual and their employer can be requested and checked upon if abuse of the work permit arrangements are suspected.

A contract of employment is required as an overseas teacher should be afforded the same terms and conditions of employment as those of a resident teacher. Anyone working on a contract-for-services basis is not regarded as being "employed" under the work permit arrangements, rather they are regarded as being "self-employed". For this reason, an agency recruiting an individual who is working solely on a contract-for-services basis would not be granted a work permit.

Immigration

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the longest time taken has been in the last five years to process an application of a person to remain in the UK indefinitely; and how many cases were outstanding at 22 April 2001. [53213]

Angela Eagle: I regret this information is not currently available. We are introducing a Casework Information database which, when fully operational, will enable us to monitor our performance on general immigration casework more effectively.

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those countries where there are difficulties in obtaining information on internal checks for people applying for indefinite leave to remain in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [53211]

Angela Eagle: Checks made on people applying for indefinite leave to remain will depend on the circumstances of the particular case. While the Immigration and Nationality Directorate aims to deal with 70 per cent. of non-asylum applications within three weeks, the need to make further inquiries, including security checks, may affect this. Within that overall target, there are no specific targets for applications which may require security checks, and on security and international relations grounds it would be inappropriate for me to list countries where there are particular difficulties.

Digital Equipment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many digital radios are owned by his Department for use in departmental buildings from which Ministers work; and what the *(a)* cost and *(b)* date of purchase of each radio was. [52858]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* The Home Office has not purchased any digital radios in departmental buildings from which Ministers work.

National Criminal Intelligence Service

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many and what percentage of reports made by accountants, solicitors and financial advisers to NCIS were *(a)* investigated and *(b)* led to confiscation, for the most recent convenient period. [53610]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) does not hold statistical information in the format requested. However, it does monitor whether financial disclosures it receives and forwards to law enforcement agencies are of value to those agencies. For the calendar year 2000, NCIS received 18,048 disclosures (in total). Which were all forwarded to law enforcement for action as necessary. (Only 0.42 per cent. and 1.35 per cent. were received in that year from accountants and solicitors respectively). To date NCIS has received feedback in 11,047 cases and in 9,082 (82 per cent.) of these replies the police force or law enforcement agency recorded that the reports had assisted law enforcement efforts.

Suspicious transaction reports may only form part of a wider investigation that ultimately leads to the arrest and conviction of individuals and the confiscation of assets. Such reports can provide new information and intelligence that may substantially move an investigation forward as well as providing an invaluable insight into the presence or whereabouts of assets for later confiscation. On occasions they may also simply provide confirmation of information already known to the investigators.

PFI/PPPs

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* private finance initiative and *(b)* public-private partnership projects which have been delayed. [44872]

Angela Eagle: From the best information available of the private finance initiative (PFI) and public-private partnership (PPP) projects entered into by the Home Office, the following projects have experienced delays:

Project	*PFI/PPP*	*Signed or expected*
Prisons Energy Tranche 2	PFI	Signed
Her Majesty's Prison Dovegate	PFI	Signed
Quantum (Prison Service)	PFI	Signed
Medway Secure Training Centre (STC)	PFI	Signed
Rainsbrook STC	PFI	Signed
Hassockfield STC	PFI	Signed
Passport Data Capture	PFI	Signed
Passport Supply	PFI	Signed
Airwave (PSRCP)	PFI	Signed
IT2000 (Sirius programme)	PFI	Signed
Criminal Records Bureau	PPP	Signed
Home Office Central London Accommodation Strategy (HOCLAS)	PFI	Signed

The length of delays for each project varies between six weeks and 24 months. The reasons for the delays are varied. For example, Her Majesty's Prison Dovegate was delayed due to the possibility of a judicial review by a local action group: Hassockfield STC due to planning appeals; changes of strategy from refurbishment of existing buildings to new build in the case of HOCLAS; and problems concluding preferred bidder stage necessitating further negotiation and an invitation to tender for best and final offers on the IT2000 project.

Human Rights Act

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases have been brought against his Department under the Human Rights Act 1998; and what has been the cost in *(a)* legal fees to defend cases and *(b)* compensation payments. [45063]

Angela Eagle: We do not collect central records of all cases in which the Human Rights Act 1998 is relied on. Human rights are now integrated in the general law and are rarely the sole basis for a challenge. We will not always know whether a case has been brought against the Home Office, because the Courts are under no obligation to inform us. It would take a disproportionate amount of time and expense to try to compile such a record, even if cases could always be categorised as "being brought . . . under the Human Rights Act 1998".

We do not collect separate information centrally about the costs to public funds, legal fees or compensation payments which include a human rights issue. In most cases it will be difficult to single out associated costs relating to the human rights element.

Airwave System

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the roll-out of the Airwave system to be completed; what dates were originally given to police forces; what compensation he is seeking from O2 for the delays in roll-out; and what proportion of masts necessary for complete roll-out are *(a)* completed, *(b)* being built and *(c)* awaiting planning consent. [47606]

Mr. Denham: The contract for the provision of the Airwave service specifies completion of the roll-out in England and Wales by June 2004, and in Scotland by 2005.

The delivery dates agreed with individual police forces, known as 'Ready For Service' (RFS) dates, commenced in 2001, and are being rolled-out in England, Wales and Scotland as indicated above.

As with any large project using leading-edge technology there has been a number of complex technical issues that have had to be resolved as the project has rolled-out. Delays have also been caused by such factors as the foot and mouth epidemic, and obtaining planning permissions for mast sites. MM02 has responded to this by instigating a fundamental review of RFS dates which began in November 2001. This review is still on-going and a full assessment of the position will not be possible until the main results of the review become available.

The Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO) is currently developing the approach that should be taken to seek appropriate remedies from MM02, and will begin consultations with police forces shortly.

The current situation is that 15 per cent. of radio masts have been built, 24 per cent. of sites are awaiting planning permission, 20 per cent. have been identified but not yet submitted for planning permission, and 41 per cent. had yet to be acquired. The number of sites needed to complete the roll-out will depend upon exact police service requirements, topology and local planning considerations.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which languages he plans will be used to educate children detained within asylum centres. [53688]

Angela Eagle: I assume that the hon. Member's question relates to educational provision in accommodation centres. The language needs of the children will be taken into account in the way that their education is provided including, where necessary, through the provision of interpreter support.

Asylum seekers will not be detained in accommodation centres.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what his estimate is of the numbers of asylum seekers from Slovakia who have entered the UK in each of the past five years; and what percentage of them were subsequently found to have valid reasons for seeking asylum; [54013]

(2) how many asylum seekers from *(a)* Romania and *(b)* the Czech Republic have entered the UK in each of the past five years; and what percentage of them were subsequently found to have valid reasons for seeking asylum. [54019]

Angela Eagle: I regret that reliable information on the entry routes of asylum seekers, including when asylum seekers first enter the United Kingdom is not available. However the number of asylum applications received between 1997 and 2001 from nationals of Romania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia is given in the tables.

Information on the initial decisions made in this period is also given, though these initial decisions do not all relate to applications made in the same period.

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*[1]	*2001*[1]
Romania					
Applications received[2]	605	1,015	1,985	2,160	1,425
Total initial decisions[3]	645	1,160	440	2,800	2,125
Cases considered under normal procedures[4]:					
Number of cases	645	1,160	350	2,725	2,125
Granted asylum (percentage)	0	0	1	1	0
Granted ELR (percentage)	1	0	0	1	3
Refused (percentage)	98	100	99	99	97
Backlog clearance exercise[5]:					
Number of cases	—	—	95	75	—
Granted asylum or ELR under background criteria (percentage)	0	0	50	63	0
Refused under backlog criteria (percentage)	0	0	50	37	0
Czech Republic					
Applications received[2]	240	515	1,790	1,200	930
Total initial decisions[3]	210	180	275	1,800	855
Cases considered under normal procedures[4]:					
Number of cases	210	180	275	1,800	855
Granted asylum (percentage)	0	0	0	1	0
Granted ELR (percentage)	0	0	0	1	0
Refused (percentage)	100	100	100	99	100
Backlog clearance exercise[5]:					
Number of cases	—	—	—	—	—
Granted asylum or ELR under background criteria (percentage)	0	0	100	100	0
Refused under backlog criteria (per cent.)	0	0	0	0	0

	1997	1998	1999	2000[1]	2001[1]
Slovakia[7]					
Applications received[2]	290	835	70	55	60
Total initial decisions[3]	375	335	160	220	85
Cases considered under normal procedures[4]:					
Number of cases	375	335	160	220	85
Granted asylum (percentage)	0	0	5	5	1
Granted ELR (percentage)	0	0	1	1	1
Refused (percentage)	100	100	93	93	98
Backlog clearance exercise[5]:					
Number of cases	—	—	*—	*—	—
Granted asylum or ELR under background criteria (percentage)	0	0	100	100	0
Refused under backlog criteria (percentage)	0	0	0	0	0

[1] Figures for 2000 and 2001 are provisional and subject to change.
[2] May exclude some cases lodged at local enforcement offices between January 1999 and March 2000.
[3] Information is of initial decision, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.
[4] Cases considered under normal procedures may include some cases decided under the backlog criteria.
[5] Cases decided under measures aimed at reducing the pre-1996 asylum application backlog.
[6] 1 or 2 cases.
[7] Data prior to 1999 for Slovakia refer to the Slovak Republic.
Notes:
1. Figures rounded to the nearest 5.
2. Decision figures do not necessarily relate to applications received in the same period.
3. Percentages for cases considered under normal procedures and those within the backlog clearance exercise are calculated separately.
4. Includes some cases where the application has been refused on substantive grounds.

Information on applications and initial decisions is published quarterly. The next publication will cover the period up to March 2002, and will be available from 30 May 2002 on the Home Office research development and statistics directorate website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers he estimates will pass through asylum induction centres in each year; what estimate he has made of the costs of introducing the centres; and if he will make a statement. [53905]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Eventually all asylum seekers will pass through induction centres. Those seeking National Asylum Support Service accommodation will remain in the induction centre for approximately seven days; whereas those seeking NASS financial support only or no NASS support at all, will remain in the centre for approximately one day—this may, in some cases, involve an overnight stay.

It is envisaged those asylum seekers who are to be housed in accommodation centres in the future, will remain in the induction centre for around two days, while appropriate arrangements are made for their transfer.

The cost of introducing induction centres has been kept to a minimum. The Dover induction centre required additional funding for a small number of staff, (and related resources, such as information technology), within migrant helpline to deliver the more comprehensive detailed briefing. In addition a local team of staff has been created, by means of local recruitment and the introduction of a NASS office in the area, (the site of which is yet to be finalised). The introduction of induction centres will negate the need to use expensive bed and breakfast type housing on an emergency basis.

The establishment of the induction centre in Dover has assisted in a faster dispersal of asylum-seekers to NASS accommodation throughout the country, despite the fluctuating numbers arriving there; and the streamlining of Immigration Nationality Directorate processes. This has assisted in delivering a more cost effective front-end process.

Further induction centres in outer London, such as the Heathrow and Gatwick areas will follow. These centres will, of course, replace a significant amount of emergency accommodation currently used to house NASS applicants in inner London. In addition, a number of smaller centres within the regions will be established. Again the opening of such centres will be closely linked to the present use of emergency accommodation in related areas and the possibility of regionalising some of the work carried out by NASS staff.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what right asylum seekers have to nominate their own *(a)* psychiatrist and *(b)* psychologist for the production of reports on their suitability for deportation; how many have done so in the last 12 months; and in how many cases people have been found to be psychologically unsuitable for deportation. [53960]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* It is open to anyone facing removal from the United Kingdom under the Immigration Acts to make representations against that decision, and they may submit whatever evidence, including medical evidence, they consider necessary in support of those representations. Where medical evidence is submitted, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate may seek a second opinion.

Information about numbers of cases where psychiatric or psychological reports have been submitted and the outcomes of such cases is not collected centrally.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to provide financial assistance to students waiting for their asylum applications to be processed towards their monthly train fare to Gatwick to report to the authorities. [54157]

Angela Eagle: The current immigration legislation does not provide a power to enable the Home Office to reimburse the costs of travel for those required to report to a police or immigration officer. The Nationality Immigration and Asylum Bill provides a power which, if introduced, will mean that the Secretary of State may meet the reasonable travelling costs of those required to report.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are being held in Prison Service accommodation; and if he will make a statement. [53906]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member for Woking to the answer I gave him on 30 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 410W. Information on Immigration Act detainees as at 30 March 2002 will be published on 30 May 2002 on the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum applicants have been refused *(a)* asylum and *(b)* exceptional leave to remain in each of the last two years; and what proportion of them subsequently appealed. [52760]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 30 April 2002]:* Information on the outcome of initial decisions made on asylum applications in the United Kingdom during the last two years is given in the table.

Initial decisions made on applications for asylum in the UK, 2000 and 2001[1], principal applicants only

	2000	*2001*
Total initial decisions	109,205	118,195
Cases considered under normal procedures[2]:		
Granted asylum	10,375	10,960
Granted ELR[3]	11,495	19,510
Refused asylum or ELR[3]	75,680	87,825
Backlog clearance exercise[4]:		
Granted asylum or ELR under backlog criteria	10,325	—
Refused under backlog criteria[5]	1,335	—

[1] Provisional figures are rounded to the nearest 5, and exlude dependants.

[2] Cases considered under normal procedures may include some cases decided under the backlog criteria.

[3] ELR = Exceptional Leave to Remain.

[4] Cases decided under measures aimed at reducing the pre-1996 asylum applications backlog.

[5] Includes some cases where the application has been refused on substantive grounds.

Our latest estimate is that 50–60 per cent. of those principal applicants who were refused asylum and exceptional leave to remain in 2000 subsequently lodged an appeal. An estimate for 2001 will be published in the forthcoming annual Home Office bulletin 'Asylum Statistics 2001'.

Information on initial decisions and appeals is also published quarterly. The next publication will cover the period up to March 2002, and will be available from 30 May 2002 on the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether accommodation centres for asylum seekers will be located in cluster areas where they are currently being accommodated through the NASS. [53740]

Angela Eagle: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) on 11 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 57W.

Magistrates

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on proposals to extend sentencing powers of magistrates. [51317]

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the proposal to increase the sentencing power of magistrates courts; and if he will make a statement. [51326]

Mr. Keith Bradley *[holding answers 30 April 2002]:* In the course of consultation on the Auld report on the criminal courts, many organisations and individuals who commented on the proposed intermediate tier and abolition of the right to elect suggested that an increase in magistrates sentencing powers might serve as an alternative means of reducing the burden on the Crown court. Similar views were expressed during consultation following the Halliday report on sentencing, particularly in response to the proposed sentence of custody plus, as when imposed in full this sentence would be outside magistrates current powers.

National Asylum Support Service

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 938W, what was the total value of payments from the National Asylum Support Service to the reception assistant agencies in respect of the provision of one-stop shop advice services in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02; and what is the planned value of such payments in 2002–03. [54106]

Angela Eagle: The total value of payments made by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to voluntary sector organisations in respect of reception assistants and one stop services is as follows for the following years *(a)* 2000–01 was £18.3 million and *(b)* 2001–02 £19.2 million. The planned value of payments for 2002–03 is £18 million. All figures are rounded to the nearest £0.1 million.

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 938W, what was the total value of payments from the National Asylum Support Service to the reception assistant agencies in respect of the provision of emergency accommodation in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02; and what is the planned value of such payments in 2002–03. [54105]

Angela Eagle: The total value of payments made by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to reception assistants for *(a)* 2000–01 was £27.5 million and *(b)* 2001–02 £70 million. The planned value of payments for 2002–03 is £50 million. All figures are rounded to the nearest £0.1 million.

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it the practice of the National Asylum Support Service to issue an acknowledgement of correspondence received from *(a)* supported asylum seekers and *(b)* representatives of supported asylum seekers. [54104]

Angela Eagle: The time within which the National Asylum Support Service responds to requests from *(a)* supported asylum seekers and *(b)* representatives of supported persons is considered to be sufficiently fast not to warrant introducing a system of routine acknowledgements of correspondence received.

Asylum Accommodation Centres

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who determined the criteria for the selection of proposed sites for asylum accommodation centres. [54099]

Angela Eagle: The criteria for proposed site selection was determined by the Home Office and was outlined in the reply I gave to the hon. Member on 7 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1134W.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department will send written details to *(a)* Wychavon district council and *(b)* Worcestershire county council on the proposed asylum accommodation centre at Throckmorton. [42803]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 12 March 2002]:* I apologise for the delay in answering this question, caused by an administrative oversight in my Department. We will make an announcement in the proposed use of the site shortly.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the merits of locating asylum accommodation centres in *(a)* rural, *(b)* suburban and *(c)* urban sites; what discussions he has had with EU counterparts on the location of asylum accommodation centres; and if he will make a statement. [54035]

Angela Eagle: Our policy is to site accommodation centres in non-urban areas in order to reduce the overall burden placed upon local services in urban areas. Each potential accommodation centre site will be assessed on its merits. We have not discussed the location of United Kingdom asylum accommodation centres with our European Union counterparts, but we are drawing on the European experience as we develop our plans.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how asylum seekers who have resided at asylum accommodation centres and are accepted for permanent settlement will be allocated permanent addresses in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [54036]

Angela Eagle: Any asylum seeker who is granted refugee status has the freedom to live wherever he or she wishes in the United Kingdom, in the same way as somebody already resident here. The Government will explore with local authorities and others options for those leaving accommodation centres with positive decisions and subsequent integration into United Kingdom society.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his most recent assessment is of the implications for local emergency services of the establishment of asylum accommodation centres in their service areas; and if he will make a statement. [54101]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 5 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 880W.

Deportations (Zimbabwe)

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is on the deportation of failed asylum seekers to Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [53929]

Angela Eagle: On 15 January 2002, we announced a temporary suspension of returns of unsuccessful asylum applicants to Zimbabwe. We will resume returns only when we are satisfied that it is safe to do so, and not before. We are monitoring events in the aftermath of the Zimbabwe presidential election in close liaison with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). There is no set time scale, but it would be unrealistic to be able to make any decision on a resumption of removals until the immediate post-election situation has calmed down and we have had time to assess properly the risks to returnees and gather and consider the views of FCO and others.

Correspondence

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter dated 12 March from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan, regarding his constituent Mr. J Morrison of Rosehearty. [53775]

Angela Eagle: The correspondence was transferred to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and a reply to the hon. Member was despatched from the Joint Entry Clearance Unit on 25 April 2002.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the question from the hon. Member for Isle of Wight of 1 March, Ref 39915. [55430]

Angela Eagle: I have replied to the hon. Member's question today. I apologise for the delay in responding.

Child Asylum Seekers

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of child asylum seekers, broken down by *(a)* those seeking asylum with an adult and *(b)* those unaccompanied were from each country in each year since 1995. [54111]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The table shows the number of unaccompanied children who have made an asylum application in the period January 1995 to August 2001, inclusive.

I regret that reliable information on the number of children who have applied for asylum in the United Kingdom, accompanied by an adult, is not readily available and could be obtained only by examination of individual case records and is, therefore, available only at disproportionate cost.

Information on unaccompanied minors is published annually in the statistical bulletin "Asylum Statistics United Kingdom", a copy of which is available in the Library, and from the research development and statistics website: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Unaccompanied[1,2,3] children, aged 17 or under, applying for asylum in the United Kingdom, by nationality, 1995 to 2001

Number of principal applicants

Nationality	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000[4]*	*2001[4,5]*
Europe							
Albania	6	14	39	49	126	94	46
Czech Republic	—	—	2	6	29	18	22
FRY	—	—	119	1,529	1,522	666	312
Poland	5	15	18	44	47	13	20
Romania	9	13	32	68	86	40	33
Russia	—	—	2	2	3	2	2
Turkey	41	71	48	107	116	153	75
Ukraine	—	—	—	2	1	4	1
Other former USSR	8	2	10	36	26	24	22
Other former Yugoslavia	14	50	107	24	32	36	100
Other	5	12	30	9	8	3	—
Total	88	177	407	1,876	1,996	1,053	633
Americas							
Colombia	6	14	26	9	18	5	4
Ecuador	2	5	4	5	13	7	—
Other	1	1	1	6	9	4	6
Total	9	20	31	20	40	16	10
Africa							
Algeria	—	2	21	50	12	23	12
Angola	17	10	12	10	42	102	101
Dem Republic Congo	21	15	27	19	33	47	43
Ethiopia	52	21	23	66	54	62	79
Gambia	20	—	—	—	—	—	1
Ghana	8	7	1	2	1	10	2
Kenya	19	31	9	23	12	8	8
Nigeria	24	15	18	53	45	24	26
Rwanda	2	1	7	13	35	49	20
Sierra Leone	6	3	14	23	65	74	88
Somalia	71	68	158	153	189	177	132
Sudan	1	—	3	4	6	9	5
Tanzania	48	10	1	3	1	3	1
Uganda	10	6	5	9	10	26	22
Zimbabwe	2	—	—	—	6	34	21
Other	34	41	65	107	121	151	453
Total	335	230	364	535	632	799	677
Middle East							
Iran	3	2	7	8	14	65	20
Iraq	12	16	20	30	58	112	125
Other	1	5	5	7	16	14	16
Total	16	23	32	45	88	191	161
Asia							
Afghanistan	50	48	109	124	213	300	563
Bangladesh	5	3	3	2	4	4	8
China	26	56	78	301	166	117	72
India	8	14	6	9	13	14	12
Pakistan	3	7	4	12	19	25	17
Sri Lanka	53	40	40	91	127	170	116
Other	—	2	6	10	10	25	51
Total	145	170	246	549	552	655	839
Other, and nationality not known	4	11	22	12	41	19	23
Grand total	597	631	1,102	3,037	3,349	2,733	2,343

[1] Unaccompanied at the point of their arrival, and not known to be joining a close relative in the United Kingdom.
[2] May exclude some cases lodged at Local Enforcement Offices between January 1999 and March 2000.
[3] Figures exclude disputed age cases.
[4] Provisional figures.
[5] 2001 figures include January to August only. August is the latest month for which data are available.

United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 18 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1155W, on the UN Convention on Rights of the Child, what measures are in place to inform *(a)* adult asylum seekers with children and *(b)* unaccompanied child asylum seekers about the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child. [54110]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Asylum seekers are able to access legal advice to assist them with their applications and this should include information about their rights under international conventions. All unaccompanied minors who apply for asylum are referred to the Refugee Council's Panel of Advisers, a non-statutory body which acts as adviser to the child in his or her dealings with the Home Office and other agencies for the duration of the asylum claim.

Criminal Case Review Commission

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what fees and expenses are available for full and part-time members of the Criminal Case Review Commission panellists; and what the median annual income from public funds of Criminal Case Review Commission full and part-time panellists is. [53754]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Details of salary and emoluments of all commission members are published in the commission's annual report, a copy of which is lodged in the Library.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consideration was given by the Criminal Case Review Commission to the prioritisation of the allegation of miscarriage of justice brought by Mr. Robert Brown; on what date the case papers of Mr. Brown were received by the Criminal Case Review Commission; on what date a caseworker was allocated to his case; on what date the caseworker's report was completed; on what date Mr. Brown was informed of a pending hearing before a three-person panel of the Criminal Case Review Commission; what date is planned for a panel hearing; on what date the Criminal Case Review Commission were informed of the health of Mr. Brown's mother; if compassionate grounds constitute a factor to be taken into account by the Criminal Case Review Commission in progressing a case; and how many of the proposed panel members are retained on a part-time basis by the Criminal Case Review Commission. [53753]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Mr. Brown's application was received by the Criminal Case Review Commission on 2 October 1997. It was routinely allocated to a case review manager on 21 October 1999. It remains under review. The progress of cases is as expeditious as possible taking into account the factors of individual cases. The Commission does not publicly release details of its cases or their applicants.

Asylum Induction Centre (Dover)

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the asylum induction centre in Dover will be fully operational; and if he will make a statement. [53907]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Applicants are housed on a full-board basis. Migrant Helpline and the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) provide support services daily leading to dispersal within seven days of arrival. Those who do not seek NASS support are fully briefed about the asylum process in the United Kingdom and an interview is arranged on their behalf.

Presently health screening is provided through the East Kent health authority, and is funded by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate for a six-month pilot period, at the end of which the process will be evaluated before decisions are taken on the delivery of health screening within induction centres throughout the United Kingdom.

Oakington Detention Centre

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the future of the Oakington Detention Centre site. [53904]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The fast track asylum facility operated at the Oakington Reception Centre is a key element within the Government's overall strategy for processing asylum applicants as speedily as possible. Subject to the outcome of the appeal to the House of Lords, we intend that the fast track process will continue to operate as at present. We fully expect to have the use of the Oakington facility until October 2004 but, in view of the outstanding judicial proceedings, it would be inappropriate to comment further at this stage.

Arranged Marriages

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards arranged marriages, with special reference to immigration. [54497]

Angela Eagle: There is no policy relating to arranged marriages.

Abu Hamza

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the suspension of Abu Hamza by the Charity Commission from his position with the charity, the North London Centre Mosque, with special reference to the basis for the Charity Commissioner's action. [54202]

Angela Eagle: The decision to suspend Abu Hamza is a matter for the Charity Commission as the Government Department responsible for charities in England and Wales. The Director of Operations at the Charity Commission will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of his reply will be placed in the Library.

Parliamentary Questions

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the question from the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) on the special voucher scheme (ref: 46319). [53886]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* I replied to the hon. Member's question yesterday, *Official Report*, column 233W. I apologise for the delay in responding.

Press and Public Relations

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the annual budget for communications activities, including press, public relations, marketing and internal communications, was for his Department for each financial year from 1997–98 to 2001–02. [39915]

Angela Eagle: The information for the Home Office is as follows:

Communications budgets 1997 to 2002

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Press office running costs	—	1,095,000	1,213,200	1,606,100	1,505,100
Press office programme costs	—	—	—	—	—
Total	—	1,095,000	1,213,200	1,606,100	1,505,100.00
Prison press media running costs	—	—	—	578,100	467,500
Prison press media programme costs	—	—	—	—	—
Total	—	—	—	578,100	467,500
Marketing running costs	—	950,950	986,200	758,300	815,000
Marketing programme costs	4,121,000	7,459,050	11,050,000	32,874,000	25,115,000
Total	[1]4,121,000.00	8,410,000	12,036,200	33,632,300	25,930,000
Internal communications unit running costs	—	—	—	692,600	814,500
Internal communications unit programme costs	—	—	—	—	—
Internal communications ('Inside Track' staff magazine)	—	—	—	125,000	130,000
Total	—	—	—	817,600	944,500
Internal advisers running costs	—	—	—	373,200	480,500
Internal advisers programme costs	—	—	—	—	—
Total	—	—	—	373,200	480,500
Grand total	4,121,000	9,505,000	13,249,400	36,429,200	28,860,100

[1] The figure for 1997–98 is given as a single total. This was the first year that publicity budgets were devolved to directorates, also at that time all expenditure including running costs were entered under one cost code; therefore a more detailed breakdown is not available.

As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and my right hon. Friend his predecessor (Mr. Straw) have said on a number of occasions, increases in spending on communications activities have largely come about for two reasons. Firstly, the expansion of the Home Office Press Office, which took effect in late 2000, was to cope with the widened responsibilities—particularly relating to the Government's reform programme and a significant increase in demand from the media. The second expansion has been on marketing and advertising where a number of substantial and important public information campaigns were mounted—including fire safety, electoral registration, and vehicle crime reduction and, more recently, the continuing highly effective police recruitment campaign which has contributed greatly to the achievement of the highest level of police officers.

TREASURY

Budget

8. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the effect on a family with two children on an average income for the north-west as a result of the Budget changes. [53550]

Mr. Gordon Brown: There are 325,000 families with children in the north-east and 880,000 in the north-west. Around 90 per cent. of these families will be eligible for the child tax credit from April 2003, which together with child benefit will deliver up to £54.25 a week in support for the first child, compared with £27.70 a week in April 1997.

A single-earner family on median earnings of £21,400 and with two children will gain by £3.90 a week as a result of the personal tax and benefit measures announced in the Budget.

25. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much additional support the Budget will provide to families with children in financial year 2002–03. [53567]

Dawn Primarolo: An additional £500 million of support will be available for families with children in 2002–03. This includes the costs of a £2.50 per week above-inflation increase in working families' tax credit rates from June 2002 and a £3.50 per week above-inflation increase in the child allowances in income support and jobseeker's allowance from October 2002.

14. **Andrew Mackinlay:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of people in Thurrock who will be affected by his Budget proposals aimed at relieving poverty. [53556]

Mr. Boateng: There are 14,000 families with children in Thurrock. Nationally, around 90 per cent. of families will be eligible for the child tax credit, which together with child benefit will deliver up to £54.25 a week in support for the first child from April 2003.

There are 17,000 people in Thurrock benefiting from the increase in the winter fuel payment to £200 and 15,000 will benefit from the guaranteed increases in the basic state pension. Nationally, up to half of all pensioner households will be eligible for the pension credit from October 2003.

National Insurance Contributions

12. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received about the burden of national insurance contributions on business. [53554]

Mr. Andrew Smith: In the run up to the Budget statement the Government received a number of representations from business organisations.

20. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what cost compliance estimate was made of the effects on business of changes in national insurance contributions announced in the Budget. [53562]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the Inland Revenue's Regulatory Impact Assessment for the National Insurance Contributions Bill. A copy was placed in the Library on 1 May.

24. **Mr. Baron:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions he has had with the Federation of Small Businesses regarding the increase in employers' national insurance contributions announced in the 2002 Budget. [53566]

Dawn Primarolo: Ministers and civil servants have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals as part of the process of policy development and analysis. As with previous Administrations it is not this Government's practice to provide details of all such meetings. All such contacts are conducted in accordance with the Ministerial Code, the Civil Service Code and Guidance for Civil Servants: Contacts with Lobbyists.

27. **Mr. Peter Duncan:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cash-flow implications to businesses of the increase in employers' national insurance contributions announced in the 2002 Budget. [53569]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Most businesses in the UK are small, and the average small business employs around five employees. For a typical employer of this size, the increase in employers' NICs is around £835 a year.

34. **Matthew Green:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact of the proposed change in employers' national insurance contributions on manufacturing company profitability for financial year 2003–04. [53576]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It is estimated that the changes to employers' national insurance contributions announced in the Budget will increase pay costs on average across the economy by 0.7 per cent. next year. Employers will benefit from the impact of the investment in the health service on the health of their employees.

38. **Mr. John Taylor:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the cost to the public sector of the change in employers' national insurance contributions announced in the Budget in 2003–04. [53580]

39. **Mr. Hendry:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the cost to the public sector of the change in employers' national insurance contributions announced in the Budget in 2003–04. [53581]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The cost to the public services will be just over £1 billion which compares with a planned rise in spending on public services of nearly £20 billion. The changes will help to fund improvements to public services and a real terms increase in spending on health over the next five years of over 40 per cent.

Road Haulage Industry

16. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from the Road Haulage Association on the impact of Budget measures on the road haulage industry; and if he will make a statement. [53558]

Mr. Boateng: Since the Budget, I have chaired a meeting in the Treasury to outline further details about how the Government intend to implement their manifesto commitment to "ensure that hauliers from overseas pay their fair share towards the costs of our roads".

The Road Haulage Association has welcomed the Budget and the Government's proposals to modernise the taxation of the haulage industry, describing them positively as a revolution gathering momentum. The Road Haulage Association's chief executive, a former Member of the House for the party opposite, has even said that this policy could make 2002 the most important year since denationalisation—and perhaps ever.

Wanless Report

17. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will next meet Mr. Wanless to discuss the contents of the final Wanless report. [53559]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Derek Wanless formally submitted his final report to the Chancellor on 15 April. No further meetings between Mr. Wanless and the Chancellor are currently planned.

Pensioner Income

18. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the Budget on pensioner income. [53560]

Ruth Kelly: The average pensioner household will be £7.75 per week, or around £400 per year, better off due to the Government's personal tax and benefit changes announced in the latest Budget round.

19. **John Robertson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on measures to raise the standard of living of the poorest pensioners. [53561]

Ruth Kelly: The Government are committed to tackling pensioner poverty; helping those in greatest need. The Government introduced the minimum income guarantee and is committed to raising it in line with earnings throughout this Parliament. From 2003, the pension credit will enable those with a modest amount of second pension or savings to gain on average just over £400 a year.

Pensions

21. **Mr. Todd:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on recent fiscal measures he has taken to encourage pension provision. [53563]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are introducing pension credit from 2003, at a cost of £2 billion in the first full year. The pension credit will reward those pensioners who have modest incomes from second pensions or savings. In addition from 2003–04 the age-related personal tax allowances will be increased to ensure that no pensioner aged 65 or over will pay tax on income of less than £127 a week.

Debt Relief

15. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress he has made in persuading other countries to follow his December 2000 pledge on debt cancellations. [53557]

Mr. Boateng: The UK Government continue to press other countries to follow the UK's example and to hold in trust any debt payment received from HIPC countries prior to decision point. However, among other considerations, legal constraints make this difficult for many countries. To date only Canada has introduced a similar policy.

22. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he will ensure that debt relief for developing countries *(a)* inside and *(b)* outside the HIPC initiative is accelerated to levels required to meet international development targets. [53564]

Mr. Boateng: The Government continue to press for rapid implementation of the HIPC debt relief initiative. At the IMF/World bank spring meetings we secured agreement that there needed to be a full review of HIPC for consideration at the annual meetings in October. This review will ensure that all countries in the HIPC initiative achieve sustainable levels of debt. Already countries are receiving debt relief worth $1.7 billion in 2001–02 which is being used to increase spending on education, health and other key poverty reducing areas.

The benefits of the HIPC initiative remain open to all poor countries that are heavily indebted. However it is clear that many poor countries that have only moderate levels of indebtedness none the less need additional finance if they are to achieve the millennium development goals. For this reason the Government have welcomed the recent commitments by the US and the EU to increase their aid effort by $12 billion per annum.

33. **Alan Simpson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average number of conditionality terms attached to agreements in the Debt Relief programme undertaken by the World Bank and IMF has been to date, broken down by country. [53575]

Mr. Boateng: Under the HIPC framework countries must demonstrate their commitment towards poverty reduction prior to qualifying for debt relief. They do this by developing a national poverty reduction strategy and following sound macroeconomic policy. Upon reaching decision point, countries start receiving interim relief and continue to develop their full poverty reduction strategy. Most countries will have implemented their poverty reduction strategy for a year prior to exiting the HIPC framework. The average number of conditions is 12 where 60 per cent. of the conditions are attached to poverty, including health and education, while 24 per cent. are on governance and financial transparency.

World Poverty

23. **Tony Cunningham:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on progress in international efforts to relieve world poverty. [53565]

Mr. Boateng: There has been positive progress made recently. In March, the United Nations conference on financing for development held in Monterrey helped to mobilise substantial increased aid commitments

In March EU member states agreed to increase their aid volumes in the next four years so that collectively an EU average of 0.39 per cent. of national income is reached by 2006—a seven billion dollar a year increase in aid from 2006, and potentially cumulatively 20 billion dollars before then.

Furthermore, the United States has committed to increasing its aid by five billion dollars a year from 2006—a 50 per cent. increase in the US aid budget.

The Monterrey Consensus—which sets out a balanced agenda of partnership and mutual accountability—was formally adopted by UN members; particularly welcome are the emphasis to good governance and the rule of law.

The recent spring meetings on the IMF and World bank discussed progress made at Monterrey, and both institutions have given their full support. Aid increases and a global agreed agenda set out in the Monterrey consensus, will help provide a stronger international foundation on which to relieve world poverty.

Combating Crime

26. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will ensure that sufficient funds in the comprehensive spending review are allocated for combating the causes of crime. [53568]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Announcements about budgets for all Departments will be made at the conclusion of the 2002 spending review.

Health Inequalities

28. **Derek Twigg:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact the Budget will have on reducing health inequalities over the next five to 10 years. [53570]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Key measures in Budget 2002 that will contribute to meeting the Government's targets on health inequalities are:

new child tax credit (CTC), which is a single, seamless system of support for families with children. From April 2003 CTC will combine with child benefit to deliver up to £54.25 a week in support for the first child, compared to support of £27.70 a week in April.

specific help for people with disabilities (including long-standing illnesses) looking for work: the new deal for disabled people has now been extended nationally, and the rates and thresholds of the working tax credit will, from April 2003, improve the in-work financial support available specifically for disabled people.

extra resources announced in Budget 2002 for the NHS—average growth in NHS spending of 7.4 per cent. after inflation over the five years from 2003–04 to 2007–08—will enable the NHS to play its full role in meeting the existing national targets for tackling health inequalities.

Renewable Energy

29. **Ian Lucas:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he made of the needs of manufacturers of renewable energy equipment when preparing his Budget. [53571]

Mr. Boateng: The Chancellor considers a wide range of representations when preparing his Budget. The Budget announced that solar water heating systems will be eligible for enhanced capital allowances, while most forms of renewable energy are exempt from the climate change levy. The Government are also providing direct support for renewable energy worth over £260 million between 2001 and 2004, and renewable energy is also supported through the renewables obligation, which requires all electricity suppliers to source a minimum percentage of their electricity from renewable sources.

Aggregates Levy

30. **Mr. Carmichael:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the operation of the aggregates levy. [53572]

Mr. Boateng: The levy came into effect on 1 April 2002.

488 businesses have registered for and are operating the levy.

Stamp Duty

31. **Hugh Robertson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the level of stamp duty on commercial property transactions. [53573]

Ruth Kelly: Stamp duty on property currently raises around £4 billion per annum, about 40 per cent. of which derives from commercial transactions. We regularly review the impact of stamp duty on all aspects of the commercial market.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed in the Budget his intention to lift the cap on stamp duty relief for non-residential property transactions in disadvantaged areas, subject to state aids approval, giving a boost to commercial development in these areas.

Halifax (Ombudsman's Ruling)

32. **Mr. Gardiner:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will ask the Financial Services Authority to issue a formal statement on *(a)* how the Halifax has handled the dual variable rate mortgage issue since the Ombudsman made his ruling and *(b)* what steps consumers should take to claim compensation. [53574]

Ruth Kelly: It is for the FSA to take any action it deems appropriate as part of its on-going supervision of banks. The FSA has already published a guide to making a complaint and this is available free from its help desk (0845 606 1234).

Tax Credits

35. **Lynne Jones:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the take-up rate is of each of the tax credits. [53577]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Mr. Cousins) on 24 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 336W.

Community Investment Tax Credit

36. **Ms Walley:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his timetable in respect of the introduction of the community investment tax credit. [53578]

Mr. Boateng: We will bring forward legislation for the community investment tax credit in the Finance Bill. Organisations will then be able to apply for tax credit status during 2002–03, subject to State Aids approval for the measure.

Film Tax Relief

37. **John Barrett:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost of film tax relief in 2004–05 after the Budget 2002 measures have been implemented. [53579]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It is estimated that the gross amount of relief given under section 48 Finance (No.2) Act 1997 given in 2004–05 will be £320 million. When compared with tax relief that would be available in the absence of section 48 reliefs the net tax cost is £70 million. The net tax cost of other film tax reliefs in that year is estimated at a further £70 million. The decision in Budget 2002 to restrict eligibility to British feature films intended for cinema release will reduce the amount of relief in 2004–05 by £295 million.

Family Income (South-west)

40. **Jim Knight:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of people in the south-west who will be affected by his measures to support lower and middle income families. [53582]

Dawn Primarolo: There are 575,000 families with children in the south-west. Around 90 per cent. of these families will be eligible for the child tax credit, which together with child benefit will deliver up to £54.25 in support for the first child from April 2003. There are currently 105,000 families with children in the south-west benefiting from the working families' tax credit.

Landfill Tax

Sue Doughty: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the total cost to the Treasury will be *(a)* at the outset of its introduction and *(b)* projected in the next three years of the landfill tax. [53720]

Mr. Boateng: The landfill tax was introduced on 1 October 1996 and raised £0.4 billion in its first full year. The projected revenue from the landfill tax was published on 17 April in the Financial Statement and Budget Report 2002. The administrative cost of collecting the landfill tax is less than £2 million per annum.

Smuggling

Paul Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the percentage of *(a)* alcohol, *(b)* tobacco and *(c)* pornographic material that escaped detection and was imported illegally into the United Kingdom in each of the past three years. [54817]

Mr. Boateng: Customs latest figures for the revenue value of detected alcohol and tobacco fraud and smuggling are for 2000–01 and are contained in Customs annual report for that year.

Customs latest estimates for the revenue loss and illicit market shares arising from all forms of alcohol and tobacco fraud were published in the documents "Tackling Indirect Tax Fraud" and "Measuring Indirect Tax Fraud" at the time of the pre-Budget report in November 2001. They also contain the most recently published figures for Customs cigarette seizures.

Customs have no estimates of the total amount of pornographic material illegally imported into the UK.

Limited Companies

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is his policy to encourage small firms to become limited companies; and if he will make a statement. [55084]

Mr. Boateng: Government policy is to stimulate enterprise and entrepreneurship in its various forms, and not to support one group of businesses over another. Both incorporation and non-incorporation offer a range of benefits to small businesses. The choice as to whether to incorporate or not is influenced by multiple factors, many of which are firm-specific, for example the personal circumstances of the owner(s). The Government take the view that businesses themselves are best placed to assess the relative benefits of different legal structures, and to decide which is most appropriate for them.

Development Taxation

Ms Shipley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to equalise taxes levied on brownfield sites with those levied on greenfield sites. [55179]

Mr. Boateng: The Government introduced a 150 per cent. accelerated payable tax credit in Budget 2001 for owners and investors for the costs they incur in cleaning up contaminated sites. This measure will make the development of these sites more viable. There are no other differences in the tax treatment of brownfield and greenfield sites.

Statutory Instruments

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when proposed drafts of the statutory instruments regarding the working tax credit and the child tax credit will be made available. [55840]

Dawn Primarolo: As part of the on-going consultation about the proposed new child tax credit and working tax credit and to inform debate on the Tax Credits Bill, copies of a number of draft statutory instruments have today been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. A memorandum has been prepared by the Inland Revenue and the Department for Work and Pensions to accompany these drafts, copies of which have also been placed in the Libraries.

The draft statutory instruments have been prepared by the Inland Revenue and the Department for Work and Pensions. Together they contain proposals for the definition of income for the purposes of the new tax credits, detailed rules about entitlement to those credits and their proposed structure, and the arrangements for paying the credits to claimants. They also set out proposed changes to social security legislation in consequence of the introduction of the new credits.

Drafts of further statutory instruments will be made available in due course.

Correspondence

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will reply to the letter dated 1 April from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan regarding the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. [55165]

Mr. Boateng: I did so on 30 April and am sending a copy of my letter to the hon. Member.

HEALTH

"Information for Health"

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on 11 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 806W, if he will publish the report commissioned from Professor Protti by the Information Policy Unit and the NHS Information Authority on issues of implementing "Information for Health". [44054]

Mr. Hutton: The report from Professor Protti is still under consideration. It is informing the preparation of the delivery plan for information and information technology that the Department is preparing as part of taking forward "Delivering the NHS Plan", published in April 2002. Professor Protti's report will be published later in the year.

Emergency Care

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what cash allocations have been made under the reforming emergency care accident and emergency nurse allocation for 2002–03 to each acute NHS trust in the northern region; upon what basis the allocations have been made; and which trusts are involved in PFI programmes. [47430]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 622W.

Performance Assessment Framework

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the Performance Assessment Framework assimilates patients' views on *(a)* food and *(b)* other issues. [47005]

Jacqui Smith: The Performance Assessment Framework is based on a balanced scorecard, which allows organisations to get a rounded view of performance. The framework highlights a number of areas of performance, including patient/carer experience.

The framework is supported by a set of national NHS performance indicators. The indicators published in February 2002 included a number of measures of patient/carer experience, including an indicator of hospital cleanliness and information on the handling of complaints. We are currently developing indicators to reflect patients' views, based on comprehensive surveys, initially of acute in-patients, on food and other issues that are of importance to them.

Primary Care

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much investment in primary care facilities there has been since the publication of the NHS National Plan. [47018]

Mr. Hutton: Audited health authority finance returns for the years 1999 to 2001 show that a total of £661 million was spent on general medical services primary care premises in that period. Spend on premises used by personal medical services pilot providers is not identified in these returns.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Fulbourn School of Nursing by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative. [49545]

Mr. Hutton: The business case justifying the individual schemes estimating the net savings in present value terms (ie all future costs and benefits discounted to their present values) compared with publicly funding the scheme is shown in the table.

Net present costs of PSC v. PFI option

Trusts	*Eastern regional office/Fulbourn*
PFI (£000)	14,449
Public (£000)	20,254
Savings in net present value terms (£000)	5,805
Difference (%)	29

Generic Drugs

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations his Department has received from *(a)* Generics UK, *(b)* Kent Pharmaceuticals, *(c)* Regent-GM Laboratories, *(d)* Goldshield Group, *(e)* Norton Healthcare and *(f)* Ranbaxy UK regarding generic drugs in the past five years; [50705]

(2) what meetings his Department has had with *(a)* Generics UK, *(b)* Kent Pharmaceuticals, *(c)* Regent-GM Laboratories, *(d)* Goldshield Group, *(e)* Norton Healthcare and *(f)* Ranbaxy UK to discuss generic drugs in the past five years. [50706]

Mr. Hutton: As part of routine business the Department meets with pharmaceutical industry trade associations and individual pharmaceutical companies including Generics UK Ltd., Kent Pharmaceuticals Ltd., Regent-GM Laboratories Ltd., Goldshield Group Plc, Norton Healthcare Ltd. (a subsidiary of Ivax Corporation) and Ranbaxy (UK) Ltd. (a subsidiary of Ranbaxy Laboratories Ltd.) on a regular basis to discuss a range of issues including those relating to licence applications; product safety issues; leaflets and labelling and intellectual property.

In April 2000 the Government introduced a maximum price scheme for controlling the price of specified generic medicines. This was rolled forward in October 2001 and has resulted in annual savings in expenditure of generic medicines in the order of £330 million. In addition, in July 2001 the Department issued a consultation paper on proposals for NHS controls over the future supply and pricing of NHS generic medicines. In compliance with best practice these initiatives required that information and opinions be sought from those companies and organisations affected by the Department's initiatives. Accordingly officials met with and received representations from many interested parties, including Generics UK, Kent Pharmaceuticals, Regent-GM Laboratories, Norton Healthcare/Ivax and Ranbaxy UK.

Occupational Therapists

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many unfilled vacancies for occupational therapists there are in each health authority in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [52874]

Mr. Hutton: The number of occupational therapists employed in the NHS increased by 2,390 (20 per cent.) between 1997 and 2001.

The information requested is shown in the table.

Department of Health Vacancies Survey, March 2001—vacancies in NHS trusts by region and health authority areas[1], occupational therapists

	Three month vacancy:		*Staff in post:*	
	Rates (percentage)	*Numbers*	*(wte)*	*(hc)*
England	4.1	480	11,180	13,130
Northern and Yorkshire				
Bradford HA	4.6	70	1,430	1,640
County Durham and Darlington HA	7.5	10	120	140
East Riding and Hull HA	3.6	0	80	90
Gateshead and South Tyneside HA	6.7	10	100	110
	5.7	10	80	90

Department of Health Vacancies Survey, March 2001—vacancies in NHS trusts by region and health authority areas[1], occupational therapists

	Three month vacancy:		Staff in post:	
	Rates (percentage)	Numbers	(wte)	(hc)
Leeds HA	5.0	10	170	200
Newcastle and North Tyneside HA	2.2	0	110	120
North Cumbria HA	6.3	0	60	70
Northumberland HA	6.9	10	90	110
Sunderland HA	0.0	0	40	40
Tees HA	4.2	10	140	150
Wakefield HA	7.5	10	120	130
North Yorkshire HA	1.2	0	160	210
Calderdale and Kirklees HA	2.5	0	150	170
Trent	3.0	40	1,230	1,420
Barnsley HA	6.2	0	50	50
North Derbyshire HA	4.0	0	100	120
Southern Derbyshire HA	0.7	0	140	170
Doncaster HA	8.3	10	90	110
Leicestershire HA	0.0	0	210	240
Lincolnshire HA	4.6	0	80	100
North Nottinghamshire HA	2.5	0	80	90
Nottingham HA	2.1	0	210	240
Rotherham HA	6.6	10	110	120
Sheffield HA	0.0	0	150	170
South Humber HA	13.0	0	20	20
West Midlands	4.1	50	1,090	1,260
Birmingham HA	2.7	10	240	270
Coventry HA	5.3	0	60	70
Dudley HA	4.4	0	70	80
Herefordshire HA	0.7	0	40	50
Sandwell HA	4.1	0	50	50
Shropshire HA	3.0	0	100	120
Solihull HA	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
North Staffordshire HA	5.5	10	130	150
South Staffordshire HA	5.1	10	90	110
Walsall HA	15.0	10	40	40
Warwickshire HA	5.5	0	80	100
Wolverhampton HA	4.8	0	70	80
Worcestershire HA	0.7	0	120	150
North West	4.8	80	1,470	1,710
South Lancashire HA	2.5	0	70	100
Liverpool HA	0.0	0	70	80
Manchester HA	2.7	10	130	150
Morecambe Bay HA	0.0	0	70	90
St. Helens and Knowsley HA	2.8	0	50	50
Salford and Trafford HA	0.7	0	140	160
Sefton HA	4.4	0	70	70
Stockport HA	0.0	0	50	70
West Pennine HA	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—
Bury and Rochdale HA	5.4	0	50	60
North Cheshire HA	2.7	0	90	100
South Cheshire HA	1.0	0	90	130
East Lancashire HA	4.8	10	100	120
North West Lancashire HA	4.8	10	150	180
Wigan and Bolton HA	3.7	10	130	150
Wirral HA	1.0	0	100	120
Eastern	2.9	30	1,050	1,270
Bedfordshire HA	1.0	0	100	130
North Essex HA	1.4	0	210	250
South Essex HA	2.2	0	130	150
Suffolk HA	0.0	0	130	160
East and North Hertfordshire HA	4.2	0	50	60
West Hertfordshire HA	4.1	0	60	80
Cambridgeshire HA	5.6	10	170	200
Norfolk HA	4.3	10	210	250

Department of Health Vacancies Survey, March 2001—vacancies in NHS trusts by region and health authority areas[1], occupational therapists

	Three month vacancy:		Staff in post:	
	Rates (percentage)	Numbers	(wte)	(hc)
London				
Hillingdon HA	7.0	130	1,730	1,940
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster HA	8.7	0	30	30
Enfield and Haringey HA	2.8	0	140	150
Redbridge and Waltham Forest HA	0.0	0	120	140
Bexley and Greenwich HA	7.7	10	100	110
Bromley HA	10.7	10	80	100
Croydon HA	9.2	0	20	30
Kingston and Richmond HA	10.2	0	40	40
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham HA	0.0	0	60	80
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth HA	10.3	30	230	250
Barking and Havering HA	4.9	10	200	240
Barnet HA	10.0	10	110	120
Brent and Harrow HA	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Camden and Islington HA	12.9	10	70	80
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow HA	6.2	10	150	170
East London and The City HA	6.6	10	190	220
	8.2	20	140	150
South East				
Berkshire HA	3.9	70	1,790	2,190
Buckinghamshire HA	2.5	0	120	150
East Kent HA	3.4	10	170	230
West Kent HA	1.1	0	170	200
East Surrey HA	9.2	20	160	200
West Surrey HA	2.4	0	120	140
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove HA	7.2	10	170	210
West Sussex HA	3.1	10	170	200
Northamptonshire HA	5.3	10	170	210
Oxfordshire HA	0.5	0	100	130
North and Mid Hampshire HA	5.2	10	150	180
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire HA	0.9	0	70	90
Southampton and South West Hampshire HA	2.8	0	90	110
Isle of Wight HA	0.8	0	120	150
	16.4	0	20	20
South West				
Somerset HA	1.2	20	1,290	1,590
South and West Devon HA	0.6	0	100	130
Wiltshire HA	1.9	0	160	180
Avon HA	2.2	0	130	160
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly HA	2.6	10	280	360
Dorset HA	0.0	0	90	110
North East and Devon HA	0.2	0	220	270
Gloucestershire HA	0.6	0	160	200
	0.0	0	150	180
Special HAs	3.4	0	100	100

[1] Vacancy and staff in post numbers are rounded to the nearest 10.
[2] Figures where sum of staff in post and vacancies is less than 10.
[3] Figures where previously published, where the trusts have advised that the figures supplied were incorrect.

Notes:

1. Three month vacancies are vacancies as at 31 March 2001 which trusts are actively trying to fill, which had lasted for three months or more (whole time equivalents).
2. Three month vacancy rates are three month vacancies expressed as a percentage of three month vacancies plus staff in post from the September 2000 medical and dental and non-medical work force censuses (whole time equivalent).
3. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.
4. Totals may not equal sum of component parts due to rounding.
5. HA figures are based on trusts, and do not necessarily reflect the geographical provision of health care.
6. Due to the way vacancy data have been collected it has sometimes been necessary to provide combined vacancy data information for certain trusts.
7. Due to combined vacancy data being used and rounding calculating the vacancy rates using the above data may not equal the actual vacancy rates.
8. Figures may not match previously published data due to a different method of rounding used on the staff in post data.

NHS Wages

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average annual increase in NHS wages and salaries has been for *(a)* doctors, *(b)* nurses and *(c)* ancillary staff in each of the last 10 years. [52998]

Mr. Hutton: The table sets out the general pay increase for hospital doctors, nurses and ancillary staff in each of the last 10 years. Additional amounts may have been awarded for particular grades or sub-groups of staff in particular years. The figures for nurses and ancillary staff for 1995–96 and 1996–97 are estimates as these included an element of local pay.

Percentage

	Hospital doctors	*Nurses*	*Ancillary staff*
1993–94	1.5	1.5	1.5
1994–95	3.0	3.0	2.39
1995–96	2.5	3.0	3.0
1996–97	3.8	2.8	2.8
1997–98	3.4	3.3	3.3
1998–99	4.2	3.8	3.8
1999–2000	3.5	4.7	3.0
2000–01	3.3	3.4	3.25
2001–02	3.9	3.7	3.7
2002–03	3.6	3.6	3.6

Cancer

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the estimated cost was of treating sun-induced skin cancers in the last year. [53012]

Yvette Cooper: The Department does not collect figures on the cost of NHS services in a way that enables an accurate figure to be calculated for the cost of a particular disease.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will ask NICE to review its decision on the use of irinotecan and oxaliplatin in treating bowel cancer patients. [52971]

Mr. Hutton: I understand that National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) has recommended that irinotecan and oxaliplatin should be used in specific clinical circumstances. We set up NICE to give authoritative guidance on when it is clinically and cost effective to use drugs and other treatments. NICE has undertaken a full appraisal of irinotecan, oxaliplatin and raltitrexed and has also considered an appeal against its initial decision. In the light of this, I do not expect NICE to review its decision except as part of its usual processes. The review will take place in April 2005, or earlier if significant new evidence becomes available.

Missed Appointments

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of *(a)* in-patient and *(b)* out-patient appointments were missed in each of the last six years. [53369]

Mr. Hutton: The number of patients who did not attend consultant out-patient appointments from 1995–96 to 2000–01 are shown in the table. Information up to quarter 2 of 2001–02 is available on the Department's website www.doh.gov.uk/hospitalactivity.

	Total out-patient appointments	*Total attendances*	*Total DNAs*	*Percentage DNAs*
1995–96	45,578,990	40,117,691	5,461,299	12.0
1996–97	46,380,294	40,872,769	5,507,525	11.9
1997–98	47,264,698	41,635,269	5,629,429	11.9
1998–99	47,803,368	42,154,397	5,648,971	11.8
1999–2000	48,923,209	43,040,699	5,882,510	12.0
2000–01	49,524,159	43,569,340	5,954,819	12.0

Note:
Did Not Attends (DNAs) are counted for those patients who gave no advance warning for their non-attendance.
Source:
Department of Health form KH09

As part of the NHS plan all out-patient appointments will be pre-booked by the end of 2005. Patients will be able to choose a date and time for their appointment that is convenient for them. Booking systems, where introduced, have proven to significantly reduce numbers of patients failing to turn up for appointments.

The number of patients who did not attend consultant in-patient appointments from 1995–96 to 2000–01 is shown in the table.

	Patients admitted	*Patients failed to attend*	*Failed to attend rate (percentage)*
1995–96	3,500,353	207,515	5.60
1996–97	3,549,073	223,255	5.82
1998–99	3,826,507	171,382	4.30
1999–2000	3,682,180	146,599	3.83
2000–01	3,467,338	125,860	3.50

Note:
Data for 1997–98 is not available
Source:
Department for Health form KH06

Consultants' Remuneration

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the percentage changes in *(a)* consultants' NHS remuneration and *(b)* total consultants' remuneration in each of the past five years. [54016]

Mr. Hutton: Table 1 sets out the general pay increase for consultants in each of the last five years.

The majority of consultants earn additional money from the national health service for extra duties. The size of this additional income varies by speciality, by age and geographic location. Table 2 shows the increase in total NHS earnings August 1998 and August 2000.

The Department does not collect or hold detailed information about private practice.

Table 1

	Hospital doctors (percentage)	*Bottom of consultant scale (£)*	*Top of consultant scale (£)*
1998–99	4.2	44,780	57,800
1999–2000	3.5	47,345	61,605
2000–01	3.3	48,905	63,640
2001–02	3.9	50,810	66,120
2002–03	3.6	52,640	68,505

Note:
A DDRB recommendation in 1999–2000 recommended a further £50 million be allocated annually to consultants to recognise work load, intensity and contribution to the NHS.

Table 2

	1998	*1999*	*2000*
Earnings per contract (£)	59,300	63,200	65,400
Increase over previous year (percentage)	—	6.7	3.4
Earnings per wte (£)	65,100	69,300	72,100
Increase over previous year (percentage)	—	6.4	4.1

Note:
The data in Table 2 are taken from the NHS Earnings survey (sample based).

Smallpox Vaccine

Mr. Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the specification for the smallpox vaccine stated that the vaccine to be provided had to be the Lister strain. [53931]

Mr. Hutton: The Lister strain was specified as the vaccine strain required and all the companies with which the Department had discussions were made fully aware of this.

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what publicly owned accommodation is made available to him in his official role; how many nights he has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost was of maintaining each of these properties in the last 12 months. [55102]

Ms Blears: None.

Ashford and St. Peter's Hospital NHS Trust

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his plans to franchise the post of chief executive at the Ashford and St. Peter's Hospital NHS Trust. [55042]

Ms Blears: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced on 8 May 2002 that the franchise for Ashford and St. Peter's Hospitals NHS trust had been awarded to Mr. Andrew Morris, with Mr. Glen Douglas the chief executive designate.

Patient Transport Facilities

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of patients travelled by *(a)* bus, *(b)* train, *(c)* private transport and *(d)* other forms of transport to their (i) GP, (ii) dental and (iii) hospital appointment in (A) 1991, (B) 2000 and (C) 2001. [46455]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 15 April 2002]:* This information is not held centrally.

International Recruitment

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 163W, on international recruitment, which agencies have not adhered to the code of practice for *(a)* internationally qualified medical staff and *(b)* other healthcare professionals. [50077]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 17 April 2002]:* There are no plans to publish the names of the international recruitment agencis dealing with internationally qualified medical staff and other healtcare professional agencies who have failed to adhere to the code of practice. Trusts will be advised to refer to a list, due to be published shortly, of those agencies that are compliant with the code of practice before beginning the process of setting up new recruitment contracts.

NHS Plan

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total *(a)* cost and *(b)* distribution figure was of the NHS Plan-A Progress report 2000–01. [50806]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 18 April 2002]:* The NHS Plan—A Progress Report 2000–01 was the first report of the Modernisation Board. It is a requirement of the Board's Terms of Reference that an annual report should be produced.

The total cost of producing and distributing this document was £82,480. 22,000 copies of the report have been distributed.

Matrons

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what duties matrons are expected to undertake. [53301]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* It is for employing organisations to specify the duties of matrons in job descriptions. Guidance was issued to the National Health Service in April 2001 as Health Service Circular 2001/010, 'Implementing the NHS Plan—Modern Matrons'.

Medical Precautions

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what precautions the Government plans to take in the event of *(a)* plague and *(b)* Ebola attack. [53898]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* My Department issued guidance to all health authorities and regional directors of public health on the procedures to be followed in the event of a deliberate release of plague and other biological agents, on 17 October. At the same time, guidance for medical and laboratory staff was issued by the public health laboratory service (PHLS) concerning the precautions to be adopted in the event of an outbreak of plague and other biological agents. This advice is available on the PHLS website:

http://www.phls.co.uk/advice/smallpox guidelines.pdf.

Plague can be treated with antibiotics and the Department has a substantial stockpile of appropriate antibiotics that could be deployed in the event of an outbreak of plague following a terrorist attack.

For Ebola, which is one of the viral haemorrhagic fevers. (VHF), guidance on the management and control of VHFs has already been produced by the advisory committee on dangerous pathogens. Further guidance on the action to be taken in the event of a deliberate release of a VHF has been drawn up by the PHLS and is being revised following review by the Viral Haemorrhagic Fever Working Group of the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens. There is no treatment for Ebola virus infection and patients are normally cared for in isolation facilities.

The Chief Medical Officer has also written to general practitioners, and participated in a symposium at the Royal College of Physicians, for the medical profession.

Correspondence

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter of 17 January from the hon. Member for Manchester, Central in relation to Mr. B. R., reference PO002718. [53933]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* A reply was sent on 9 May.

Warrington PCT

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer of 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 120W, how many applications were received for non-executive appointments to the board of Warrington PCT from each ward in Warrington; what percentage of applicants from each ward were interviewed; and what percentage of applicants from each ward were appointed. [54219]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Information on the number candidates who applied, those interviewed and those appointed from each ward has been placed in the Library.

Medicines Control Agency

Mr. Bailey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the high level targets for the Medicines Control Agency for 2002–03. [55480]

Ms Blears: The high level targets for the Medicines Control Agency are included in its Annual Business Plan, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

NHS Staff

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many staff were employed by the NHS in *(a)* Gloucestershire and *(b)* England in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [54665]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* The number of staff working for the national health service in England and Gloucestershire for the last five years is as follows.

An increase of 8.2 per cent. in Gloucestershire compared with an increase of 10 per cent. in England.

NHS hospital and community health services (HCHS) and practice staff: All NHS staff employed within Gloucestershire HA and England as at 30 September each year

	England		*Gloucestershire HA*	
	Whole-time equivalents	*Headcount*	*Whole-time equivalents*	*Headcount*
1997	849,450	1,053,580	8,750	11,520
1998	858,520	1,066,340	8,980	11,670
1999	876,880	1,092,030	9,150	11,800
2000	896,200	1,112,030	9,500	12,210
2001	935,060	1,159,960	9,820	12,470

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
2. All practitioners included in the totals exclude GP retainers.
3. All practice staff included in the total includes practice nurses, direct patient care, administration and clerical and other.
4. All practitioners and GP practice staff are not directly employed by the NHS but work to contracts for the NHS.

Sources:
1. Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census.
2. Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census.
3. Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many staff have been dismissed in the NHS in *(a)* Gloucestershire and *(b)* England in each of the last five years for which figures are available, broken down by (i) reasons for the dismissals and (ii) categories of employees; and if he will make a statement. [54664]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* The information requested is not collected centrally.

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many resignations, broken down by job description, there have been from NHS employment in Hull and the East Riding since 1 January 2001. [50612]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 10 May 2002

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Human Rights Act

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many cases have been brought against her Department under the Human Rights Act 1998; and what has been the cost in *(a)* legal fees to defend cases and *(b)* compensation payments. [45059]

Mr. Morley: We do not collect records of all cases in which the Human Rights Act 1998 is relied on. Human rights are now integrated in the general law and are rarely the sole basis for a challenge. We do monitor centrally those cases which we consider may be of particular significance to this department. We have recorded 5 cases to date.

We do not collect separate information centrally about the costs to public funds, legal fees or compensation payments in cases which include a human rights issue. In most cases it will be difficult to single out associated costs relating to human rights elements.

Bovine TB

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the recently diagnosed cases of bovine TB in herds in Denbighshire, Powys and Monmouthshire; and what steps her Department is taking to control further spread of mycobacterium bovis infection. [53204]

Mr. Morley: Powys and Monmouthshire have suffered a number of TB incidents in recent years. In the first three months of this year raw data show there were 37 new incidents in Powys, 20 of which are provisionally confirmed as due to bovine TB.

Raw data show that in Monmouthshire some 36 new incidents were disclosed in the first three months of the year, of which 19 are provisionally confirmed as bovine TB.

One new confirmed bovine TB incident was recently disclosed in a herd in Denbighshire. Investigations into the origin of this incident are still ongoing.

The State Veterinary Service in Wales, in close consultation with the Welsh Assembly Government, is working to clear the TB test backlog, to restrict the movement of cattle off herds with suspected TB and to target resources effectively.

The causes of bovine TB are complex and the Government is seeking to proceed on the basis of sound science drawn from independent scientific and veterinary experts. A wide-ranging research programme has been put in place on advice from the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG). The programme extends to the pathogenesis of TB in cattle, improved diagnostic techniques, vaccine development, the badger field trial, risks to cattle from wildlife other than badgers and a study looking at TB in newly formed herds following restocking after foot and mouth disease.

European Commission

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal meetings her Department has undertaken with the European Commission since 1 January; and if she will make a statement. [54487]

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and her Ministerial colleagues meet the relevant Commissioners at meetings of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Environment Councils. In addition, the Secretary of State has met bilaterally with Commissioners Fischler (twice), Byrne, Wallstrom, Kinnock and Patten. I have met Fischler once during the period mentioned. The number of contacts between officials of the Department and representatives of the Commission, in the wide range of fora where they meet, could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Flooding

Mr. Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by what criteria flood defences are graded in terms of being *(a)* maintained at their current level or *(b)* in need of enhancement. [54234]

Mr. Morley: Operational responsibility for planning, design, construction, maintenance, inspection and operation of flood defence measures rests with local operating authorities (the Environment Agency, Local Authorities and Internal Drainage Boards). The operating authorities determine which flood defences should be maintained at their current level and which are in need of enhancement. Efforts are being made to collate such information on a National Flood and Coastal Defence Database.

Mr. Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps are being taken to ensure *(a)* detailed mapping of areas at risk from flooding, *(b)* that insurance companies recognise the difference in flood risk within post-code areas and *(c)* that households are graded in accordance to direct risk. [54236]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency has published indicative flood maps and has made these available to local authorities. Copies have recently been made available to Members of Parliament in England and Wales showing the indicative flood risk areas in their constituency. Smaller scale versions are also available to the public via the Internet. The Department is in discussion with the Agency to further develop this mapping and is currently funding work that will improve the information available. Discussions continue with both the Agency and ABI to improve the information available for assessing insurance risk.

Mr. Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many *(a)* homes and *(b)* commercial properties are at risk from

coastal or inland flooding in (i) England, (ii) the South East and (iii) East Sussex; and what the total value of assets are. [54271]

Mr. Morley: The 2001 National Assessment of Assets at Risk from Flooding and Coastal Erosion, commissioned by DEFRA, estimated figures for areas at risk of flooding by regions of the Environment Agency; the Agency have provided a further breakdown for East Sussex.

The estimated figures for the whole of England, for the Southern Region of the Environment Agency and for East Sussex are as follows:

	England	*Southern Region*	*East Sussex*
Homes at risk of flooding	1,670,000	152,000	23,500
Commercial properties at risk	128,000	14,000	2,100
Estimated total value of assets at risk	£200,000 m	£18,400 m	£2,850 m

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to fund the repairs to flood defence systems identified as Government targets following the Bye report into the 1998 floods. [54637]

Mr. Morley: The Government drew up High Level Targets for Flood and Coastal Defence in 1999 in liaison with local operating authorities (the Environment Agency, Local Authorities and Internal Drainage Boards). The targets are intended to facilitate a more certain delivery of national policies and objectives for flood and coastal defence. However operational responsibility for planning, design, construction, maintenance, inspection and operation of flood defence measures rests with the local operating authorities.

I understand that the Environment Agency has repaired flood defences damaged in the 1998 floods, has carried out some improvements and is considering other improvements where they meet the normal economic, technical and environmental criteria.

Funding from this Department for capital works to all operating authorities has increased from an outturn of £73 million in 1998–99 to a planned £114 million in 2003–04.

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if resources will be made available to improve the accuracy of the Environment Agency's maps and website relating to flood risk assessments. [54639]

Mr. Morley: The Department is in discussion with the Environment Agency to further develop the indicative flood plain maps, copies of which have recently been made available to Members of Parliament in England and Wales, local authorities and, the general public (via the internet). DEFRA is currently funding work that will improve the data available. More detailed information will be available (as hardcopy and via the internet) in the Autumn.

Trawling

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will take steps to ensure that the National Environment Research Council fund research into deep seabed impacts by trawling. [54867]

Mr. Morley: The Office of Science and Technology within the Department of Trade and Industry is the responsible body within Government for the allocation of funds to the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) for scientific research, not DEFRA. Within the budget provision from OST NERC is funding a programme of research into the ecology of deep sea fish and the impact of deep-water fisheries on both commercial and non-target species. DEFRA has in the past funded research at NERC's marine laboratories on a wide range of subjects, and also liaises with NERC over the development of its thematic programmes. DEFRA is funding an extensive programme of research at the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Acquaculture Science and several other institutes into fishing impact on the seabed, but focussing on coastal rather than deep waters.

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she is taking to prevent trawling damage to seabed communities. [54870]

Mr. Morley: The Department is currently looking to establish Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas to extend the EC Habitats and Birds Directive beyond 12 nautical miles with a view to protecting vulnerable habitats and species. One potential site is an area of coral reef off the North West coast of Scotland known as the Darwin Mounds thought to have been subject to damage by trawl gear. We will work to get the Commission to bring forward the necessary legislation to restrict fishing activity where a habitat is in need of protection but is situated in international waters. More generally, one of our priorities for the forthcoming review of the Common Fisheries Policy is the greater integration of environmental concerns into fisheries policy: this will involve action to reduce the impact of fishing on non target species and sensitive habitats.

Rural Subsidies

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what total sums of public money, unavailable to urban areas, were paid in each of the past four years to rural areas in all forms of subsidies, compensations, concessions and reduced charges. [54827]

Alun Michael: It is difficult to draw an absolute line between urban and rural areas. Support for farmers will be available to farmers within a mainly urban area, for instance. It must also be remembered that these figures represent targeted funds. Other finances are targeted at purposes relating mainly or wholly to urban needs.

The following table provides information on the total public expenditure on UK agriculture in each of the past four years.

£ million	1998–99	1999–00	2000–01	2001–02
UK Public expenditure under CAP & on national grants and subsidies	3,482	3,161	3,014	3,227
(b) Foot and Mouth disease costs [of direct benefit to the agriculture sector]	—	—	29	2,028
(c) Total	3,482	3,161	3,043	5,255

In addition UK agriculture benefits from red diesel and other concessions. These are broadly estimated to be worth £300m per year.

Beyond agriculture there are other forms of support for rural areas unavailable to urban areas. The following table provides details of public expenditure for relevant programmes for rural areas in England (as defined by the Countryside Agency definition).

Programme £ million	1998–99	1999–00	2000–01	2001–02
Rural Transport[1]	2.3	3.3	4.6	6.0
Community Services Grant[2]	—	—	—	1.7
Parish Transport[2]	—	—	—	0.4

[1] This includes the Rural Transport Partnership and Rural Transport Development Fund, which include funds for linking rural and urban areas. In 1999 the Countryside Agency took over the role of the Rural Development Commission, which administered these funds.
[2] Part of the Countryside Agency Vital Villages programme, which first reported in 2001–02.

In addition there is rate relief for a number of rural businesses, including village shops, post offices, public houses and garages in rural communities of less than 3,000 inhabitants.

There are a number of other programmes that have specific rural targets but are also open to urban areas. These include Parish Plans, funded by the Countryside Agency, and programmes of the Regional Development Agency and Housing Corporation.

Pets

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to regulate the sale of *(a)* cats and *(b)* dogs in pet shops. [54694]

Mr. Morley: There has been a review of animal welfare legislation relating to farmed, captive and domestic animals, including the regulation of companion animal sales. A public consultation exercise ran from 2 January to 30 April. We will now evaluate the 2,400 responses we received and then decide on what changes need to be made.

Whales and Whaling

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her policy is on the 1946 International Convention on the Regulation of Whaling. [54976]

Mr. Morley: The Government's policy on whaling remains unchanged. We are opposed to all forms of whaling other than some limited subsistence whaling; and we strongly support the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on commercial whaling.

I am planning to attend the next annual meeting of the Commission which takes place from 20–24 May in Shimonoseki, Japan where the UK will resist any attempts to lift the moratorium.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the natural reproduction rate is of *(a)* Minke whales and *(b)* Sperm whales; and what her Department's estimate is of the rate of change in their global populations if these whales continue to be hunted at current levels. [54975]

Mr. Morley: Minke whales can normally reproduce every 1–2 years and Sperm whales every 4–5 years. It is not possible to estimate the effects of current whaling activities in terms of the rate of change in global populations.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her Department's assessment is of the world's population of *(a)* Minke whales and *(b)* Sperm whales. [54977]

Mr. Morley: There is considerable scientific uncertainty over the numbers of whales of different species and in different geographical stocks. The International Whaling Commission (IWC), which is the primary international body responsible for the management and conservation of whales, estimated that *(a)* in 1995 there were approximately 149,000 Minke whales in the North Atlantic (excluding Canadian East Coast) and *(b)* in 1990, approximately 25,000 Minke whales in the North West Pacific and Okhotsk Sea. The IWC Scientific Committee is currently carrying out a major review of Minke whales in the Southern Hemisphere as no reliable estimate is available.

There is no current assessment of the population of Sperm whales.

Sheep Identification

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she intends to introduce new regulations in respect of sheep identification and traceability. [54849]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* The Interim Animal Movements Regime introduced in February 2002 makes provision for the identification and tracing of sheep and goats. We will be reviewing experience with these interim controls in the next couple of months with a view to making any necessary changes in late summer. Later in the year we will also need to consider any recommendations on identification and traceability that emerge from the independent inquiries into the foot and mouth outbreak, and possible proposals from the European Commission on identification of sheep.

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to provide financial support for research into electronic means of identification of sheep. [54850]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* There are no current plans to commission research into electronic means of identifying sheep (EID) in England. However, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre has recently completed a major four-year programme of practical trials of EID in cattle, sheep and goats to test

feasibility, including practicality and animal welfare. The UK government is working closely with the EC-Joint Research Centre to learn from this experience.

We are also making practical use of EID technology as part of the NSP.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much money has been paid to farmers in compensation for slaughtered livestock arising from the recent foot and mouth epidemic to date; what is *(a)* the average amount paid to each farmer and *(b)* the largest payment to a single farmer; and if he will make a statement. [52545]

Mr. Morley: £1,050m has been paid to farmers in compensation for slaughtered livestock arising from the recent foot and mouth epidemic to date, and the average amount paid to each farmer was £124,755. The largest payment to a single farmer was £4,238,800.

Dolphins

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will publish the results of her Department's surveys on board UK pair trawlers to establish how many dolphins were killed per 100 net hauls; and if she will make a statement. [49282]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 15 April 2002]:* Observations by the Sea Mammal Research Unit during 2000 and 2001 were as follows:—

Target species	*No. of dolphins*	*No. of hauls*	*No. of days at sea*
Anchovy	0	3	3
Blue whiting	0	4	8
Herring	0	42	33
Mackerel	0	27	64
Pilchard	0	8	6
Sprats	0	10	10
Bass	53	116	71

These figures indicate a significant problem in the bass fishery off south west England but not in other fisheries sampled. Those pair trawling teams monitored in the bass fishery caught dolphins at a rate a little in excess of one every two hauls. This is a cause for serious concern, and we have drawn the attention of the EU Commissioner and the French Fisheries Minister to it.

SMRU have also completed an initial trial in the bass fishery of special gear designed to allow dolphins to escape. Information on this will be published as soon as it is available.

Affordable Housing

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list by category, the number of key sector workers living in affordable housing in rural areas in each of the last 10 years. [54815]

Ms Keeble: I have been asked to reply.

Information is not available in this form.

WORK AND PENSIONS

New Deal

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people living in the London Borough of Wandsworth have taken up the New Deal options. [53876]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The information is in the tables.

New Deal for Young People

Option	*Number of people in London Borough of Wandsworth taking up an option (up to January 2002)*
Employment	99
Full Time Education and Training	459
Voluntary Sector	157
Environment Task Force	85
Total	800

*New Deal 25 Plus (Pre-April 2001 Programme)**

Option	*Number of people in London Borough of Wandsworth taking up an option (up to January 2002)*
Employment	53
Full Time Education and Training	85
Work Based Learning for Adults	268
Total	406

*New Deal 25 Plus (Post-April 2001 Programme)**

Option	*Number of people in London Borough of Wandsworth taking up an option (up to January 2002)*
Employment	1
Basic Employability Training/Basic Skills	11
Self Employment	8
Education and Training Opportunity	0
Work Experience/Placements	1
Intensive Activity Period Training	43
Other	0
Total	64

Source:
New Deal Evaluation Database
* In April 2001 New Deal 25 Plus was enhanced to provide more flexible, individually-tailored help for long term unemployed people.

Access to Work Scheme

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how Access to Work has been promoted *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* in Edinburgh East and Borders. [53043]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Access to Work was promoted through the Employment Service. Since the start of April responsibility for promoting Access to Work passed to Jobcentre Plus. Jobcentre Plus promotes awareness of the whole range of its services, including support available to disabled people and their employers, through media such as leaflets, audio tapes, videos and the Jobcentre Plus website.

In Scotland, the Access to Work Business Centre Manager and Access to Work Advisers take part in events with General Practitioners and at job fairs and give presentations to employers and interested organisations.

Employment assistance schemes in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the *(a)* budget, *(b)* actual and *(c)* estimated outturn has been of the Access to Work scheme (i) in the UK and (ii) in the Edinburgh East and Borders district, in each year since creation. [53041]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The information available is in the table.

	Budget		*Actual Spend*	
Year	*England, Scotland and Wales*	*Edinburgh East and Borders*[1]	*England, Scotland and Wales*	*Edinburgh East and Borders*
2000–01	£25.7m	Not available	£32.4m	£1.2m
1999–00	£24.3m	Not available	£24.4m	£620,847
1998–99	£19.0m	Not available	£19.5m	£379,975
1997–98	£19.0m	Not available	£14.6m	£320,123
1996–97	£19.0m	Not available	£12.5m	Not available[2]
1995–96	£13.4m	Not available	£19.9m	Not available[2]
1994–95	£14.6m	Not available	£15.7m	Not available[2]

Source:

DWP Access to Work Management Information

[1] Before 2001, Access to Work was delivered through a network of Disability Service Teams in Scotland. Because of several boundary changes over the course of the last few years, these figures have not been collected separately. The information could therefore be provided only at disproportionate cost.

[2] Figures on actual spend for Edinburgh East and Borders can only be provided as far back as the 1997–98 financial year.

[3] Employment assistance schemes in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Action Team for Jobs

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many unemployed people have received support through the Action Teams for Jobs initiative; and how many found work as a consequence of the initiative. [47927]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Action Teams for Jobs are set up to tackle the problems of endemic joblessness in the most employment deprived areas in the country. Up to the end of February 2002, Action Teams for Jobs had engaged with 62,506 eligible jobless people and helped 23,745 of them into work. The Teams have also helped a number of people living outside their areas that are not recorded in the statistics.

Employment Zone Scheme

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people are involved in *(a)* stage 1 and *(b)* stage 2 of the Employment Zone scheme in each of the 15 Employment Zone areas. [47930]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The information is in the table.

	Number of current participants (at 31 January 2002)	
Employment Zone	*Step 1*	*Step 2*
Birmingham	2,225	2,423
Brent	424	380
Brighton	238	349
Doncaster	587	531
Glasgow	776	768
Haringey	935	1,154
Liverpool	1,422	2,628
Middlesbrough	219	319
Newham	528	825
North West Wales	460	335
Nottingham	194	226
Plymouth	166	232
Southwark	682	933
Tower Hamlets	347	313
Heads of the Valleys	170	356
TOTAL	9,373	11,772

Source:

Employment Zone Management Information.

Employment Zones vary in size and coverage.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much has been *(a)* budgeted and *(b)* spent on the Employment Zone scheme in each year since its introduction; and how much of the allocation in each year went into personal job accounts. [47929]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The Department does not receive information from contractors on the specific amounts spent on personal job accounts. This is because funding for the personal job account is drawn from the overall payments made to the contractors. Expenditure on personal job accounts by contractors varies according to the needs of each participant.

In the financial year April 2000–March 2001, the Employment Zone budget was £56,374,000 and the spend was £71,950,885.

For the financial year April 2001–March 2002 the budget was £87,026,000. Forecast expenditure will be published in the Departmental Report in May.

Reasons for the differences between the spend on Employment Zones and budget include better than anticipated performance by Zone contractors and more participants entering the programme earlier than forecast.

The budget for 2001–02 includes funding for those who joined Employment Zones during the year and have not yet completed Steps 1 and 2.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people have been helped into sustained employment via the Employment Zone scheme *(a)* in each year since its introduction and *(b)* broken down according to each employment zone. [47928]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Between April 2000, when they were launched, and January 2002, Employment Zones have helped 20,850 people into work. Of these, 14,743 have been helped into sustained employment.

The information on each Employment Zone is in the table.

Employment Zone	Number of people helped into sustained employment (cumulative total up to 31 January 2002)
Birmingham	2,708
Brent	690
Brighton	859
Doncaster	480
Glasgow	1,730
Haringey	1,847
Liverpool	1,693
Middlesbrough	615
Newham	867
North West Wales	246
Nottingham	333
Plymouth	466
Southwark	1,136
Tower Hamlets	602
Heads of the Valley	471

Source:
Employment Zone Management Information
Employment Zones vary in size and coverage

Pensions

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when private sector providers who wish to make combined pensions forecasts available to prospective pensioners will be able to do so; and what information on forecasts is available to them. [54239]

Maria Eagle: The combined pension forecasting service was launched in October 2001 at the industry's annual Pensions Show. Since that date the service has been open to all pension providers to register their interest in participating.

The service is delivered on a voluntary basis through employers and pension scheme providers with the consent of individual customers.

Customer Account Managers organise publicity of the service at industry conferences and seminars. Additionally, they support individual providers who have expressed an interest in joining the new service through one-to-one presentations and guide them through the formal registration process.

Explanatory information leaflets and guides, have also been produced for distribution to providers these are: CPF1—Take part in combined pension forecasting, CPF2—A guide to combined pension forecasting and CPF3—Combined pension forecast: Technical guide.

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list those employers and pension scheme providers who have participated in pilot exercises to inform the design and development of combined pensions forecasts; and if he will make sample statements available in the Library. [54238]

Maria Eagle: Pilot exercises were conducted with the following seven companies:

Sainsbury's
Emap
Prudential
Axa/Sunlife
Merseyside Pension Fund
Department for Work and Pensions
National Provident Institute

A sample statement from the Prudential has been placed in the Library.

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps he has taken to inform employees whose employers have switched from final salary pensions to money purchase schemes about the impact of such changes. [55327]

Maria Eagle: Pension schemes are set up voluntarily by employers and they decide what the provisions of those schemes should be. Once a scheme is established scheme trustees are required to provide members with basic information about the scheme, including what benefits are payable and how those benefits are calculated. If employers choose to switch from a final salary to a money purchase scheme, the Government believes employers have a responsibility to make it clear to their employees if contribution rates change and what the implications of that are for their future pension provision.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Directly Elected Mayors

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how much the research on Public Attitudes to Directly Elected Mayors by IFF Research Ltd., published by his Department on 14 December 2001 cost; and when the research was delivered to his Department. [53784]

Dr. Whitehead: The research on Public Attitudes to Directly Elected Mayors, commissioned to find out more about how the public perceived directly elected mayors and to establish the level of interest in local democracy generally, involved fieldwork by IFF Research Ltd, which cost £103,650, and analysis and publication by my Department. The survey data was delivered to my Department on 25 September 2001, and after analysis was published on 14 December, a date which was outside any period for restricting publicity prior to a mayoral referendum.

Fire Service

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the starting salary of a fireman is in *(a)* London and *(b)* the rest of England; and when this salary will next increase. [54176]

Dr. Whitehead: The starting salary for a firefighter aged 18 in London is £20,111 rising to £20,897 after six months. Firefighters over 18 in London start on £20,378 rising to £21,152 after six months.

Outside London the starting salary for a firefighter aged 18 is £16,941 rising to £17,727 after six months. For those over 18 the starting salary is £17,208 rising to £17,982 after six months.

After four years a firefighter in London will be on £24,701 and £21,531 outside London.

Under the national pay agreement between local authority employers and the Fire Brigades Union the operative date for pay increases for firefighting staff is 7 November.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has to increase the pay of fire service personnel. [54177]

Dr. Whitehead: The Government has no statutory role in the determination of fire service pay. Pay arrangements are negotiated between the local authority employers and the representatives of the staff concerned.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the shortfall is in the number of firemen in the UK; and what measures he plans to introduce to increase numbers. [54178]

Dr. Whitehead: Based on figures taken from annual returns HM Fire Service Inspectorate, the difference between establishment and actual strength of whole-time and retained firefighters in England and Wales as at 31 March 2001, the most recent figure available, was as follows:

	Establishment	*Actual*	*Shortfall*
Whole time	33,640	33,376	264
Retained	14,940	12,028	2,912

Recruitment and increases in firefighter numbers are a matter for local fire authorities.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many fire stations have *(a)* closed, *(b)* opened and *(c)* had improvements made to them since 1997. [54179]

Dr. Whitehead: This information is not collected centrally. Information on the number of fire stations in each fire authority in England and Wales at 1 January for each year from 1997 to 2002 was given in my right hon. Friend's reply to a Question from the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. Theresa May) on 19 March 2002, *Official Report,* columns 239–242. On the basis of these returns, six fire stations have closed and five fire stations have opened since 1997. However, these figures may not include instances where the opening of a fire station is balanced by the closure of another in the same authority within a particular year.

Local Authority Services

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that district authorities have the flexibility to fund and deliver high quality public services to local people. [54797]

Dr. Whitehead: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) on 7 May 2002, *Official Report,* column 26W.

Bus Workers (Safety)

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will require the Health and Safety Executive to take steps to improve the safety at work of bus workers. [54871]

Dr. Whitehead: Bus workers, in common with all other workers are protected by the general provisions of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and related legislation. The priorities for HSE are set out in the Health and safety Commission's Strategic Plan 2001–04. There are no specific plans to target the safety of bus workers at this time.

Rural Bus Challenges

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has to extend rural bus challenges to non-road transport; and what his reasons for his policy are. [55078]

Ms Keeble: We have no plans to extend the rural bus challenge scheme to non-road transport. The scheme's focus on buses, and other road public transport, recognises that in the overwhelming majority of cases throughout the country they will be the means of meeting public transport needs in rural areas.

Mineral Planning Guidance

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) what plans he has to issue new guidance on aggregates as a technical note to Mineral Planning Guidance Note 1; [55073]

(2) when he plans to review the guidance in Mineral Planning Guidance Note 6; [55072]

(3) whether minerals planning authorities may deviate from the production levels set in Mineral Planning Guidance Note 6, with particular reference to paragraph 105 of MPG 6. [55074]

Ms Keeble: Following public consultation on principles to be adopted in planning for the future supply of aggregates in 2001, revision of MPG6 was in progress at the time that the Government decided to proceed with the Planning Green Paper. Work on MPG6 was put into abeyance so that any new guidance could conform with decisions to be taken in the light of consultation on the Planning Green Paper. The Green Paper proposed that priority should be given to revising MPG1, dealing with guidance for all types of mineral working, and suggested that MPG6 should be replaced by a technical note in support of MPG1.

Subject to an announcement on the conclusions of the Planning Review, work is in hand to publish a consultation draft revision of MPG1 in the Autumn of 2002, with draft supplementary advice on aggregates following early in 2003. Meanwhile, as a matter of priority, work is proceeding to update the national and regional quantitative guidelines for aggregates provision, at present in the 1994 edition of MPG6, with a view to consulting on these in mid 2002.

The supply guidelines in MPG6 have always been flexible. Paragraph 26 of MPG6 makes it clear that "If circumstances change, requiring a change in assumptions, the provision to be actually made can be adjusted. Consequently the figures contained in these Guidelines are not targets but are indicative figures for the purposes of preparing development plans and the administration of development control." In addition, paragraph 58 of MPG6 makes it clear that the regional guidelines "provide an indication of likely demand but the apportionment figure should not be regarded as inflexible".

"The preparation of development plans provides an important opportunity to test the practicality and environmental acceptability at the local level of the Guidelines figure. The provision to be made in each plan will need to be justified not only in relation to this Guidance, but also in relation to all other relevant considerations affecting planning for the area". In line with paragraph 105 of MPG6, the regional guidelines should always be subject to local review and updating in the light of local circumstances. The forthcoming publication of revised forecasts and guidelines will provide a good opportunity for authorities to do this in reviewing and updating their mineral development plans.

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what discussions he has had with West Sussex County Council on the provision of new aggregate sites at *(a)* Funtington, *(b)* Oving and *(c)* Duncton. [55075]

Ms Keeble: No such discussions have taken place.

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the status is of planning policy guidance and mineral planning guidance notes issued by his Department. [55071]

Ms Keeble: Planning Policy guidance and minerals planning guidance notes set out the Government's policies on different aspects of planning and minerals issues. Local and mineral planning authorities must take them into account, where relevant, in preparing their development plans. It has also been established that such guidance may be material to decisions on individual planning applications and appeals, depending on the circumstances of each case.

Telephone Kiosk Advertising

Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will announce the outcome of the consultation exercise on the future treatment of telephone kiosk glass advertising in the regime for the control of advertisements; and if he will make a statement. [56243]

Ms Keeble: Existing planning rules do not address telephone kiosk glass advertising, which is a relatively new form of advertising. The issue raises a wide range of considerations including visual amenity, highway safety, public safety and crime, and the cost and other resource implications of formal regulation. The consultation paper which we issued on 11 July 2001 invited views on possible options for clarifying the position. I am grateful to all those who took the trouble to respond.

We have carefully considered the responses received and the range of factors involved. We have concluded that kiosk glass advertising should benefit from deemed consent but subject to certain conditions and limitations. This will mean that, subject to meeting conditions and limitations relating to geographical coverage, illumination and size of advertisement, such advertisements may be displayed without the express approval of the local planning authority. The siting of kiosk glass advertisements in conservation areas, areas of outstanding natural beauty, National Parks and the Broads will require the express consent of the local planning authority, as will advertising on more than one face of a kiosk.

We believe that this approach strikes a strikes a fair balance between the need to preserve and where possible enhance the character of the environment and the public realm, the need to ensure public safety, and the business needs of industry, including payphone providers and advertisers. It is designed to resolve the current uncertainty, and promote a consistent approach, by providing an appropriate degree of control but without excessive and burdensome statutory regulation.

Provisions to give effect to these changes will be set out in the new Advertisement Control Regulations due to come into force in the Summer.

Homelessness

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will bring into force the new homelessness legislation in the report "More than a Roof"; and what resources will be provided to ensure its effective implementation. [56244]

Ms Keeble: The homelessness report, "More than a roof', was published on 13 March. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out his response to that report on 13 March in the reply he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan, *Official Report*, column 1091W. Together, those documents set out a new approach to tackling homelessness, one that focuses as much on people and the problems they face, as on the places in which they live. New legislation is a key part of this new approach.

The Homelessness Act 2002 received Royal Assent on 26 February. The Act will strengthen the safety net which local authorities provide for people who are homeless, or threatened with homelessness. It will, for the first time, place a new duty on local authorities to conduct a review of homelessness and develop, in consultation, a strategy to meet the housing and support needs of all homeless people in their district. It will also ensure that people are given greater choice in applying for social housing.

We will be making an Order later this Session to bring the main homelessness provisions of the Act into force in July.

We will also be laying an Order for approval by Parliament to extend the groups of people who have a priority need for accommodation under the homelessness legislation. This will ensure that vulnerable homeless people leaving institutions, young people including those leaving care, and people fleeing domestic, racial and other forms of violence get the help they need. We intend, subject to Parliament's approval, to bring these changes into force in July, at the same time as the main provisions of the Homelessness Act 2002.

We will also issue revised statutory guidance on homelessness in June, up-dated to reflect the new legislation.

Section 8 of the Homelessness Act 2002, which provides for applicants to seek a review of the suitability of accommodation offered by a local authority as a settled solution to homelessness, and paragraphs 3 and 7 of Schedule 1 of the Act, came into force on 26 February. Interim statutory guidance has been issued to housing authorities in respect of these provisions.

We will also be issuing in the next few weeks a draft of the code of guidance on allocation of accommodation for a twelve week consultation period. Following that consultation, we plan to issue the revised statutory code in the Autumn, with the provisions on allocations in the Homelessness Act 2002 coming into force from January 2003.

In order to help local authorities and other agencies to implement these changes effectively, the Government has increased the resources available for housing, homelessness and support services.

In addition to this increased investment, an extra £8 million has been added to local authorities' Revenue Support Grant settlement from 2001–02 to cover the additional duties imposed by the new homelessness legislation.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his response to "More than a roof" that we would provide additional resources to enable local authorities to deliver the new Priority Needs Order. I can confirm today that we will be providing £10 million for this purpose in 2002–03, from a total of £125 million being provided specifically to tackle homelessness. The extra £10 million will be allocated to local authorities by the new Homelessness Directorate in my department following consultation with the Local Government Association on the most appropriate method of distribution.

The Homelessness Directorate is working with local authorities and other key agencies to ensure that the new legislation—and the Government's new approach to tackling homelessness—is implemented efficiently and effectively to make a real difference to the lives of homeless people.

Housing Definitions

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what definition he uses of the terms affordable housing and social housing; and if he will make a statement. [55304]

Ms Keeble: Social housing normally refers to subsidised housing provided by local authorities or registered social landlords for rent. For the purposes of securing affordable housing through the planning system, affordable housing encompasses low-cost market and subsidised housing, whether for rent or shared ownership, that will be available to people who cannot afford to rent or buy houses generally available on the open market. Local authorities are expected to define in their local plans what they consider to be affordable in the plan area, in terms of the relationship between local income levels and house prices or rents for different types of households.

Key Worker Housing

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) if he will set out his definition of key workers in the public services for the purposes of providing Government land for pre-fabricated key worker housing; [55321]

(2) what proportion of the housebuilding targets in each county will be provided by prefabricated key worker housing; [55324]

(3) if the named planning rules will apply to the development of pre-fabricated key worker housing; [55316]

(4) if the public land to be made available for the provision of pre-fabricated key worker housing will include land owned by *(a)* Government departments, *(b)* local authorities and *(c)* Government agencies; [55319]

(5) if he will list those organisations to whom free public land will be made available for the provison of pre-fabricated key worker housing; [55323]

(6) if he will list the sites of Governerment land that will be made available for the provision of pre-fabricated key worker housing. [55322]

Mr. Byers: The Government recognises that there is an urgent and growing need to assist the number of keyworkers and others on intermediate incomes who cannot afford to rent or buy in high demand areas where house prices have risen sharply over the last few years. We are looking at a number of options for helping overcome this problem, including the potential to increase housing supply by using surplus public sector land of all types for affordable housing and by using modular unit construction techniques as illustrated by the Peabody Trust scheme at Murray Grove, Hackney. These techniques offer significant time savings and potential cost reduction. Normal planning rules have applied to recent modular developments.

DEFENCE

Depleted Uranium

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the UK sites where armour piercing and hard target penetrating warheads containing depleted uranium have been used, indicating the numbers used on each site in each year since 1990. [43414]

Dr. Moonie: Since 1990, Depleted Uranium (DU) has been fired on the ranges at Kirkudbright, Eskmeals and West Freugh.

Details of the amount of DU fired are as follows. Because of the way in which data was collected at each establishment the figures for Kirkudbright and West Freugh are given in terms of numbers of rounds fired whereas the Eskmeals data is quoted in mass (Kg) of DU:

Kirkudbright

Year	*Rounds*
1990	783
1991	666
1992	781
1993	682
1994	458
1995	286
1996	105
1997	734
1998	134
1999	136
2000	270
2001	126
TOTAL	4,378

Eskmeals

Year	*Mass Kg*
1990	1,520
1991	640
1992	1,076
1993	917
1994	512
1995	520
1996	0
1997	0
1998	0
1999	0
2000	0
2001	0
TOTAL	5,170

West Freugh

Approximately 215 rounds of the Phalanx weapons system were fired in 1990, all of which entered the sea 2km below low-water mark. There have been no DU firings since.

Errors have unfortunately been identified in the figures for DU projectiles fired at the Kirkudbright Training Area given in the responses on 5 December 2001, *Official Report,* column 342W, to the hon. Member for Galloway & Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan) and on 14 June 2000, *Official Report,* column 644W, and 19 June 2000, *Official Report,* column 27W, to the then hon. Member for Galloway & Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan). It is unclear how these inconsistencies occurred but it is possible the source figures came from data for planned firings rather than actual firings or there may have been a simple miscalculation. The above figures correct these errors.

Colchester Garrison

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the development of the new Colchester Garrison. [52449]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 7 May 2002, *Official Report,* column 40W, to the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin).

Helicopters

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress with trials of the Army's Apache AH Mk 1 attack helicopter. [53517]

Dr. Moonie: Trials of the Apache WAH64 Attack Helicopter are progressing satisfactorily. Delivery of an initial operational capability to the army, consisting of the first operational Apache Squadron, is expected in August 2004.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what savings accrued to the Defence Budget from the reduction in the planned order of Merlin helicopters. [54903]

Dr. Moonie: There have been no reductions in planned orders of Merlin since the Strategic Defence Review.

West Freugh Airfield

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many air traffic movements were reported at West Freugh airfield in each of the last 12 months. [54251]

Dr. Moonie: The following aircraft movements took place at West Freugh in each of the last 12 months.

Year	*Number*
April 2001	300
May 2001	470
June 2001	256
July 2001	391
August 2001	310
September 2001	231
October 2001	166
November 2001	276
December 2001	633
January 2002	143
February 2002	232
March 2002	367

These figures do not include overflights or range runs.

Deployments

Hugh Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many service personnel are serving with *(a)* BDLS Washington and *(b)* BATUS Suffield, broken down by service; [53778]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 16 April, *Official Report,* column 825W, on deployment, what account was taken of army personnel serving with *(a)* BATUS Suffield and *(b)* BDLS Washington. [53801]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The answer my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Ingram) gave on 16 April 2002, *Official Report,* column 825W, showed the total number and location of armed forces personnel deployed overseas on military tasks and operations only.

No account was taken of army personnel serving with *(a)* BATUS Suffield and *(b)* BDS Washington as neither of these are military tasks or operations.

The figures for those currently serving with BATUS Suffield are as follows:

Permanent Staff	207
Temporary Staff (summer training staff)	180
Canadian Military Staff	103
Total Personnel*	490

*All Army Personnel.

The figures for those currently serving with BDS Washington are as follows:

Naval Service	18
Army	16
RAF	12
Total Personnel	46

These figures reflect service personnel serving in the British Defence Staff at the British Embassy in Washington (including Attaches). They do not include

service personnel in exchange, liaison or project staff appointments. In organisational terms BDLS Washington no longer exists and is replaced by BDS Washington.

Gibraltar

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many military personnel were stationed in Gibraltar in *(a)* October 2000, *(b)* April 2001, *(c)* October 2001 and *(d)* April 2002. [54355]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The number of military personnel stationed in Gibraltar is as follows:

Year	*Personnel*
October 2000	585
April 2001	591
October 2001	600
April 2002	564

These figures include UK-based military personnel stationed on Gibraltar and regular members of the Royal Gibraltar Regiment.

Medical Downgrading

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the reason underlying the number of service personnel who are medically downgraded; and if he will make a statement. [54128]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* There are many reasons for Service personnel being medically downgraded on either a temporary or permanent basis. Personnel who are temporarily downgraded have incurred an injury or developed a medical condition for which they are receiving or awaiting treatment or are recuperating. Servicewomen who are pregnant or have recently given birth are also temporarily medically downgraded. Personnel who have a long term medical condition which prevents them from undertaking their full range of duties, but which allows them to be retained with limited employability, are placed in a permanently downgraded category.

Work is currently in hand in the Ministry of Defence to develop improved analysis of the causes of medical downgrading. This will enable us to ensure that we are adopting the most effective means of prevention and treatment wherever these are appropriate.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the Royal Navy are in the medical categories *(a)* baby, *(b)* PO, *(c)* P2, *(d)* P2X, *(e)* P2U3, *(f)* P2L3, *(g)* P3R, *(h)* P3P, *(i)* P7RA, *(j)* P7RB, *(k)* P7RC, *(l)* P7RD and *(m)* P8; in each case what percentage of (i) establishment and (ii) actual manning this represents; and if he will make a statement. [54130]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to my letter of 19 April, a copy of which was placed in the Library of the House. The Royal Navy only has figures for the total number of medically downgraded personnel, and a comparison with the Establishment, which includes only trained posts, would not be valid. "Baby" is not a medical category but an administrative one used when a woman declares her pregnancy; she is then included in the P3R Medical Category. P2L3 and P2U3 are administrative categories used in training, and personnel in these categories are fit for service world-wide.

The number of personnel in the Medical Categories listed and the percentage they represent of the Total Strength is set out on the following table:

Medical Category	*Total*	*per cent of Total Strength*
PO	119	0.28
P2	38,346	90.41
P2X	9	0.02
P3P	383	0.90
P3R (including "Baby")	354	0.83
P7RA	298	0.70
P7RB	66	0.15
P7RC	62	0.14
P7RD	1,525	3.59
P8	68	0.16

Medical Category	*Total*	*per cent of Total Strength*
P2L3	844	1.99
P2U3	56	0.13

ASRAAM

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what savings to the Defence Budget accrued from the delay in the delivery of the ASRAAM missile. [54902]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 1 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 601W, when I informed the House that the delay in the ASRAAM In-Service Date had cost the Ministry of Defence approximately £7 million. The MOD has collected liquidated damages from the contractor, on the basis of terms agreed at the time of contract signature. Liquidated damages are paid to the MOD in respect of the loss and damage caused by the late delivery of the missiles; this includes both the MOD's additional costs and the loss of capability. Accordingly, although the amount of liquidated damages received from the company exceeds £7 million, the MOD does not regard this as a saving.

Retention

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the average length of service by new recruits in each regiment since 1990; and if he will provide a breakdown of the results of exit interviews with personnel over the most recent period for which figures are available. [55168]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The average length of service on Outflow for trained Officers and soldiers since Financial Year 1990–1991 is detailed in the following table:

Officers

Financial Year	*Mean Length of Service on Outflow*
1990–1991	12 Years 9 Months
1991–1992	10 Years 2 Months
1992–1993	15 Years 10 Months
1993–1994	13 Years 10 Months
1994–1995	13 Years 2 Months
1995–1996	11 Years 11 Months
1996–1997	12 Years 1 Month
1997–1998	13 Years 2 Months
1998–1999	13 Years 9 Months
1999–2000	14 Years 10 Months
2000–2001	14 Years 10 Months
2001–2002	15 Years 10 Months

Soldiers

Financial Year	*Mean Length of Service on Outflow*
1990–1991	8 Years 8 Months
1991–1992	8 Years 11 Months
1992–1993	10 Years 9 Months
1993–1994	11 Years 10 Months
1994–1995	10 Years 9 Months
1995–1996	9 Years 3 Months
1996–1997	8 Years 10 Month
1997–1998	9 Years 9 Months
1998–1999	9 Years 9 Months
1999–2000	10 Years
2000–2001	9 Years 10 Months
2001–2002	9 Years 8 Months

The above information is not restricted to new recruits as to do so would provide no meaningful information. New recruits would obviously have a shorter reckonable service than those that joined in 1990 as, by definition, they will have had less time to accumulate service. The information provided allows for a valid time series comparison to be made. To provide a breakdown of this information by Regiment could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Information gathered at exit interviews is recorded on the Continuous Attitude Survey; however, the Survey is anonymous so it is not possible to attribute information to any particular Regiment or individual. The last full leavers survey conducted covered the period July–December 1999; questionnaires are still being returned for the latest Survey so data has not yet been analysed.

The main reasons for leaving were identified as follows:

Lack of job satisfaction

Amount of separation from spouse/partner

Better civilian job opportunities outside

Effect of Army lifestyle on marriage/relationship

If stayed longer it would be difficult to start a new career

Compassionate reasons.

Hydrographic Office

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office for the financial year 2002–03. [55842]

Dr. Moonie: The key targets set for the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office for the Financial Year 2002–03 are as follows:

Publish 100 per cent of priority safety information within the stated timescales from receipt of the original data.

Deliver Defence specific outputs as defined in the Tasking Authorisation Forms. All agreed outputs delivered to time and quality.

Improve completeness and delivery of orders. 90 per cent of orders shipped to schedule and 95 per cent line completeness at first despatch by year end.

Deliver immediate and medium term change projects to ensure the long-term viability of the Office.

Break even taking one year with another and return an average Return on Capital Employed over the Plan period of 7.5 per cent.

Achieve efficiency measure of 5 per cent growth in "Value Added" per member of staff (based on FY 2000–01) by FY 2005–06.

Offshore Wind Farms

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has made and to whom against proposals for offshore wind farms off *(a)* Cromer and *(b)* the coast of Lancashire; and if he will make a statement. [55578]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has made known its objections to these offshore windfarm proposals to both the Department of Trade and Industry and to the developers concerned. Discussions continue with the developers.

London Power's proposed site off Cromer is close to the Cromer Air Defence Radar and therefore the MOD has objected because the siting of wind turbines close to such installations can produce false returns on radar screens.

The proposed sites off Lancashire by Shell and Energie Kontor lie within 15 miles of the airfield at British Aerospace Systems Ltd Warton and give rise to similar issues of potential radar interference.

Basic Training Costs

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost is of basic training for one enlisted recruit in the British Army. [55169]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* In the Financial Year to 31 March 2002, the estimated cost of basic training for one recruit to the British Army was £11,000.

Drug Tests

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* drug tests, *(b)* positive results of drug tests and *(c)* subsequent dismissals there have been in the British Army, broken down by (i) regiment and (ii) division in the last five years. [55167]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Naval Vessel Sales

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many naval vessels have been sold in the last five years; and what records are retained. [55166]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* 103 surplus former Naval vessels have been sold in the last five years via the Ministry of Defence's Disposal Services Agency (DSA). This figure includes named capital ships, minor vessels and marine support vessels. Detailed records for the last five years of all surplus transactions are retained by the DSA. There was also one Upholder Submarine sold during this period. This was the responsibility of the MOD's Upholder Programme and records would be retained by that MOD branch.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 19 October 2001, *Official Report*, column 1394W, on asylum seekers, when he will place the letters from Merseyside Police concerning asylum seekers in Everton, Liverpool in the Library. [43300]

Angela Eagle: Further to my Answer of 27 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1397W. The letters were placed in the Library on 18 March 2002. I apologise to my hon Friend for the administrative delay that occurred.

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what performance indicators and output targets are used by the National Asylum Support Service to measure the efficiency of its service to asylum seekers and other stakeholders; and how the NASS is performing against these performance indicators and output targets. [44752]

Angela Eagle: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) measures its performance against challenging targets. Targets are set for individual areas of work. Details of targets for the main areas of work are as follows:

Area of work	*Target*	*Current performance*
Response to enquiries about vouchers	24 hours	Met in 100 per cent of cases
Single additional payment and replacement of HC2 certificates	5 days in 90 per cent of cases	Target met
Post allocation work (including requests for payment of maternity grant and inclusion of additional dependants)	10 days in 90 per cent of cases	Target is met in 11 of 13 different work areas.
Change of circumstances i.e. request to change from subsistence only to subsistence and accommodation	10 days in 90 per cent of cases	Target met
Assessment of non complex applications for support	3 days in 90 per cent of cases	Target met
Turnaround time for subsistence only applications	5 days in 90 per cent of cases	Target met

"Supporting Families"

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) of 4 December 2001, *Official Report*, column 231W, when the report on progress towards the recommendations in the Supporting Families document will be placed in the Library. [44202]

Angela Eagle: A progress report on the issues raised in the Supporting Families document was placed in the Library today.

Animal Experiments

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to bring forward regulations on *(a)* mandatory investment by commercial companies into the development of non-animal alternatives to animal testing and *(b)* over-breeding of animals for experiments. [43970]

Angela Eagle: The Government does not believe that setting mandatory requirements for investment into research into alternatives to the use of animals in scientific procedures is either desirable or necessary.

Nonetheless, every year the Home Office makes available to the Animal Procedures Committee (APC) a budget for research aimed at developing or promoting the use of alternatives which replace animal use, reduce the number of animals used, or refine the procedures involved to minimise suffering (the three Rs). Details of completed research projects are published in the annual Report of the Animal Procedures Committee, which is available from The Stationery Office.

The amount made available to the Committee for 2001–02 for this specific purpose has increased to £280,000. However, this is not the only money spent by the Government on seeking to develop alternatives, as other Departments also fund such work. It is estimated that the total spent on this by the United Kingdom Government is in the region of £2 million each year. Industry also spends many millions of pounds each year on the search for and development of alternatives. To take this further on an international level, the United Kingdom Government will continue to support the European Centre for the Validation of Alternative Methods (ECVAM) through contributions to the European Union.

The Animal Procedures Committee looked at the issue of the over-breeding of animals for use in scientific procedures as part of its 10-year review of the 1986 Act. The Committee defined "overbreeding" as "the production in breeding programmes of animals intended for use in scientific procedures but which prove to be unsuitable for such use or surplus to requirements". With the exception of genetically modified animals, the production of which is a regulated procedure, these animals are not recorded in the annual statistics on animal use under the 1986 Act since they are not used in regulated procedures. Estimates vary significantly as to the number of animals that may be involved. The Animal Procedures Committee concluded that although some overbreeding was unavoidable, it can and should be minimised and it recommended principles of best practice to help to achieve this. The Committee also undertook to liaise with the Laboratory Animal Science Association, which has also been considering the issue of overbreeding and how it can be minimised, to refine these principles before finalising its advice. I expect to receive the Committee's report by the summer and will carefully consider the further advice it provides.

Non-police Personnel

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how he will inform the public of the

allocation of the power to detain and use force to non-police personnel; what the projected cost is of providing this information; and if he will make a statement. [44964]

Mr. Denham: Clause 35 (4) of the Police Reform Bill proposes that a police authority must include in their annual policing plan any proposals they have to employ, accredit or give powers to police support staff or members of Community Safety Accreditation Schemes. These plans are published.

Under the Police Act 1996, police authorities are already required to issue an annual policing plan each year and, so, any additional information can be included in the plan at minimal cost.

Antisocial Behaviour Orders

David Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many antisocial behaviour orders were made in the West Midlands by constituency in the last 12 months. [45131]

Mr. Denham: From 1 June 2000 official statistics on the number of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) issued are based on quarterly returns from Magistrates' Courts Committees (MCCs) and are not presently designed to give figures below MCC level. The latest available data covers the period to the end of September 2001. In the 12 months ending September 2001, 37 ASBOs were issued within the West Midlands MCC area.

Project Sponsorship

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which of his Department's projects have received sponsorship since 1997, including *(a)* details of the sponsor, *(b)* the nature of the project, *(c)* the date of the project, *(d)* the total cost of the project and *(e)* the amount of money involved in the sponsorship deal. [48403]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 11 April 2002]:* The information available on projects that have received sponsorship since 1997, including details of sponsor, nature and date of the project, total cost and the amount of money involved in the sponsorship deal is as follows:

Project—Burglary Taskforce

Sponsor	Sponsorship Value £	Total Cost £	Date
British Gas	30,000*	2.25 million	April 2000
Electricity Association	30,000		
British Telecom	3,000		
Water United Kingdom	200,000		

For further information, provided below are details for non-monetary sponsorships. The value of the sponsorship has been calculated as "added value" to the campaign. It is not cash received by the Home Office.

Chip Pan Safety Campaign

Sponsor	Sponsorship Value £	Total Cost £	Date
B & Q	7,560	305,000	November 1997/ March 1998
Tesco	5,693		
Moorhouses Brewery	6,600		

Smoke Alarm Maintenance/Education/Awareness Campaign

Sponsor	Sponsorship Value £	Total Cost £	Date
Duracell	309,250	370,000	January 1999
El Electronics	26,000		
Homebase	16,000		
Woolworths	6,000		
B & Q	5,000		
Focus Do It All	30,000		
Kidde Safety	11,500		

National Chip Pan Campaign

Sponsor	Sponsorship Value £	Total Cost	Date
First Alert	5,000	1.33 million	August/ September 1999
Morphy Richards	10,775		
Comet	386,600		
Curry's (Dixons Group)	27,500		

Escape Route Campaign

Sponsor	Sponsorship Value £	Total Cost £	Date
Safestyle UK plc	12,500	345,000	February 2000

National Escape Route

Sponsor	Sponsorship Value £	Total Cost £	Date
Comet	41,133	5 million	September 2000
First Alert	6,774		
BBC Worldwide	44,600		
GMTV	450,000		
El Electronics	31,390		
Homebase	9,000		
Woolworths	124,230		
B&Q	52,000		

Vehicle Crime Reduction Campaign

Sponsor	Sponsorship Value £	Total Cost £	Date
RAC Auto		15.015 million	July 2000 To date
Windscreens	303,000		
RAC	180,000		
Lycos	29,000		
Kwik-Fit	130,000		
Ford	150,000		
Retainagroup	189,500		
Tracker	38,800		
NCP	40,000		
AA Insurance	180,500		

Child Protection on the Internet

Sponsor	Sponsorship Value £	Total Cost £	Date
Bolt.com	19,000	1.1 million	November 2001–March 2002
Yahoo	22,000		
MSN	22,000		

Premier Services

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the service agreement aspect of the contract with Premier Services can be placed in the public domain. [53216]

Angela Eagle: Yes. Those parts of the contract with Premier Services that are not commercially confidential or subject to the Official Secrets Acts 1911 and 1989 will

be made available to the public. The service aspect of the contract will in due course be published on the Home Office website and copies placed in the Library.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will to reply to the letter to him dated 30 January from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. Jawad Farooqi. [53953]

Mr. Blunkett: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 26 April 2002.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Tourism (National Insurance Contributions)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the cost to the tourism industry of the proposed increase in employers' national insurance contributions. [52757]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* It is estimated that the changes to employers' national insurance contributions announced in the Budget will increase pay costs on average by 0.7 per cent next year.

Fraud

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption was in *(a)* her Department's Vote 1 budget and *(b)* her Department's Vote 2 budget for (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [54704]

Dr. Howells: In respect of the DCMS's Vote 1 budget, I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife on 14 January 2002. In respect of Vote 2, which relates to the BBC licence fee, for which the Department has responsibility to Parliament for balancing the grant voted to the BBC with the receipts received from the licence payers, there were no losses due to fraud or corruption in the years in question.

Digital Television

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of the population in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* each United Kingdom region and *(c)* the High Peak constituency is able to receive a digital terrestrial television signal; and if she will make a statement. [54619]

Dr. Howells: The percentage of population predicted to be able to receive a digital terrestrial signal in (a) the United Kingdom and (b) Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is as follows:

Homes covered (per cent)

	BBC Multiplex	*Digital 3 & 4 Multiplex*	*Multiplex A*	*Multiplex B*	*Multiplex C*	*Multiplex D*	*Core*
UK (Current)	81	80	78	79	76	74	68
Scotland (Launch)	84	83	82	81	82	80	78
Wales (Launch)	62	60	62	59	55	55	42
Northern Ireland (Launch)	72	72	64	66	72	58	57

Figures provided by the Independent Television Commission (comparable information for the English regions is not available).

I understand from the Independent Television Commission that Digital Terrestrial Television signals from the Winter Hill, Sheffield, Chesterfield, and Emley Moor transmitters are predicted to be available to some areas of the High Peak constituency. Coverage maps are available on the Digital Television Group website: www.dtg.org.uk.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures the Government will take to ensure that the quality of the analogue signal is maintained during digital roll-out; and if she will make a statement. [54618]

Dr. Howells: The Government are committed to ensuring that terrestrial analogue signals will be maintained until everyone who can currently get the main public service broadcasting channels in analogue form can receive them on digital systems. The Independent Television Commission (ITC) require that any changes made by the broadcasters to the digital terrestrial television transmitter network conform with the ITC Code of Practice on Changes to Transmission and Reception Arrangements. This requires the continued reception of analogue services, to an acceptable technical quality, to those viewers affected by digital terrestrial services.

Culture Funding

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the Government will take steps to increase funding for culture; and if she will make a statement. [55014]

Mr. Caborn: In the context of the 2002 Spending Review, my Department and the Treasury are looking closely at current and future spending needs across all the cultural sectors. The outcome of the Review will be announced in July.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

EU Aid Budget

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she will take to improve the performance of the EU aid budget. [54687]

Clare Short: My Department published a revised strategy for improving the poor performance of the European Community development programme in August 2001. I welcome the positive steps that have recently been taken, including establishment for the first time of an EC Development Policy with poverty reduction as the central objective, streamlining of procedures and improvements in financial and staff management. The Commission are

also delegating significant new responsibilities to their offices overseas in order to improve dialogue with developing country partners and cut delays. The Government is working with other member states, the Commission and the European Parliament to ensure that these measures begin to have an impact on the ground and allow the European Community to make a much more significant contribution to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. We are also working for agreement that a much greater share of EC aid should be allocated to low income countries where it will have the greatest impact on poverty reduction. In 2000, only 38 per cent of EC aid was spent in low income countries compared to 70 per cent in 1990. Our objective is to reverse this decline in order to secure radical improvement in the effectiveness of EC aid.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made in reforming the EU aid budget. [54688]

Clare Short: My Department published a revised strategy for improving the poor performance of the European Community development programme in August 2001. We welcome the steps that have recently been taken, including establishment for the first time of an EC Development Policy with poverty reduction as the central objective, streamlining of procedures and improvements in financial and staff management. The Commission are also delegating significant new responsibilities to their offices overseas in order to improve dialogue with developing country partners and cut delays. The Government is working with other member states, the Commission and the European Parliament to ensure that these measures begin to have an impact on the ground and allow the European Community to make a much more significant contribution to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. We are also working for agreement that a much greater share of EC aid should be allocated to low income countries where it will have the greatest impact on poverty reduction. In 2000, only 38 per cent of EC aid was spent in low income countries compared to 70 per cent in 1990. Our objective is to reverse this decline in order to secure radical improvement in the effectiveness of EC aid.

Debt Relief

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made on debt relief for poor countries. [54685]

Clare Short: So far, 26 out of a total of 42 countries have qualified for relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, and by the autumn, Cote d'Ivoire could be added to the list of countries benefiting from the Initiative. Relief of more than US $60 billion will be provided to these countries, reducing their debts by more than two-thirds on average. Of the 26 countries, 21 have reached Decision Point and are receiving interim debt relief on their "flow" of payment, and five have completed the HIPC process, and have received an irrevocable reduction in their stock of debt. We hope that a further three will reach their Completion Point this year. The prospects for the remaining eleven unsustainable countries are not good. Six—Burundi, Congo Republic, Liberia, Myanmar, Somalia and Sudan—are still affected by conflict; Togo has governance problems; Central African Republic, DR Congo and Comoros might go through next year; and Lao PDR is undecided as to whether to opt for HIPC relief. Angola, Kenya, Vietnam and Yemen are regarded as sustainable cases, eligible for relief from the Paris Club.

Commonwealth Development Corporation

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the performance of the Commonwealth Development Corporation against its objectives for 2001–02. [54686]

Clare Short: In 2001, CDC made £134 million of new investments, and met both its Investment Policy targets. Over the last five years, 83 per cent of CDC's new investments have been in the poorer developing countries, and last year 69 per cent of the new investments were in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Private equities and emerging markets all declined sharply in 2001, and CDC's portfolio valuation was reduced by 10.3 per cent. A copy of CDC's annual review and financial statement for 2001 has been placed in the Library.

Middle East

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations her Department has made to the Israeli Government to secure the safe access of the Palestinian civilian population to *(a)* clean water supplies, *(b)* working sanitation and *(c)* medical care; and if she will make a statement. [55171]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to my Answer of 1 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 859W.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact of the political instability in Zimbabwe on regional security. [54260]

Mr. MacShane: I have been asked to reply.

The situation in Zimbabwe is having a negative impact on Southern Africa. The crisis has increased levels of illegal immigration from Zimbabwe into neighbouring countries, created economic imbalances in border areas and, more generally, reduced investor confidence in the region. All of these threaten the stability and security of Southern Africa. Regional governments will need to remain closely involved in helping to secure a lasting solution to the crisis.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Official Visits

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) if he will list the official visits to *(a)* Paris and *(b)* Brussels made by each Minister in his Department in 2001 and the mode of travel used; and what guidance is provided to Ministers in his Department on the choice of mode of travel for such visits; [38157]

(2) if he will list the official visits within the UK outside London made by each Minister in his Department in 2001, giving for each *(a)* the origin and destination and *(b)* the mode of travel used; and what guidance is provided to Ministers in his Department on choice of mode of travel for official visits. [38193]

Mr. Wills: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 6 March (Hansard column reference 421W).

Census Online

Mr. Brady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the 1901 Census Online facility will be reinstated at the designated regional service centres. [52754]

Ms Rosie Winterton: QinetiQ Ltd. is continuing to work on the technical enhancements. Once configuring of the technical enhancements is complete, rigorous testing will be undertaken on all aspects of the system. These enhancements are intended to make the site sufficiently robust to permit general Internet access, and are being done with a sense of urgency. Before the full Internet service is restored, it will be relaunched at the service centres as part of the testing programme; details of the relaunch will be available in due course.

Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the terms of reference are for the quarterly plenary of human rights contacts in each department of Government; and if he will list the members of the body. [53772]

Mr. Wills: These are informal meetings of human rights contacts in all the main Whitehall Departments. Our aims are to:

collect systematically examples of the impact of the Act on policy and practice in public authorities, in particular Government departments;

to disseminate and promote good practice and raise awareness amongst public authorities; and

to maintain and update a list of "notable cases" which illustrate important themes.

There are currently 26 contacts, all of whom are invited to the quarterly meetings.

Criminal Courts

Mr. Wray: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent steps the Government have taken to renovate the criminal courts. [54206]

Mr. Wills: The Court Service is currently undertaking a major Courts and Tribunals Modernisation Programme, an important part of which is aimed at improving the use of technology in the criminal courts. This includes the introduction of digital audio recording of court proceedings, expansion of TV links for vulnerable witnesses and links to local prisons, and the installation of IT equipment in court for the electronic presentation of evidence.

The Court Service undertakes general improvements to the criminal courts as part of major maintenance schemes according to priorities and funding. At the moment it is also in the second year of a three-year programme of improvement works to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995).

Renovations and modernisation initiatives in the magistrates' courts are bid for by individual Magistrates' Court Committees and Local Authorities and are funded from the Department's Capital Grant allocation.

Magistrates' Court Service

Mr. Wray: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what budget was of the Magistrates' Court Service in each year since 1997. [54207]

Mr. Wills: The Lord Chancellor's Department provides separate grants for revenue and capital (buildings and IT) to local authorities for magistrates' courts costs. Grant is paid at 80 per cent of the costs, with the remaining 20 per cent met by local authorities. The total revenue and capital grant budget made available to the Magistrates' Courts Service since 1997, including the local authorities' 20 per cent contribution, is as follows:

	£ million
1997–98	340.70
1998–99	354.40
1999–00	361.90
2000–01	362.24
2001–02	405.54
2002–03	419.89

Unpaid Fines

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the level of unpaid fines is at Merseyside Magistrates Courts. [54855]

Mr. Wills: Magistrates' Courts Committees have responsibility for the collection of a range of debts imposed through the courts, including not only fines but also fees, compensation, confiscation orders, legal aid contributions and some maintenance orders. It is not possible to separate out just the fines from the total.

The total amount of money owed to the Merseyside courts at the end of December 2001 was £25,799,445. This figure includes impositions where deferred payment was allowed and where instalments were not yet due.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans his Department has to reduce the number of unpaid fines in England and Wales. [54856]

Mr. Wills: Lead responsibility for execution of financial penalty warrants was transferred from the police to the Magistrates' Courts Committees on 1 April 2001. No targets were set for execution of these warrants during the first year of operation to enable baseline data to be collected.

On 28 February the Lord Chancellor announced challenging targets for Magistrates' Courts Committees for 2002–03 for enforcement of both financial and non-financial penalties. I refer the hon. Member to the

Reply which I gave on that day to my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac), *Official Report*, column 1554W.

Public Records

Norman Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if her policy not to release into the public domain records which may embarrass living persons also applies to the impact of such releases on institutions. [54672]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Records may be closed longer than thirty years under section 5(1) of the Public Records Act 1958 (as amended in 1967) with the permission of the Lord Chancellor. If records are to remain closed, they must satisfy the criteria for extended closure set out in the Open Government White Paper (Cm2290, July 1993). This does not allow for records to be closed if they may cause embarrassment, whether to an individual or an institution.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Small and Medium Enterprises

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures the Government have taken since 1997 to reduce regulations affecting small and medium enterprises. [54192]

Nigel Griffiths: Among the actions being taken to relieve the burden of regulation on SMEs are:

Measures to simplify the VAT regime for 700,000 businesses.

Measures to exempt up to 30,000 small shops from the new EU unit pricing requirements.

Measures to relieve up to 150,000 small firms from the burden of statutory audit, saving small companies up to £180 million a year.

A 12 weeks period between regulations being agreed and implemented, allowing SMEs time to adapt to the new regulations.

Measures to exempt employers with 4 or fewer employees from the requirements to provide access to stakeholder pensions and deduct pension contributions.

Measures to ensure that the view of small business influenced Patrick Carter's review of payroll administration, a copy of which is in the Libraries of the House.

In addition the Business Link Website is now attracting 80,000 users per month—and businesses can register to receive alerts about regulation automatically.

Measures through Business Links to assist and support 6000 individuals wanting to start and grow a business and helped a further 6000 with mentoring advice.

Middle East

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what favourable trading terms accrue to Israel through its agreements with the European Union. [54728]

Ms Hewitt: There is reciprocal free trade under the EU/Israel Association Agreement. Subject to the terms of that Agreement, manufactured goods may be traded in each direction free of duties and quotas and there are also preferences on agricultural products.

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what trading benefits accrue to *(a)* Israeli settlers in the occupied territories and *(b)* the Palestinian Authority through agreements with the European Union. [54729]

Ms Hewitt: The trading benefits of the EU/Israel Association Agreement apply to goods originating in the European Union and the State of Israel. The UK, along with the rest of our EU partners and the wider international community, does not consider the Occupied Territories to be covered by the EU-Israel Association Agreement. The EU has insisted in its discussions with the Israeli authorities that the territorial scope of the EU-Israel Association Agreement must be respected. In this respect, the European Commission published in November 2001 a notice to importers in the Official Journal of the European Communities alerting EU importers to the ineligibility of products originating in the Occupied Territories for the preferences provided under the EU-Israel Association Agreement.

Under the terms of the 1997 Interim Association Agreement between the EU and the Palestine Liberation Organisation for the benefit of the Palestinian Authority, industrial goods from the territory of the Palestinian Authority enter the EU duty and quota free. There are also preferences on agricultural products. Unlike the arrangements with Israel however there is no requirement for the Palestinian Authority to offer reciprocal market access for EU goods.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which United Kingdom companies the ECGD *(a)* is supporting or *(b)* has previously supported regarding (i) the Manban power plant and (ii) the transmission networks associated with the Manban power plant in the Philippines. [55057]

Ms Hewitt: ECGD has not provided any support nor has it received any applications or enquiries from any UK company in respect of the Manban power plant and/or the associated transmission networks.

Engineering

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what meetings her Department has had with senior officers of engineering institutions since January 2000. [56052]

Alan Johnson: The information is not held centrally and therefore could only be collected at a disproportionate cost.

Mobile Phone Shields

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the report on mobile phone shields will be published. [56246]

Mr. Alexander: Following the Government response to the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones chaired by Sir William Stewart in May 2000, the Department commissioned independent tests on mobile phone shielding devices. A copy of the test report has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Employment Law

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations she has received from small businesses regarding the implementation of employment law introduced since 1997; and if she will make a statement. [55906]

Alan Johnson: Ministers regularly meet small firms and their representatives to discuss a range of issues, including employment law.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contingency plans have been made to rescue British passport holders who may flee over the borders of Zimbabwe in the event of a humanitarian crisis. [44935]

Mr. Bradshaw: There are approximately 26,000 British nationals registered with the British High commission in Harrare. We have a civil contingency plan for Zimbabwe, as we do for many other countries. This is kept under constant review. Any evacuation would be a last resort and by whatever means available at that time.

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library copies of each version of the internal guidance which have been drawn up by his Department since 1 January 1999 to assist staff in his Department to answer subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 1998. [53360]

Mr. MacShane: Since 1 January 1999, two versions of internal guidance have been drawn up by the FCO. A booklet, "A Guide to The Data Protection Act 1998" was issued in June 2000. This has been superseded by guidance made available to staff in December 2001. Section 3 of this guidance deals with answers to subject access requests. I have arranged for a copy of both the booklet and Section 3 of the guidance to be placed in the House Library. A revised version of the guidance will be prepared for inclusion in the FCO's Publication Scheme, which is required by the Freedom of Information Act to be in place in November 2002.

Taiwan

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met representatives from Taiwan; and what was discussed. [53635]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had no official meetings with representatives of Taiwan.

Kashmir

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent meetings he has held relating to the conflict in Kashmir; and if he will make a statement on UN resolutions in respect of Kashmir. [53792]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs discussed Kashmir with his Pakistani counterpart Abdul Sattar on 19 April, and his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh on 16 April. EU Foreign Ministers also discussed Kashmir on 13 April. It is possible for both India and Pakistan to claim the support of various international and bilateral agreements. The crucial point is that the issue can be resolved only by bilateral negotiations between India and Pakistan.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many First Secretaries (Immigration) he has met since 7 June. [54503]

Mr. Bradshaw: We currently have three full time First Secretaries (Immigration): they are located in Lagos, New Delhi and Islamabad. Since taking up office on 7 June 2001 my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has met the First Secretaries (Immigration in Islamabad and New Delhi and I have met the First Secretary (Immigration) in New Delhi. Both my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I make a point of trying to meet a wide cross-section of staff working in our overseas posts. As Minister responsible for entry clearance I try to visit Visa Sections wherever possible and meet UK based and locally engaged staff working in them.

Middle East

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he *(a)* has taken and *(b)* plans to take on the Middle East crisis with his European partners. [54880]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is in constant contact with his European counterparts about the crisis in the Middle East. He agreed with our EU partners that the High Representative Javier Solana would represent the EU at the Ministerial meeting of the Quartet, (the UN, the US, the EU and Russia) on 2 May. The Quartet agreed that a comprehensive approach, including security, political and economic agendas, is needed to solve the current situation, including the rebuilding of the Palestinian security sector to achieve an end to the violence, humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians affected by the conflict; and support for the institutional and economic reconstruction of the Palestinian Authority. The Quartet agreed to work together in order to convene an international conference on the Middle East in the summer. The EU is committed to the implementation of the agenda agreed by the Quartet. The Foreign Secretary will consider the Middle East with his EU counterparts at the meeting of the General Affairs Council on 13 May.

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he is taking to ensure that Israel complies with its obligations under the 4 Geneva Convention. [54879]

Mr. Bradshaw: The UK and EU partners reaffirmed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the Occupied Territories, including East Jerusalem, at the reconvened conference of High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention in Geneva on 5 December 2001. In the Conference Declaration we called upon all parties to respect, and to ensure respect for, the Geneva Conventions in all circumstances.

Israel, like all states, has the right to defend itself against terrorism, which the UK Government condemns absolutely. However, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made clear, Israel must respect international law, including international humanitarian law. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have raised our concerns with the Israeli Prime Minister and the Israeli Foreign Minister about extra judicial killings, the closures, the denial of access for humanitarian and medical agencies to those in need, and allegations of misconduct by IDF troops. It is in Israel's own interest to respond positively and comply with its obligations.

Iran

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have taken place with Russia concerning the proliferation of nuclear technology from that country to Iran; and if he will make a statement. [54813]

Mr. Bradshaw: We continue to be concerned by reports that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons programme. We take every appropriate opportunity with the Russian Government to raise the issue of the transfer of nuclear technology and expertise to Iran.

Belorussian Government

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Belorussian Government about the meeting between President Lukashenko and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of Iraq Hikmat al-Azawi in Minsk on 19 March 2001; what reports he has received about the *(a)* aim and *(b)* outcome of the meeting; and if he will make a statement. [55155]

Mr. Bradshaw: We have not received any reports about the aims or outcome of the 19 March 2001 meeting between Belarusian President Lukashenko and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Hikmat al-Azawi. We have made clear to the Belarusian Government that we expect it to observe all international sanctions in place against Iraq.

Gibraltar

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Spanish proposal in the Brussels process that Gibraltar could have autonomous city status. [55064]

Peter Hain: Discussions under the Brussels Process are aimed at overcoming all the differences between the UK and Spain over Gibraltar, including on issues of sovereignty. Discussions have not included proposals that Gibraltar could have autonomous city status.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made on the aim of resolving the status of Gibraltar before the summer. [55859]

Peter Hain: Talks under the Brussels Process are continuing. I met my Spanish counter part in London on 9 May. We had a friendly and constructive meeting, though substantial difficulties remain. We remain committed to reaching an agreement if possible. The Foreign Secretary will meet the Spanish Foreign Minister next week to discuss Gibraltar among other issues.

TREASURY

Pensioners (Income Tax)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many pensioners living in England and Wales are paying income tax on their incomes. [53878]

Dawn Primarolo: It is estimated that 4.5 million, out of 10.8 million, pensioners in the UK paid income tax on their incomes in 2001–02.

Pensioners are defined as women aged 60 and over and men aged 65 and over. The figures are based upon the Survey of Personal Incomes and are consistent with the 2002 Budget.

House Sales (Revenue)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much revenue was received from house sales in the United Kingdom; and what proportion was received from rural areas in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [55303]

Ruth Kelly: Information on stamp duty receipts attributable to residential property transactions for the years 1991–92 to 1994–95 is given in table 15.3 of Inland Revenue Statistics 1997, and equivalent figures for 1995–96 to 2000–01 are available on the Inland Revenue website at http://www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/stats/stamp_duty/sd_t02_1.htm.

Corresponding information specifically for rural areas is not available.

Tax Credits

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the estimates are of take-up of tax credits underlying his figures for the effects of personal tax and benefit reforms on page 90 of the Red Book. [53530]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to paragraph 3.2 of "The Child and Working Tax Credits. Modernisation of Britain's Tax and Benefit System" (April 2002), a copy of which is available in the Library of the House.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Chernobyl

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what land acreage is covered by restrictions imposed in 1986 following the Chernobyl accident. [54169]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

The following tables show the acreage of the restricted area, and numbers of sheep under restrictions arising from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986. The figures are presented for England, Wales and Scotland. The last restrictions in place in Northern Ireland were removed in April 2000.

Restrictions in 1986

	England	*Wales*	*Scotland*	*Total*
Acreage	469,737	1,013,110	1,853,250	3,336,097
Sheep	867,000	2,000,000	1,358,000	4,225,000

Restrictions as of January 2002

	England	*Wales*	*Scotland*	*Total*
Acreage	29,899	130,963	44,478	205,340
Sheep	11,500	180,000	38,000	229,500

HEALTH

Defibrillators

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many new automated defibrillators have been installed in public places. [47011]

Yvette Cooper: Since its launch in April 2000 the defibrillators in public places programme has seen 486 automated external defibrillator devices installed at a total of 65 sites across England, including airports, main-line railway stations, and bus and coach stations. Action is continuing to install defibrillators at further sites.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Black Country Mental Health NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative; [49519]

(2) what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Bucknall Hospital Psychiatric Unit for the North Staffordshire Combined Health Care NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative; [49543]

(3) what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for Monyhull for the South Birmingham Mental Health NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative. [49525]

Yvette Cooper: The business case justifying the individual schemes estimating the net savings in present value terms (i.e. all future costs and benefits discounted to their present values) compared with publicly funding the scheme is shown in the table.

Annual Equivalent Costs of PSC v. PFI Option

NHS TRUST	*PFI £000s*	*Public £000s*	*Savings in EAC terms £000s*	*per cent Difference*
North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare	26,608	26,663	55	0.20
South Birmingham Mental Health	2,336	2,364	28	1.18
Black Country Mental Health	4,099	4,099.5	0.5	0.01

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Standard Court Health Authority headquarters for the Nottingham Health Authority by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative. [49510]

Jacqui Smith: The business case justifying this scheme estimating the net savings in present value terms (i.e. all future costs and benefits discounted to their present values) compared with publicly funding the scheme is shown in the table.

Net Present Costs of PSC v. PFI Option

Scheme	*PFI £000s*	*Public £000s*	*Savings in net present value terms £000s*	*per cent Difference*
Nottingham Health Authority Headquarters–Standard Court	2801	3408	607	17.8

Published guidance on public sector comparators notes that: "Accounting Officers should not rely solely on a straight comparison of a PFI bid to its PSC, which should never be regarded as a pass/fail test but instead as a quantitative way of informing judgement". (Treasury Taskforce Technical Note No. 5: How to construct a public sector comparator.)

Mental Health

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average waiting time for a residential place with 24-hour staffing for a mental health patient in London. [48866]

Jacqui Smith: The Department does not collect this information. However, the NHS Plan commitment to create an additional 320 24-hour staffed beds across the country by April 2001 was achieved and returns indicate that a substantial number of these were in the London Region. It is anticipated that this increase will have reduced waiting times for places.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the funding for the present year for *(a)* hospital and residential mental care and *(b)* day and community care, in mental health in London; how much funding for each category has increased since 1997; and what his

Department estimates is the shortfall in provision in the capital, in both categories, in terms of both places and funding. [48865]

Jacqui Smith: Health authorities and primary care trusts receive the majority of their funding through unified allocations. Since 1997, total National Health Service expenditure has increased by almost 36 per cent in real terms, with net capital expenditure more than doubling in real terms.

In general, funding for specific services are not identified separately, in order to allow health authorities and PCTs to be able to manage flexibly the resources available to them.

Allocations specifically identified in Health Authority baselines for mental health since 1997 include:

£10.6 million nationally (£3.6 million in London) from the mental health challenge fund allocated recurrently in 1997–98;

£20 million nationally (£5 million in London) from the modernisation fund allocated recurrently in 1999–2000;

£42 million nationally (£37 million adult mental health and £5 million child and adolescent mental health) from the modernisation fund allocated recurrently in 2000–01;

£75 million nationally (£12.5 million in London) earmarked specifically for mental health in 2002–03.

A detailed breakdown of funding for hospital, residential, day and community mental health care is not available in the format required for the current year or from 1997. Similarly detailed information on the provision in terms of the number of places and funding is not available.

Myotonic Dystrophy

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of the numbers of people with myotonic dystrophy; and if he will make a statement. [49921]

Jacqui Smith: We have made no assessment of the numbers of people with myotonic dystrophy, as information on the prevalence of individual conditions is not collected centrally. We do have some data on hospital activity as shown in the table below.

Admissions for myotonic disorders

NHS Hospitals, England 1996–97 to 2000–01

1996–97	251
1997–98	253
1998–99	301
1999–00	316
2000–01	299

Please note that these figures are a count of in-patient admissions and therefore do not represent the number of patients. Data in this table are adjusted for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data, except for 2000–01 which are not yet adjusted for shortfalls.

Care Standards (Older People)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many structures identifying nursing leaders with responsibility for older people have been developed as part of the milestones set out in the National Service Framework for Older People, page 172; [51529]

(2) how many strategic and operational plans, including initial action to address identified age discrimination, he *(a)* has received and *(b)* expects to receive as part of the milestones set out in the National Service Framework for Older People, page 172; [51527]

(3) which general hospitals have *(a)* submitted and *(b)* not submitted plans to introduce a specialised stroke unit by 2004 as part of the milestones set out in the National Service Framework for Older People; and what steps he proposes to take against those general hospitals that have failed to produce these plans; [51535]

(4) how many *(a)* specialist multidisciplinary teams and *(b)* interfaces for care for older people throughout hospitals have been identified as part of the milestones set out in the National Service Framework for Older People, page 172. [51530]

Jacqui Smith: Information about progress against the April 2002 milestones set within the national service framework for older people will be available in the summer.

Following the October 2001 milestone on the audit of age-related policies, we sought information about the results of the audits. An interim report on the results is available on the National Service Framework website (www.doh.gov.uk/nsf/olderpeople.htm). All health organisations which had identified written age-related policies without an evidence base indicated that they would be reviewing those policies.

Severalls Hospital

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the sale of the former Severalls Hospital in Colchester. [52450]

Yvette Cooper: The sale of the first phase of parcels of land in Colchester, near to the Severalls Hospital has been completed. A second phase is now on the market. Further phases have been included as part of a proposed one-off sale to achieve the NHS Plan's objective of the sale of surplus property to fund the NHS modernisation programme. Offers for these later phases are due to be received shortly and it is expected their sale will be completed in autumn 2002.

The Department's officials are continuing to work closely with the local planning authority regarding the development proposals for the site.

Illegal Food Imports

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce public notification of proscribed foodstuffs at ports of entry into the United Kingdom. [52986]

Yvette Cooper: I am advised by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) that existing controls under European Union harmonised legislation require prior notification to the enforcement authorities of imports of products of animal origin from third countries. Food which is not of animal origin entering the United Kingdom from third countries is not generally subject to prior notification. Food safety checks are however made under Great Britain's Imported Food Regulations 1997 and their equivalent in Northern Ireland on the basis of risk assessment by local food authorities at the point of entry

to the UK. Local authorities can refuse entry or arrange destruction of foods that do not meet the UK's requirements. Food coming to the UK from other EU Member States is in free circulation within the EU and is not subject to routine checks at UK ports.

The Board of the FSA has asked its officials to review the import controls on food which is not of animal origin including the question of prior notification. In doing so, the FSA will take account of the development of EU proposals to establish a Community framework for official controls on food and animal feed which may include a proposal for pre-notification of imports of food of non animal origin.

NHS Cancer Plan

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultations he undertook before adopting the two week wait target for cancer diagnosis in the NHS Cancer Plan. [53417]

Yvette Cooper: The White Paper "The new NHS—Modern, Dependable" published in December 1997 set the cancer specific waiting time standard that everyone with suspected cancer will be able to see a specialist within two weeks of their general practitioner (GP) deciding that they need to be seen urgently and requesting an appointment. These arrangements were guaranteed for everyone with suspected breast cancer from April 1999 and for all other suspected cancers from 2000 and was based on evidence that delays in access to cancer services is a factor in poor cancer survival rates.

To support implementation of the standard, the Department set up a steering group of medical professionals, chaired by Professor Mike Richards. This steering group developed guidance for GPs to enable them to identify the symptoms and indications of cancer for early referral of patients with suspected cancer to a specialist.

Respiratory Syncitial Virus

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many cases of respiratory syncitial virus requiring hospital admission there have been in the last three years in the Portsmouth Health Authority, broken down by age; and if he will make a statement; [53694]

(2) what estimate he has made of the cost of treating infants suffering from respiratory syncitial virus infection in terms of *(a)* hospital stays and *(b)* intensive care unit stays in the Portsmouth Primary Care Trust; and if he will make a statement. [53695]

Yvette Cooper: Figures for respiratory diseases with a subsidiary classification of respiratory syncitial virus for patients resident in the Portsmouth health authority area were very small and cannot be released for reasons of patient confidentiality. The table below contains a count of all admissions to National Health Service hospitals in England for patients resident in the south-east region.

	Age		
	0–4	*Over 4*	*Total*
Year			
1998–99	105	0	105
1999–00	32	0	32
2000–01	32	2	34

Notes:
1. These figures do not represent the number of patients as a person may be admitted more than once during the year
2. Data in this table are adjusted for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data, except for 2000–01 which are not yet adjusted for shortfalls.

Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics (HES), Department of Health

Costs associated with admission vary significantly with severe cases requiring paediatric intensive care, assisted ventilation and specialised interventions. Information on the cost of these admissions is not collected centrally.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of the need for guidance to be issued to parents about the risk to premature babies of respiratory syncitial virus; and if he will make a statement. [53693]

Yvette Cooper: Parents of premature babies that are at risk from respiratory syncitial virus infection receive guidance from their doctor before leaving hospital. General written guidance is also provided to parents before they take their baby home, on the recognition of illness, the awareness of the risks of infection in babies and contact points in the event their child appears to be unwell.

The national service framework for children is a forthcoming comprehensive opportunity to review what guidance and information is given to parents, and parents to be, about the health of their children.

Direct Payments Scheme

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information his Department collates on the rate of take up of direct payments under the direct payments scheme in each local authority area. [53766]

Jacqui Smith: Data are collected annually from councils on the number of people receiving direct payments and the gross expenditure on those payments. The Social Services Inspectorate has obtained further information through the performance monitoring of local councils.

Kidderminster Hospital

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will restore Kidderminster Hospital's status. [53882]

Yvette Cooper: A range of services, for a variety of patients, remain and continue to be developed at Kidderminster.

In May last year my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, announced that the Government would establish an independent clinical review of future elective services at Kidderminster Hospital. The review resulted from the new opportunity presented by the planned increase in elective surgery arising from implementation of the NHS Plan. The review recommended that the hospital should carry out a wider variety of common operations, including

tonsillectomies, gall bladder operations and more procedures on eyes, and ear, nose and throat surgery. We agreed with these conclusions and acted upon them.

In addition, a £13 million Ambulatory Care Centre is being developed at Kidderminster Hospital which due to be completed in 2003, and Worcestershire's new £87 million acute hospital opened in April 2002 incorporating state of the art facilities benefiting patients from across Worcestershire and beyond.

Hospital-acquired Infection

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have died as a result of hospital-acquired infection in *(a)* the most recent year for which figures are available and *(b)* each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [54154]

Yvette Cooper: There are no centrally held statistics on deaths caused by healthcare acquired infections (HAI), including Methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA).

MRSA infection can take many forms, from trivial skin infection to pneumonia or septicaemia. Often the causative micro-organism is not specified on the death certificate. MRSA does not have a distinct code within the revision of the International Classification of Diseases used for encoding death registration data at the Office for National Statistics.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the cost to the NHS of hospital-acquired infection in *(a)* each of the last five years and *(b)* the most recent year for which figures are available. [54160]

Yvette Cooper: Tackling hospital acquired infection (HAI) underpins the priorities in the NHS plan and a number of initiatives are underway to reduce HAI. However, costs of activity to prevent HAI are impossible to assess because much of this activity is a fundamental part of the work of healthcare staff.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what monitoring is undertaken by his Department of National Health Service trusts' infection control policies; and if he will make a statement. [54116]

Yvette Cooper: New standards (controls assurance) on infection control were issued in 1999 (and updated in 2001). We have asked the Commission for Health Improvement to independently review and monitor compliance with the national infection control standard for acute trusts during their routine clinical governance reviews. Monitoring arrangements will be covered in the targeted action plan for healthcare associated infections that will be produced later this year as part of "Getting ahead of the curve" our strategy to combat infectious disease.

Genetic Testing Kits

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the health consequences of the sale of genetic testing kits to the public; [54203]

(2) what plans he has to regulate the sale of genetic testing kits; [54205]

(3) what assessment has been made of the voluntary system of regulation for commercially available genetic testing kits. [54204]

Yvette Cooper: Genetic testing kits that are placed on the market and fall within the definition of an in vitro diagnostic medical device (IVD) will be regulated by the IVD Regulations (SI2000 No 1315) which came into force on 7 June 2000 and has a transition period until 7 December 2003.

The Department has published two voluntary codes of practice and guidance for genetic tests being sold directly to the public. These set out broad requirements in areas such as: peer-reviewed evidence of value, accreditation and quality assurance in testing laboratories, consent, confidentiality, sample and information storage, and customer information.

Under the "Code of Practice and Guidance on Human Genetic Testing Services Supplied Direct to the Public" (September 1997) suppliers notify the human genetics commission (HGC) of their proposed service and HGC publishes a statement of conformance with the Code.

In addition, those supplying genetic paternity testing services are expected to comply with the "Code of Practice and Guidance on Genetic Paternity Testing Services" (March 2001). All Government and public bodies commissioning paternity testing services are expected, so far as is practical, to ensure that those supplying services comply with this Code.

The HGC is the Government's strategic advisory body on how new developments in human genetics will impact on people and on health care, with a particular focus on social and ethical aspects. We have asked the HGC to conduct a thorough review of the whole issue of genetic testing services offered directly to the public, including the voluntary system of regulation, and to report with their recommendations by the end of this year.

World Health Organisation Report

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the World Health Organisation report on macroeconomics and health, published on 20 December 2001, in respect of its implications for his Department's policies. [54803]

Yvette Cooper: The World Health Organisation's report of the commission on macroeconomics and health focuses mainly on low-income countries and on the poor in middle-income countries. Its key conclusions on the important linkage of health to poverty reduction, the importance of investment in health care systems and the impact of other sectors on health status are reflected in our own policy of investing in the National Health Service, and in our cross-sectoral work on tackling health inequalities.

Working Together Safeguards Guidance

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many case reviews following serious or fatal abuse under the Working Together Safeguards Guidance have been held in each of the last five years; how many in each year involved *(a)* child deaths, *(b)* serious physical

assaults, *(c)* serious sexual abuse and *(d)* serious neglect; and if he will indicate in each the (i) age and (ii) sex of the children concerned. [55189]

Jacqui Smith: Complete statistical information is not currently collected centrally on the numbers or types of serious case reviews that have been carried out in accordance with Chapter 8 of *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (1999).

However, many findings from serious case reviews can serve as an important source of information to inform policy and practice at both national and local levels. In recognition of this, the Department is responsible for identifying and disseminating common themes and trends across review reports, and acting on lessons for policy and practice. We will shortly be publishing an overview report drawing out the key findings of a selection of case reviews from the last two years, and their implications for policy and practice. At the same time, we have recently launched a new comprehensive database, which will in future hold information about all serious case reviews.

Non-human Primates

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment has been made of the potential health hazards posed to humans by the import and use of non-human primates in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [47999]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* There is a statutory obligation under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations placed upon employers importing and using non-human primates to assess the potential health risks of their activities to both their employees and to others who might be affected by their undertaking. The potential risks will vary according to the different purposes the primates are being used for and the origin of the primate.

Guidance was issued in 1997 from the advisory committee on dangerous pathogens (ACDP), in consultation with the Health and Safety Executive, entitled "Working safely with research animals: Management of infection risks". This summarises the infection risks to humans posed by non-human primates most commonly used in research.

Further supplementary guidance entitled "Working safely with simians: Management of infection risks" was issued by the ACDP in 1998 addressing the particular risks posed to those working with simians (apes and monkeys). This guidance revised and updated earlier guidance on infections associated with simians first issued by the Medical Research Council in 1985, revised in 1990.

Cancer

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the average cost of *(a)* chemotherapy, *(b)* radiotherapy and, *(c)* aggregated medical costs in relation to the treatment of patients suffering brain cancers. [49800]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 April 2002]:* This information is not available. Calculations of the average costs of radiotherapy for brain tumours range from £386 per patient to £1,605 per patient.

National Service Frameworks

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of health service spending in 2002–03 is covered by national service frameworks. [50799]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 18 April 2002]:* This information is not available from routine data. We have estimated that the expenditure on heart disease, cancer, diabetes, renal disease, and mental health (for under 65s) is around 15 per cent of the total National Health Service and personal social services expenditure.

Activa Brain Stimulators

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the policy of the NHS is on providing operations to implant Activa brain stimulators; and how many such operations have been performed, and where, in the last 12 months. [53292]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* Trials are underway to evaluate the clinical effectiveness of deep brain stimulation. The trials commenced in 2001 and will run for five years. In the 12 months to April 2002 there were 165 implants of Activa brain stimulators. However, approximately 10 per cent of these were replacement batteries. The hospitals where the operations were performed are as follows:

Charing Cross, London
King's College, London
Royal, London
Ninewells, Dundee
Frenchay, Bristol
General, Newcastle
Queen Elizabeth, Birmingham
Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford
Walton Centre for Neurology and Neuorosurgery, Liverpool
General Infirmary, Leeds
Hope, Manchester

Source:
Medtronic Limited, Watford, England. Activa stimulators are made by Medtronic.

Hepatitis C

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have been diagnosed with hepatitis C in the United Kingdom in the last 12 months. [53276]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* There were 4515 antibody positive hepatitis C laboratory diagnoses in England in 2001 reported to the Public Health Laboratory Service (provisional figure). Information about hepatitis C diagnoses in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can be obtained from the respective devolved administrations.

Scanners

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to publish details of the criteria to be used in order to make the next allocations of CT and MRI scanners. [53891]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Consultations regarding criteria for the allocation of 50 additional computed tomography and 50 additional

magnetic resonance imaging scanners, as outlined in the NHS Cancer Plan, have already begun involving regions and the cancer networks and are being extended to include the new strategic health authorities.

One of the factors in establishing criteria for the allocation of additional equipment will be the relative provision of CT and MRI services to the population served. Work has already been carried out to assess this and the consultation process is now allowing these data to be verified at a local level.

Efficiency of use of existing scanners is also a factor when considering additional allocations of equipment.

It is expected that criteria will be published early in the summer as soon as discussions are completed, to be followed by the list of agreed allocations to individual hospitals later in the summer.

Food Supplements

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a further statement on the proposals in the European Food Supplements Directive relating to *(a)* the removals of certain minerals from free sale, *(b)* the removal of certain nutrient forms from free sale and *(c)* the setting of maximum permitted levels for vitamins and minerals in food supplements. [54508]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The coming into force of the directive will not immediately remove any products already on the UK market. Lists of permitted vitamin and mineral sources remain open pending safety assessments for additional substances. The Government intends, when implementing the directive, to take full advantage of the opportunity we have secured for EU Member States to allow continued sale for up to seven years of products containing vitamin and mineral sources not yet on permitted lists.

During negotiations, the Food Standards Agency argued strongly that maximum permitted levels should be established on the basis of scientific risk assessment. Maximum levels will eventually be decided on the basis of recommendations made by the independent EU Scientific Committee on Food (SCF). The agency is now making strenuous efforts to forge strong links between the SCF and the UK's Expert Group on Vitamins and Minerals which is already in the process of carrying out similar assessments.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Rural Awareness

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) when his Department will establish rural targets and monitoring as part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report Rural Proofing in 2001–02; [54422]

(2) when his Department will introduce measures to raise rural awareness through staff *(a)* training, *(b)* development and *(c)* secondments as part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, Rural Proofing in 2001–02. [54414]

Mr. Leslie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Alun Michael) on the 9 May 2002, *Official report*, columns 273–74W.

Civil Service

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what monitoring of recruitment and promotion within the civil service is undertaken of the *(a)* social and *(b)* educational backgrounds of successful candidates; and if he will make a statement. [52232]

Mr. Leslie: The Civil Service aims to attract applicants from a diverse range of candidates. It does not monitor the social or educational backgrounds of successful candidates it recruits, nor for those recruited to the Senior Civil Service.

The Civil Service Fast Stream does, however, monitor applicants by university of first degree and this information is published annually in the Fast Stream Recruitment Report. The report is available in the library of both Houses and on the internet at www.faststream.gov.uk. Fast Stream applicants are not monitored by social background.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the percentage increases in Civil Service pensions in *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2001 and *(c)* 2002; and on what basis the increases are calculated. [55306]

Mr. Leslie: Civil Service pensions, like other public service pensions, are increased each year after the Pensions Increase (Review) Order has been laid before Parliament by HM Treasury.

The pensions are increased by the same percentage as the increase in the additional component of the State Earnings Related Pension (SERPS) under section 59 of the Social Security Act 1975 (as amended).

This increase is calculated by reference to the all items increase in the Retail Prices Index (RPI) in the last 12 months to September of the previous year.

The increase is applied in April each year.

The increases for the last three financial years are as follows:

1.1 per cent

3.3 per cent

1.7 per cent

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 13 May 2002

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Listed Buildings

5. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the work of English Heritage in relation to listed buildings. [53966]

Dr. Howells: English Heritage's statutory duty is to secure the preservation of buildings of historical importance. They advise the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport about historic buildings meriting statutory protection and advise Government and planning authorities about requests for permission to demolish or alter protected buildings. They also give grant aid for the repair of listed buildings.

National Stadium

12. **Chris Grayling:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when a decision will be made regarding the national stadium project. [53973]

Tessa Jowell: As I explained to the House in my statement on 7 May I have agreed to the Football Association's request to delay the Government's final decision on support for the national stadium until the current commercial negotiations between the FA and their bankers are concluded. Those discussions continue to make good progress.

Sport and Leisure Facilities

13. **Mr. Gardiner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions she has had with the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions about conducting a national audit of sport and leisure facilities; and if she will make a statement. [53974]

Mr. Caborn: I discussed the proposed database of sports facilities in England with a number of my ministerial colleagues, including those from the DfES and the DTLR, at the last meeting of the Inter-departmental Group on Sport in February.

I have also written to my ministerial colleagues at the DfES and the DTLR, along with those from the Department of Health, Home Office and the Ministry of Defence, seeking their views on the scope and content of the proposed database of sports facilities in England.

Social Deprivation (Amenities)

15. **Huw Irranca-Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress her Department has made in the use of sports, arts and culture in tackling social deprivation in the poorest communities. [53976]

Mr. Caborn: Tackling social deprivation is at the heart of the Department's activity. Our work is focusing on four strategic priorities: promoting lifelong learning and social cohesion by opening up institutions to the wider community; enhancing access to a fuller cultural and sporting life for children and young people; maximising the contribution which creative and leisure industries can make to the economy; and modernising delivery, ensuring that our sponsored bodies put the needs of the customer first.

Sport (Ethnic Minority Participation)

16. **Mr. Khabra:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the efforts being made at the grassroots level to increase ethnic minority participation and representation in sport. [53977]

Mr. Caborn: The Government are anxious to ensure that sport is accessible to all members of society, irrespective of age, ability, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality or socioeconomic status, and remain committed to improving opportunities for those groups which are under-represented in sport, whether as participants, competitors, coaches or administrators.

There are a number of schemes and programmes aimed at those traditionally under-represented in sport; these include Sport England's Active Communities Programme, which targets ethnic minorities as one of its priority groups, and the Sporting Equals Programme, which receives £180,000 a year from the Government and the Commission for Racial Equality towards promoting sporting opportunities for ethnic minorities.

Film Industry

17. **Mr. Tom Harris:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the impact of the Budget on the film industry. [53978]

Tessa Jowell: It was announced in the Budget that the film tax relief will be restricted to films intended for the commercial cinema only, and that television production will no longer be able to access the relief. The relief was originally intended to help build a sustainable film industry and there has been a general acceptance that this is a necessary refocussing of the relief.

Digital Broadcasting

18. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps she is taking to ensure choice of access for digital broadcasting services. [53979]

Dr. Howells: The draft Communications Bill and associated documents (Cm 5508, published on 7 May), set out a proposed framework for the regulation of communications, which is intended to broaden choice of and access to modern communications technologies, and to make markets work better.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what definitions of *(a)* access, *(b)* availability and *(c)* affordability the Government will use to determine when analogue switch-off will take place; and if she will make a statement. [54620]

Dr. Howells: One of the key tasks of the Digital Television Action Plan is for Government to conduct a comprehensive review of progress towards digital switchover with particular reference to the accessibility, availability and affordability tests announced in September 1999. The Review will refine the tests and report on how progress towards meeting them is to be measured.

21. **Richard Ottaway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many digital television sets were sold in the last financial year; and if she will make a statement. [53982]

Dr. Howells: Industry figures indicate that 120,000 integrated digital television sets were sold in the 12 months until the end of March. As part of the Digital Action Plan, the Government will be comprehensively investigating with industry and the European Union the issues surrounding the transition to exclusive sales of integrated digital television sets. Because of our international agreements, the UK alone could not mandate the sale of integrated digital television sets.

26. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the impact of digital switchover on the BBC licence fee. [53987]

Dr. Howells: The Government increased the BBC licence fee in 2000 in recognition of the BBC's role in the development of digital broadcasting services. The annual increase is set until 2006 when the charter is due for renewal. The effect of changing media markets on the licence fee will be one of the issues we consider as part of the charter review process.

Gaming Machines

20. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the recommendations on gaming machines in the Budd report. [53981]

Mr. Caborn: We published a safe bet for success on 26 March. This sets out the Government's decisions on the recommendations for reform of the law on gambling which were made by the Gambling Review Body last summer. We took careful account of all the points made in public consultation on the report before reaching our conclusions.

Museums (North-East)

22. **Mr. Kevan Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on her support for museums in the north-east of England. [53983]

Tessa Jowell: My Department directly provides support to the Tyne and Wear Museums to the sum of £1 million per year. Resource, the Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives will provide funding to the North East Museum, Libraries and Archives Council to the tune of £745,000 in 2002–03.

Resource has now received bids from each English region, including the North East, to be considered for selection as regional hubs in accordance with the recommendations of the Regional Museums task force as set out in the report Renaissance in the Regions: a new vision for England's museums which was published last October. My Department are currently working with Resource to start implementing the task force recommendations with £10 million per annum which was given to Resource in the last spending review.

We will take the task force's recommendations into account in the current spending review alongside other priorities.

Tourism

23. **Ross Cranston:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures she is taking to promote tourism in the west midlands region. [53984]

Dr. Howells: My Department is currently considering options on how to provide stronger co-ordination of the promotion and marketing of England, including a strong regional dimension and we hope to announce our plans shortly.

Tourism in the west midlands region has recently benefited from £2 million funding from Advantage West Midlands (AWM) regional development agency (RDA). £1.1 million was spent on a recent national marketing campaign "Head to the Heart", promoted by the Heart of England Tourist Board (HETB), which principle aim is to attract more visitors to the region.

30. **Tony Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she last met representatives from the English Tourism Council to discuss tourism in the south-east. [53991]

Dr. Howells: I have been in close contact with the chairman of the English Tourism Council about the proposed merger between the south east and southern tourist boards. They also hold regular meetings to discuss issues of national and regional significance, the most recent being on 29 April. The Minister also met Joan Patten, chair of the south east tourist board, on 11 April.

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of Government funding provided to each region is for tourism marketing. [56023]

Dr. Howells: Over half of the £3.8 million obtained last year from the reserve to assist the domestic recovery of tourism from foot and mouth disease was passed via the English Tourism Council (ETC) to the 10 regional tourist boards (RTBs). Much of that money was used for promotional and PR activities.

Other central Government funding provided to the RTBs via the ETC is for the delivery of the national tourism strategy at regional level—that does not include money for domestic marketing. The RTBs are mainly private companies and use some of their membership fee and commercial income for regional marketing initiatives. In some regions, the Regional Development Agencies have also supported tourism marketing with Government funds and a substantial part of over £90 million spent by local authorities on tourism is also used for promotional activities.

Football

24. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions she has had with the football authorities on the financial position of Nationwide League football clubs. [53985]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have remained in close touch with the Nationwide League and the Football Association since it was announced that ITV Digital was to go into administration, and met the league's management on 17 April. The Government will now work with the working group appointed by the FA's chief executive to consider how affected football clubs might be helped to secure their futures.

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what support her Department is giving to football-based schemes levels in the coalfields. [53980]

Mr. Caborn: Funding from public sources for football is channelled through the Football Foundation. The Foundation's grass roots, community and education, and stadium safety funding programmes are not geographically targeted. They are designed to address lack of provision in England wherever it exists. However, the Foundation has indicated that it considers local levels of economic deprivation, among other issues, in assessing applications for funding.

Regional Theatre

25. **Mr. Mole:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps the Government are taking to support theatre in the regions. [53986]

Tessa Jowell: This is a matter for the Arts Council of England and the Regional Arts Boards. From 1 April this year the Arts Council is investing an additional £12 million in theatre increasing to £25 million a year from 2003–04, as a result of its extensive review of the needs of regional theatre. Funding for the New Wolsey in Ipswich will increase from £322,750 last year to £492,750 in 2003–04, an increase over two years of 53 per cent.

Public Libraries

27. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the role public libraries play within the Government's culture plan. [53988]

Tessa Jowell: Two of the key strategic priorities I have set for my Department are developing children and young people and building stronger communities through participation in the arts and culture. Public libraries have a major role to play in both of these and I intend to publish a policy document in the autumn setting out how they will contribute.

British Grand Prix

28. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what studies her Department has undertaken to ensure the continuation of the British Grand Prix at Silverstone. [53989]

Mr. Caborn: I met representatives of Octagon Motorsports, Sir Jackie Stewart, the Motor Sports Association, the British Racing Drivers' Club and other interested parties on 11 December 2001 and 24 January 2002 to discuss proposals for improving arrangements for the 2002 British Grand Prix, as well as wider proposals for the long term development of Silverstone. New access roads are under construction to improve access to and from the Silverstone circuit for future years. My officials are working closely with the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, the Government Office of the East Midlands and the Highways Agency. I am receiving monthly reports on the progress of access improvements to Silverstone.

I also met Max Mosley, President of the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile, on 12 December 2001 to inform him of the Government's commitment to motor sport and the British Grand Prix.

Sports Action Zones (Cumbria)

29. **Tony Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the performance of sports action zones in west Cumbria. [53990]

Mr. Caborn: A Sport Action Zone manager was appointed in September 2000 and a Needs Assessment and Action Plan was compiled in the first year of the Zone's operation, covering the period 2001–2006. This plan was approved at the Sport Lottery panel in October 2001. Approximately £230,000 per annum was ring-fencing over the five year period across the Allerdale, Barrow and Copeland districts. The projects in the Year One action plan have received ring-fenced funding and are in various stages of development, depending on match-funding sources and lead organisations' time scales.

The Sport Action Zone is being overseen by the six strategic partners including Allerdale Borough Council and Copeland Borough Council.

The Sport Action Zone partnership is looking into marketing and evaluation reports, which will be publicly available when they are produced.

Hotel Industry

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make funding available for marketing the English hotel industry. [53975]

Dr. Howells: The marketing of hotels is a matter for the industry itself but the announcement today will have a beneficial impacts on all sectors of the industry in England. The English Tourism Council has made considerable progress in extending its quality assurance schemes to all types of accommodation. Hotels and others that commit to the national quality standards benefit since the quality assurance fee entitles them to a free entry in the ETC's 'Where to Stay' guidebooks and entry on the BTA's VisitBritain website.

Pride of Place

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if it is intended to place on sale copies of Pride of Place; [54998]

(2) pursuant to the answers of 18 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1039W, and 1 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 785W, what the intended destination is of the copies of Pride of Place that are not being sent out as complimentary copies to award recipients. [55000]

Dr. Howells: 4,000 copies of Pride of Place will be available for sale through the Arts Council at £12 each.

Works of Art (Indemnities)

Sir Patrick Cormack: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many indemnity undertakings were given under section 16 of the National Heritage Act 1980 for the six-month period ended 31 March; and what the value was of *(a)* contingent liabilities in respect of such undertakings given at any time under that section which remained outstanding as at 31 March, *(b)* non-statutory Government indemnities in respect of loans handled by the Government Art Collection which remained outstanding as at 31 March and *(c)* non-statutory undertakings of Her Majesty in respect of loans from the Royal Collection which remained outstanding at 31 March. [55027]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The provision for the Government Indemnity Scheme is made by the National Heritage Act 1980. The scheme facilitates public access to loans of works of art and other objects for public display made to museums, galleries and other such institutions by private owners and non-national institutions. It does this by indemnifying lenders against loss or damage to their loan. Loans covered by the scheme must be for public benefit. The scheme also covers loans of such objects for study purposes within borrowing institutions where this would contribute materially to the public's understanding or appreciation of the loan. Examples of this are enhancing interpretation or explanation to the public of objects or bringing into the public domain, the conclusions of any study.

In the six-month period ended 31 March, the following undertakings to indemnify were given under section 16 by the relevant Departments for objects on loan to national and non-national institutions:

	Number
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	629
Scottish Executive Education Department	258
The National Assembly for Wales	114

The value of contingent liabilities in respect of undertakings given at any time under section 16 and which remained outstanding as at 31 March is:

	£
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	2,466,655,792
Scottish Executive Education Department	467,275,161
The National Assembly for Wales	45,990,729

The value of non-statutory Government indemnities to cover loans handled by the Government Art Collection and which remained outstanding as at 31 March is:

Value: £5,500,000.

The value of non-statutory undertakings given to Her Majesty in respect of loans from the Royal Collection and which remained outstanding as at 31 March is:

Value: £219,601,825.

Party Conferences

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much her Department has spent organising events at *(a)* the Labour party's, *(b)* the Conservative party's and *(c)* the Liberal Democrat party's (i) autumn and (ii) spring conference in each of the past five years; what the purpose of events organised at party conferences is; what form these events took; and if she will make a statement. [55750]

Dr. Howells: No events have been organised by this Department at party conferences.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Illegal Logging (Indonesia)

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to the answer of 18 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1064W, what the timetable is for negotiations with Indonesia to tackle illegal logging and associated trade; and when agreement will be reached. [53757]

Mr. Meacher: The Governments of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Indonesia signed on 18 April 2002 a Memorandum of Understanding on co-operation to improve Forest Law Enforcement and Governance and to combat illegal logging and the international trade in illegally logged timber and timber products. We are placing a copy of the Memorandum in the Library of the House.

Farming

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what payments were made in each of the last five years broken down by *(a)* scheme, *(b)* county and *(c)* farm size, for (i) the countryside stewardship scheme, (ii) arable stewardship (up to 2000), (iii) the energy crops scheme, (iv) the environmentally sensitive areas, (v) the farm woodland premium scheme, (vi) the hill farm allowance scheme, (vii) the organic farming scheme, (viii) the woodland grant scheme, (ix) the processing and marketing grant, (x) the rural enterprise scheme and (xi) the vocational training scheme. [54476]

Alun Michael: The following table shows expenditure on the England Rural Development Programme schemes for the last five years. A further breakdown by county or farm size is not readily available.

Payments by scheme for five years—England

£000

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Countryside stewardship	15,708	19,896	23,359	28,890	47,326
Arable stewardship	—	—	470	863	1,500
Energy crops scheme	—	—	—	—	234
Environmentally sensitive areas	28,600	37,600	39,500	40,900	48,300
Farm woodland premium	4,700	5,400	5,900	6,000	7,500
Hill farm allowance	—	—	—	—	42,346

Payments by scheme for five years—England

£000

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Organic farming scheme	700	1,200	2,300	15,400	26,600
Woodland grant scheme	15,723	18,151	18,416	16,957	16,590
Processing and marketing grant	—	—	—	—	237
Rural enterprise scheme	—	—	—	—	573
Vocational training scheme	—	—	—	—	332

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the total area of genetically modified crops to be grown in the farm scale evaluations in England in 2002 is; and how many trials there are for *(a)* spring oilseed rape, *(b)* winter oilseed rape, *(c)* fodder beet, *(d)* sugar beet and *(e)* fodder maize. [54477]

Mr. Meacher: The total area to be grown with GM crops in the farm scale evaluations in England to date is approximately 400 hectares. In autumn 2001, 30 oilseed rape sites were sown. This year, there are 22 spring oilseed rape sites, 33 maize sites, six fodder beet sites and 12 sugar beet sites. The proposed site locations for the 2002 round of winter oilseed rape will be announced later this year.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the data from the farm-scale evaluations of GM crops will be available for the advisers in ACRE and ACP; and when she will publish the data. [54986]

Mr. Meacher: Data from the farm-scale evaluations will be available to this Department, to advisers on the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment and the Advisory Committee on Pesticides, and the wider public generally, once we have received the advice of the scientific steering committee overseeing the progress and publication of the ecological studies and the results are published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. This is anticipated to be in the summer of 2003 for spring-sown crops (spring-sown oilseed rape, maize and beet) and in summer 2004 for winter-sown oilseed rape.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will announce her decision on the proposals put forward by the Agriculture, Environment and Biotechnology Commission for public debate on the possible commercialisation of GM Crops. [54984]

Mr. Meacher: The Government welcome the AEBC's advice on the proposal for a public debate on the possible commercialisation of GM crops. AEBC has provided an important contribution which the Government are considering. We will announce our response as soon as possible.

Sustainable Environmental Schemes

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has made to HM Treasury in advance of the Comprehensive Spending Review on funding to assist the transition from direct subsidies to sustainable environmental schemes; and if she will make a statement. [54488]

Mr. Meacher: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, has submitted advice and proposals to my right hon. Friend, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith), as he is in charge of other spending Departments. The proposals are consistent with the Government's policy of promoting a sustainable, diverse, modern and adaptable farming industry. The outcome of the Spending Review will be announced in Parliament in due course.

Waste Regulations

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what levels of *(a)* business packaging waste recovery and *(b)* business packaging recycling in the United Kingdom were in each year since 1997; what assessment has been made of how the United Kingdom compares with Europe; and if she will make a statement. [54828]

Mr. Meacher: Packaging waste recovery and recycling achieved by businesses obligated under the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997 (as amended) from 1997 to 2001 was as follows:

Recovery and Recycling 1998–2001

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Paper	[1]n/a	1,894,086	1,820,732	1,880,414	2,030,944
Glass	—	503,800	582,577	715,037	735,594
Aluminium	—	14,517	15,402	16,299	29,030
Steel	—	182,409	225,216	238,668	278,079
Plastic	—	125,539	198,461	204,430	269,962
Wood	—	170,000(1)	94,000(1)	296,437	573,951
Alt. evidence	—	—	—	—	30,741
Total recycling	—	2,890,351	3,084,296(2)	3,351,285	3,917,560
Percentage	[2]27	28	33.5	36.5	42
E/W	—	448,354	496,269	500,047	513,939
Total recovery		3,338,705	3,506,611	3,851,332	4,462,240
Percentage	[2]30	33	38	42	48
Tonnes in waste stream	—	10,240,000	9,189,981	9,179,981	9,313,900

[1] Breakdown by material not available for 1997

[2] Approximate

The UK's current recovery and recycling rates of 48 per cent. and 42 per cent. have been achieved in the four years from 1998 to 2001. Other member states began focusing on packaging waste recovery/reecycling in the early 1990s. A number of them have achieved much higher recovery/ recycling rates while others remain close to or just above the UK rate.

Figures from the European Commission show the following recovery and recycling rates for European Union member states in 1998.

Recovery and recycling rates in member states 1998

Percentage

	Recovery rate	*Recycling rate*
Austria	70	65
Belgium	73	64
Denmark	89	50
France	56	45
Germany	67	65
Italy	35	28
Netherlands	62	62
Spain	37	34
Sweden	68	61
UK	33	28

Source:
European Commission

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what steps her Department is taking to review the notice period on annual targets under the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997; and if she will make a statement; [54802]

(2) for what reason the targets for packaging and packaging waste for 2002 did not appear until 19 March; when she expects to publish targets for 2003; and if she will make a statement. [54843]

Mr. Meacher: We make every effort to publish the annual targets for recovery and recycling of packaging waste as early in the year as possible. Businesses have an opportunity to plan on the basis of the proposals and analysis in the consultation exercise carried out in the previous year. However, where the Government do not have the latest relevant packaging data until the end of a year, this means that it is not always possible to decide on the final targets for the following year to our intended timing.

It is too early to say when we might publish targets for 2003. However, it is the Government's intention to consult this year on targets for 2003 and 2004.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations her Department has received *(a)* between September and December 2001 and *(b)* since 1 January regarding the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997; and if she will make a statement. [54841]

Mr. Meacher: We liaise regularly with industry and receive a good deal of correspondence relating to the packaging Regulations. The period in question covers the consultation exercise undertaken on proposed packaging waste targets for 2002. The consultation document was issued in September 2001 and 66 responses were received to this alone. Since January 2002, we have received about 70 letters relating to packaging waste matters.

Nitrate-Sensitive Areas

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many nitrate-sensitive areas have been designated. [54859]

Mr. Meacher: There are 66 nitrate vulnerable zones (NVZs) in England, which were designated in 1996.

In December 2001, in response to a European Court of Justice judgment, we consulted on options for completing implementation of the nitrates directive in England. These would involve either designating additional nitrate vulnerable zones, or applying measures to prevent and control nitrate pollution throughout England.

We are still considering the responses to this consultation, and will announce a decision in due course.

Flooding

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Government are taking to ensure that sustainable urban drainage systems are adopted and maintained by water companies. [54638]

Mr. Meacher: A Working Group chaired by the Environment Agency and comprising representatives of this Department and other interested parties has been set up to consider all aspects of the use of sustainable urban drainage systems. Among other things, it will be considering future responsibilities for installation and maintenance of such systems, including the extent of water and sewerage companies' responsibilities.

Waste Composting

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if her Department plans to allow local authorities to count domestic composting towards their recycling targets; and if she will make a statement. [54599]

Mr. Meacher: We have no plans to allow local authorities to count domestic composting towards their recycling targets.

Local authorities benefit in two main ways from home composting. First, they save on the costs associated with collecting, transporting and composting this waste. Secondly, it increases their recycling rate because the home composted waste is not included in the calculation for the total amount of waste collected. This has the effect of increasing the percentage of household waste sent for recycling.

There are also real difficulties with the measurement of home composting. Accurate reporting against the statutory performance standards is essential if we are to ensure real efforts are made by local authorities to increase recycling and composting.

Kyoto Agreement

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what part a

reduction in HFC emissions in the UK will play in the United Kingdom's commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the Kyoto agreement. [54626]

Mr. Meacher: The UK is on course to meet, and go beyond, its target under the Kyoto Protocol to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2008–12. This target covers a basket of six greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulphur hexafluoride); the UK does not have targets under the Kyoto Protocol for the individual gases.

UK emissions of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) in 1995—the base year chosen for measuring emissions of these gases for the Kyoto Protocol—were equivalent to 4.1 MtC, contributing about 2 per cent. of the total greenhouse gas emissions in that year.

Action to reduce fugitive emissions of HFC-23 from HCFC-22 manufacturing plants have meant that total emissions of HFCs have fallen significantly since then. This will be partly offset by an increase in emissions from end use markets such as aerosols, refrigeration and foam blowing as consumption of HFCs increases in response to the phase out of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) under the Montreal Protocol. However, reduced levels of leakage and increased use of alternative fluids are expected to limit the increase in emissions.

Overall, annual emissions of HFCs are projected to be equivalent to 2.9 MtC in 2010, a fall of 29 per cent. from 1995 levels. The expected reductions in emissions of the other five greenhouse gases covered by the Kyoto Protocol mean that the relative contribution of HFCs emissions in 2010 is projected to be the same as in 1995, at about 2 per cent. of the total UK greenhouse gas emissions.

Timber

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to the answer of 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 272W, on timber, if she will place in the Library the confirmation given by the Brazilian Government that the mahogany shipments in question did not breach CITES regulations. [54644]

Mr. Meacher: A copy of the translation of the document issued by the Brazilian Management Authority confirming that the CITES permits for the shipment in question were authentic has been placed in the Library.

Farm-scale Biodiversity Evaluations

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the time scale was set out in the voluntary agreement with SCIMAC in November 1999 for the Scientific Steering Committee to review the data and provide recommendations on the farm-scale biodiversity evaluations. [54985]

Mr. Meacher: The voluntary agreement between SCIMAC and Government made in November 1999 states that:

"The final year of crop plantings within the Farm-Scale Biodiversity Evaluations is 2002. Following the Scientific Steering Committee's final year review and recommendations, the work programme of the Committee relating to the current objectives set and agreed will be concluded. No extension to this agreement will take place without further negotiation between Government and SCIMAC."

"The Government will ask and expect the Scientific Steering Committee to review data and provide recommendations/advice on or before end-October in 2002 of the Farm-Scale Biodiversity Evaluations."

"The Government will ask and expect the Scientific Steering Committee to complete final year analysis and reporting of results for winter oilseed rape in time for autumn 2003 plantings to take place should the null hypothesis be confirmed."

Refrigerators

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how the money allocated to help local authorities deal with the storage and disposal of refrigerators has been distributed. [55077]

Mr. Meacher: The £6 million allocated to local authorities for the extra costs they faced from 1 January to end March this year was added to local authorities' general grant for the current financial year. General grant is distributed to councils through standard spending assessments (SSA). The provision for waste disposal is included within the upper tier of the Environmental, Protection and Cultural Services (EPCS) SSA.

Marine Environment

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what new funds her Department will provide to the statutory nature conservation agencies and Sea Fisheries Committee to allow them to meet their responsibilities to manage, protect and monitor the marine environment and its natural resources. [55768]

Mr. Meacher: Officials are currently discussing with English Nature their corporate plan for 2002–05. These discussions will focus on the need for resources to cover important areas of work such as the marine environment and in turn help inform the process for the Departments allocation of funds as part of spending review 2002.

Sea fisheries committees are committees of local authorities and are funded by local government. The Government have made it clear that no decisions will be taken on funding of sea fisheries committees until the Common Fisheries Policy review is complete. At that stage we will be better placed to assess any changes in our obligations for inshore management, including any additional environmental responsibilities.

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the Government's Review of Marine Nature Conservation will report on its findings. [55769]

Mr. Meacher: The regional seas pilot scheme in the Irish sea recently announced by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is due to report its findings to Government in the early part of 2004. The pilot scheme's findings will inform the review's final recommendations to Government which we hope to receive by the end of 2004.

Sellafield

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what actions BNFI has taken to stop the leaks from the sludge storage tanks in Building B24L at Sellafield; and when this work will be complete. [53662]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

BNFL has undertaken a number of projects aimed at improving the integrity of the B241 tanks, reducing the potential for material to leak from the plant and enabling the removal of the inventory from the tanks. This work has been ongoing since 1993. BNFL expects that the work to remove the majority of the active inventory will be completed in approximately 11 years.

Rainforests

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Government have taken to reduce the logging of rainforests and to discuss these matters with mining companies. [53653]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

Logging of rainforests is not necessarily a bad thing. It can bring income and jobs to poor people. If done carefully logging need not threaten the long-term sustainability of these forests or the environmental services they provide.

Logging should not take place in protected areas or in contravention of other laws and regulations. My Department is working with a number of countries to help improve forest law enforcement and governance and tackle illegal logging and associated trade.

The Government have not discussed logging of rainforests with mining companies.

Co-product Feeds

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what estimate she has made of the amounts of moist co-product feeds and liquids used as feed materials by livestock farmers in conjunction with home-produced feeds or as complements to bought-in feeds in the last year for which figures are available; and what assessment she has made of the importance of co-product feeds to the UK livestock industry; [42247]

(2) if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on co-products as feed materials; and what representations she has made to the European Commission to include co-product feeds on the EU's proposed positive list of approved feed materials. [42248]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that industry estimates nearly two million tonnes of moist feed and over one million tonnes of liquid feed is fed annually to British livestock. Many materials derived during the manufacture of food and drink are fed by livestock farmers, or used by manufacturers for feed sold to farmers. These co-products have a nutritional value and are considered an important range of feed materials for the UK livestock industry.

The European Commission has commissioned a feasibility study on the possibility of having a positive list of approved feed materials for use in animal feed. If any such list is to be compiled it is likely that it will include co-products.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Christopher Reeves

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Solicitor-General if she will make a statement about her Department's handling of the case of Christopher Reeves, Oxford Crown court T2000/022. [51371]

The Solicitor-General: Dr. Alfred Christopher Reeves was tried at Oxford Crown court, on a number of allegations of indecent assault. On 22 May 2000, he was acquitted on all charges, part way through the defence case, at the direction of the trial judge, Her Honour Judge Mowatt.

Following the conclusion of the case, Dr. Reeves and the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) wrote to the Director of Public Prosecutions complaining about the CPS handling of the case. These complaints have been investigated thoroughly and the Crown Prosecution Service and the Attorney-General have provided comprehensive responses to both the hon. Member and Dr. Reeves' solicitors.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister on what subjects and on which dates his Department has recently consulted organisations representing young people; and if he will list such organisations. [52508]

Mrs. Roche: The Cabinet Office does not hold this information centrally and it could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The Cabinet Office is committed to the new core principles for the involvement of children and young people published by the Minister for Young People in November 2001. The Cabinet Office will shortly be publishing an action plan setting out for the first time how it will implement these principles to extend the participation of children and young people in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them.

Fraud

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption

was in *(a)* his Department's Vote 1 budget and *(b)* his Department's Vote 2 budget for (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [54700]

Mr. Leslie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Buckingham on 29 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 252W.

Sustainable Timber

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will place in the Library certificates showing that timber used for the doors, doorframes and window frames in the refurbishment of Norman Shaw South came from a certified sustainable source. [55261]

Derek Conway: I have been asked to reply.

Wallis Joinery, the manufacturer of the new timber windows, doors and joinery for the Norman Shaw South refurbishment project, operates a Quality Assurance system. This requires their timber suppliers to provide evidence (in the form of import licences and certificates) to show that timber supplied has been legally obtained and is from sustainably managed sources. The contractor is required to provide these licences and certificates to the House. When they are received I will ensure that copies are placed in the Library.

Balfour Beatty

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what contracts the Government have with Balfour Beatty; which ones are under way; and what the start dates are of ones on which work has not started. [55293]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have been asked to reply.

This information is not held centrally.

DEFENCE

Sea King AEWs

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he plans to withdraw the Sea King AEW force from service. [49767]

Mr. Ingram: On current plans the Sea King Airborne Early Warning force is projected to remain in service until at least 2012.

Deployments

Hugh Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 26 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 858W, on deployments, if he will reconcile his figure for the number of service personnel serving in the Balkans with the answer given on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 825W. [53823]

Mr. Ingram: The answer I gave on 26 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 858W, showed only UK regular forces deployed on military tasks overseas, including operations. Personnel on NATO commitments and Mobilised Reservists were not included.

Reconciliation of this answer with the answer given on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 825W, is shown in the following table.

Number deployed

	Balkans Tasks	*NATO and Mobilised Reservists*	*Balkans total*
Royal Navy	—	100	100
Army	3,823	744	4,567
RAF	233	—	233
Total	4,056	850	4,900

Note:
NATO and Mobilised Reservists figures are approximate.

Cyprus

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what British service personnel are deployed in the Republic of Cyprus. [54732]

Mr. Ingram: The United Kingdom contributes 414 service personnel to UNFICYP. British forces in the sovereign base areas on Cyprus, and therefore on British territory and not in the Republic of Cyprus, number approximately 3,230.

Ethnic Minorities

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women from ethnic communities were serving in the British forces on 1 May. [54640]

Mr. Ingram: Figures for 1 May 2002 are not yet available. A re-survey of the ethnic origin of armed forces personnel is currently being undertaken using the categories contained in the national census of 2001. The last available figures using the previous ethnic categories are those of 1 October 2001 and are as follows:

Ethnic minority (EM)	*Number*	*EM as a percentage of EM plus non-EM*
Male	3,173	1.73
Female	314	1.92
Total	3,487	1.75

Women

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many women are serving in each of the armed forces. [54634]

Mr. Ingram: As at 1 April 2002, the number of women serving in the UK regular forces is as follows:

	Number of women serving
Naval Service	3,521
Army	7,901
RAF	5,616
Total	17,038

These figures are taken from TSP1 'UK Regular Forces Strengths and Changes', a monthly publication, a copy of which can be found in the House of Commons Library.

Land Mines

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British service personnel are involved in land mine destruction; and in which countries such personnel are working. [54632]

Mr. Ingram: British Service personnel provide technical expertise, management and specialist skills to support mine action programmes worldwide. As at 1 May 2002, personnel were deployed as follows:

Senior Technical Adviser to the UN Mine Action Centre in Bosnia.

Staff Officer within the Humanitarian Demining Training Centre at the US Army's Engineer School.

Head of Technical Unit at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining.

In Bosnia, as part of the Stabilisation Force (SFOR), UK military personnel are involved in the co-ordination and monitoring of mine clearance; emergency disposal of mines and unexploded ordnance as required; and mine awareness training. We also maintain an Explosive Ordnance Disposal detachment in the Falkland Islands. Additionally, UK personnel have provided technical information to the United Nations and to non-governmental organisations on mines that could be found in Afghanistan.

Gurkhas

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Gurkha troops are serving in Gurkha regiments based in the United Kingdom. [54635]

Mr. Ingram: The total number of trained Gurkhas serving in the United Kingdom as at 1 April 2002 is 2,291. There is only one Gurkha Infantry Battalion based in the United Kingdom; however, Gurkha Reinforcement Companies are currently serving with the 2nd Battalion Parachute Regiment, 1 Royal Irish and 1 Highlanders. There are also formed Gurkha units serving with 10 Transport Regiment, 30 Signal Regiment, 36 Engineer Regiment and in training establishments at Sandhurst and Brecon. In addition, there are small numbers of Gurkha servicemen serving as "Attached Arms" within numerous other establishments across the British Army.

Territorial Army

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) of 22 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 373W, what savings accrued from the cancellation of the exercises. [54901]

Mr. Ingram: Information on the savings which might have accrued from the cancellation of the 84 exercises listed in the answer given on 22 November 2001 is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Savings might have accrued, for example, from the cancellation of chartered transport or from a reduction in fuel consumption. However, other costs such as personnel, equipment and infrastructure costs are fixed and would not have been saved when an exercise was cancelled.

Navy Vessels

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the oldest ship in commission in the Royal Navy is. [54641]

Mr. Ingram: The oldest ship in commission in the Royal Navy is HMS Victory which was commissioned in 1778. Although HMS Victory is the oldest ship in commission in the Royal Navy, she is no longer floating but is set in a dry dock in Portsmouth naval base. The oldest commissioned ship which is still afloat is HMS Fearless which was brought into service in November 1965 and is due to be de-commissioned on 31 October 2002.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the complement is of *(a)* HMS Cardiff, *(b)* HMS Edinburgh, *(c)* HMS York, *(d)* HMS Nottingham, *(e)* HMS Glasgow, *(f)* HMS Exeter, *(g)* HMS Southampton and *(h)* HMS Newcastle. [54884]

Mr. Ingram: The respective complements are set out in the table:

Ship	*Complement*
Cardiff	252
Edinburgh	244
York	255
Nottingham	242
Glasgow	251
Exeter	241
Southampton	243
Newcastle	249

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to put into reserve HMS Cornwall, HMS Campbeltown, HMS Chatham and HMS Cumberland in Portsmouth naval base. [55433]

Mr. Ingram: There are no current plans to put any of the Type 22 (Batch 3) frigates into reserve.

Defence Logistics Organisation

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the operating costs were of the Defence Logistics Organisation in *(a)* 2002–03 and *(b)* each year since it was established. [54900]

Mr. Ingram: The Defence Logistics Organisation (DLO) was formed on 3 April 2000. The first year of operation (2000–01) was managed under a cash regime. 2001–02 was managed under the new resource accounting system for the first time but the final outturn will not be available until the end of October 2002 which is when the National Audit Office is expected to have completed the audit of the departmental accounts. Operating costs have therefore been provided on a cash basis for consistency as follows:

Financial year 2000–01 final outturn: £5.798 billion

Financial year 2001–02 AP 12: £6.371 billion.

Under a cash accounting regime, operating costs include expenditure on capital projects and running costs. The outturn for 2000–01 included a transfer of some £600 million from the Defence Procurement Agency to the DLO following the transfer of responsibility for the management of in-service support costs. Financial year

2001–02 included a transfer of an additional £400 million for in-service support, taking the annual total transfer of in-service support costs into the DLO to around £1 billion.

Financial year 2002–03 has only just started and under the new resource accounting regime the DLO has not been given a cash control total equivalent target.

Split North Port

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost to his Department was for the use of the Split North Port by British forces between September 1992 and January 2002. [54835]

Mr. Ingram: The cost to the Ministry of Defence for the use of Split North Port between September 1992 and January 2002 was £10.14 million.

Fraud

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption was in *(a)* his Department's Vote 1 budget and *(b)* his Department's Vote 2 budget for (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [54703]

Dr. Moonie: The reported estimated losses arising from suspected fraud (including theft and corruption) are as follows:

Year	£
1999–2000	2,037,406
2000–01	881,350

No abatement is made for subsequent recoveries. The figures, which relate entirely to the resource estimates formerly ascribed as Vote 1 attribution, are a combination of suspected and proven frauds and theft with estimated values refined from time to time as investigations, sometimes lasting a year or more, reach a conclusion. A significant element of estimated cost or value can relate to 'at risk' estimates applied to suspected procurement cases, the majority of which have a proven value lower than original estimates with a significant number of cases resolved as 'no crime'.

Medial Treatment

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the *(a)* standard of treatment *(b)* in-patient waiting time, *(c)* out-patient waiting time and *(d)* cost of the current medical treatment of armed forces personnel in (i) the private sector and (ii) the NHS. [54135]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* We consider that a satisfactory standard of treatment is provided to Service personnel by the NHS and private healthcare providers. The majority of Service patients treated in NHS hospitals are admitted to Ministry of Defence Hospital Units whose host NHS trusts are set targets by the Defence Secondary Care Agency, reflecting its own Key Targets for both in-patient and out-patient waiting times. Overall performance against the key targets is published in the Agency's Annual Report, which is laid before Parliament. The contracts with the NHS trusts are monitored for cost effectiveness. Some Service personnel receive treatment at other NHS hospital trusts with whom we have no contractual agreements, where this is more appropriate for them. As entitled patients, they receive such treatment free of charge. Limited use is made of private healthcare providers to enable Service personnel to be treated and returned to deployability more quickly, where this is considered cost effective.

Army

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the average length of service has been for *(a)* British nationals, *(b)* Gurkhas and *(c)* foreign nationals, broken down by country serving in the British Army. [55453]

Mr. Ingram: The tables show officer and soldier mean length of service. Nationality at birth before 1997 is not available on strength data so only the last six years have been shown. Totals shown are for untrained and trained personnel, ie officer designates are included in the officer table.

Calculations have been made using the mean length of service totals as at April 2001 of each year for those personnel on current strength at that date. Figures on mean length of service have only been calculated for populations of 10 or more.

Average length of service in years—as at April

Officers	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
(a) British	11.71	11.60	11.75	11.57	11.52	11.36
(b) Gurkhas	n/a	22.99	22.56	22.38	22.18	22.40
(c) Foreign[1]						
Nationality (at birth)						
Australia	7.69	8.24	8.73	8.12	7.17	7.38
Canada	10.00	9.26	9.35	10.29	10.12	10.95
India	9.41	9.67	10.36	10.50	10.35	10.57
Malta GC	18.22	17.44	15.93	15.04	16.70	—
Nepal	—	—	—	—	—	12.90
New Zealand	6.88	7.21	7.36	7.50	7.23	7.30
Republic of Ireland	10.36	10.29	10.98	11.74	11.44	10.33
Rhodesia	6.38	6.38	7.37	8.07	8.31	8.82
South Africa	8.80	8.82	9.24	6.54	6.81	5.50
Zimbabwe	—	—	3.00	1.95	2.83	3.67

[1] Those nationalities with a current strength more than 9 as at April 2001

Average length of service in years—as at April

Soldiers	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
(a) British	8.21	8.19	8.14	8.16	8.23	8.26
(b) Gurkhas	n/a	9.09	8.97	9.01	9.16	9.10
(c) Foreign[1]						
Nationality (at birth)						
America	8.25	7.43	7.08	8.68	7.61	8.17
Australia	6.14	6.79	6.61	6.38	6.48	7.20
Belize	—	—	—	3.00	3.20	—
Canada	8.20	7.84	7.09	7.02	7.62	7.20
Fiji	—	—	1.64	0.60	1.13	1.37
France	—	—	—	—	—	9.60
Gambia	—	—	—	—	—	1.85
Germany	8.85	7.34	6.88	5.99	4.85	5.47
Ghana	—	—	—	—	3.45	1.32
Grenada (Windward Islands)	—	—	—	—	—	1.00
India	14.61	13.17	11.59	12.20	10.67	8.43
Jamaica	15.01	15.31	11.89	8.09	4.57	1.94
Kenya	—	—	11.50	8.50	2.67	2.31
New Zealand	7.09	6.89	5.98	6.68	6.95	8.41
New Zealand Islands	—	—	—	—	—	1.94
Nigeria	—	—	—	—	—	1.44
Pakistan	9.92	8.83	9.63	10.63	9.90	6.71
Republic of Ireland	8.24	7.66	7.84	7.79	8.30	9.20
Rhodesia	6.60	6.85	5.90	5.80	6.31	7.89
South Africa	4.88	4.32	3.81	2.79	2.48	2.17
St. Helena	—	—	0.42	0.66	1.07	2.09

Average length of service in years—as at April

Soldiers	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
St. Lucia Island	—	—	—	—	—	0.89
St. Vincent Island	—	—	—	—	0.49	1.46
Trinidad and Tobago	—	—	—	—	4.41	3.33
Zimbabwe	—	5.50	3.25	2.85	2.20	1.35

[1] Those nationalities with a current strength more than 9 as at April 2001

Glencorse Barracks

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future use of Glencorse Barracks. [55170]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The Ministry of Defence is currently examining the options for the future use of Glencorse Barracks, but I can confirm that the Recruit Selection Centre will remain at the site, maintaining a dedicated recruit selection facility in Scotland. In addition, it is intended that there will be a further Army presence at Glencorse, although the extent of this has not yet been decided.

Submarine Service

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the *(a)* manning requirement and *(b)* strength is of the submarine service. [54882]

Mr. Ingram: The manning requirement for the Submarine Arm of the Royal Navy is 710 officers and 3,154 ratings.

The trained strength of the Submarine Arm, including personnel filling staff appointments and undergoing training, is 806 officers and 3,004 ratings.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the submarine service has sufficient manpower to crew all operational submarines; and if he will make a statement. [54883]

Mr. Ingram: The Submarine Arm of the Royal Navy has sufficient manpower to man the submarines currently in the normal seagoing operational cycle to 100 per cent. of their complement.

Israel

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his policy is on the supply of arms to Israel. [54731]

Mr. Bradshaw: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) on 15 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 722–23W.

TREASURY

Aggregates Levy

Sue Doughty: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the total cost to the Treasury will be *(a)* at the outset of its introduction and *(b)* projected in the next three years of moneys redirected from the Aggregates Levy to the Sustainability Fund in England. [53719]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

The Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund is a public expenditure programme of £29.3 million a year in England for the two years 2002–03 and 2003–04. Decisions on the size of the fund in future years have yet to be made.

National Insurance

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact on VAT revenues of the 1 per cent. rise in employers' national insurance contributions from April 2003; whether this impact is included in the revenue estimates published in Table A.1 of the Red Book; what estimate he has made of the cost to the public sector of higher VAT charges resulting from the rise in employers' national insurance contributions; and whether the impact on public sector VAT bills of a higher rate of employers' national insurance has been included in his estimate of the total cost to the public sector of the increase in employers' national insurance contributions. [53627]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The net Exchequer effect of a Budget measure is generally calculated as the difference between applying the pre-Budget and post-Budget tax and benefit regimes to the levels of total income and spending at factor cost expected after the Budget. Separate estimates of the impact of individual measures on overall levels of income and spending are not available; any such effects will, however, be taken into account in the forecasts of the economy and public finances as set out in chapters B and C of the "Financial Statement and Budget Report".

English GDP

Paul Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what contributions to English GDP were made in 2001–02 by the *(a)* farming, *(b)* tourism and *(c)* manufacturing industries (i) gross and (ii) net of subsidies and compensation. [54463]

Ruth Kelly: The information falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated 13 May 2002:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on estimating the contributions to English GDP in 2001–02 of a number of industries net and gross of subsidies and compensation. (54463)

The latest Gross Value Added (GVA) estimates for the constituent countries of the United Kingdom by industry are available up to 1998 only, and were published as an ONS News Release on 27 February 2001 (data up to 1999 will be published later this month). The Standard Industrial Classification breakdown identifies 'Agriculture, Hunting, Forestry and Fishing' and 'Manufacturing' but does not separately identify 'Tourism'. However, estimates of the contribution from 'Tourism' have been supplied by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, defined from the activities of tourists rather than by the conventional industry classification. For this reason, there will be some double counting for estimates in this category against estimates for the agricultural and manufacturing industries.

Table 1: Gross Value Added, England, 1998

	£ million
Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing	7,313
Manufacturing	127,027
Tourism[1]	34,700
Total	743,318

[1] GVA for tourism will include a small element from agricultural and manufacturing industries.

Source:
Office for National Statistics, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Department for Culture, Media and Sport

No sub-UK breakdowns of subsidies or compensation payments consistent with these data are currently available.

Data on subsidies for the whole of the UK are available by industrial sector up to 1999, as outlined in the release 'United Kingdom Input-Output Analysis 2001', but National Accounting conventions limit these to include subsidies on production only, excluding subsidies on product. Using these National Accounts definitions, the 'Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing' industry received £370m subsidies on production in 1999 across the UK, while the 'Manufacturing' industry received none (and, as before 'Tourism' is not classed as an industry under the Standard Industrial Classification).

Separately, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs publication 'Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2001' shows that subsidies on product for that industry for the UK totalled £2,405m in 1999 and £1,943m in 2001. No estimates on subsidies on product are available for the Manufacturing industry. No estimates on Tourism as an industry are available from any source, though the Department for Culture, Media and Sport made a statement recently about Government support for tourism, which I enclose.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs publication also shows a breakdown by country for these data on agricultural subsidies. The latest report was published on 3rd May 2002, and is available through their web site at http://www.defra.gov.uk or through the House of Commons library.

The ONS releases referred to in this answer are available in the House of Commons Library and on the web at htt://www.statistics.gov.uk

Advisory Committee Mandates

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the mandate of the Economic Policy Committee: Working Party and Reduced Compositions is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55351]

Ruth Kelly: The responsibilities of the Economic Policy Committee are set out in articles 272 and 209 of the EC treaty, and in its statute as adopted in European Council decision 2000/604 of 29 September 2000. Article 1.2 of the statute requests this committee to "contribute to the preparation of the work of the Council by providing economic analyses, opinions on methodologies and draft formulations for policy recommendations, particularly on structural policies for improving growth potential and employment in the Community".

The Economic Policy Committee met 11 times over the 12 months from the beginning of May 2001, and the UK representation consists of three officials from HM Treasury and one from the Bank of England. In addition there are eight working groups dealing with specific topics, which met up to six times over the last 12 months.

To disaggregate the costs of the Economic Policy Committee from the UK's total contribution to the EU budget would involve disproportionate costs.

The reports of work under consideration by the Economic Policy Committee are available on the committee's website. Any reports that are subsequently considered by the ECOFIN Council are subject to normal parliamentary scrutiny.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the mandate of the Economic and Financial Committee (including alternates and working party) Working Party and Reduced Compositions is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55352]

Ruth Kelly: The role and responsibilities of the Economic and Financial Committee are set out in Article 114(2) (ex 109c(2)) of the EU treaty and in the statutes of the Economic and Financial Committee, which were adopted by the ECOFIN Council on 31 December 1998.

Since the start of May 2001, the Economic and Financial Committee has met on 12 occasions. In accordance with Article 114(2) of the EU treaty, member states each appoint two members of the committee; the UK is represented by one official from HM Treasury and one official from the Bank of England. Each of these representatives has one alternate.

The information regarding the annual cost of the committee's work to public funds can be obtained only at a disproportionate cost.

The items currently under consideration by the Economic and Financial Committee are those to be discussed in the coming months by the ECOFIN Council. Accountability and transparency to Parliament are ensured by the regular EU scrutiny process: documents agreed by the ECOFIN Council are submitted to Parliament along with explanatory memoranda and are examined by the Scrutiny Committee.

ECOFIN

Mr. Hood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the outcome was of the ECOFIN Council held in Brussels on 7 May; what the Government's stance was on the issues discussed, including its voting record; and if he will make a statement. [55301]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I attended the ECOFIN Council on 7 May.

ECOFIN held an orientation discussion on the draft Commission proposals for the 2002 Broad Economic Policy Guidelines. After further preparatory work in the Economic and Financial Committee, the draft guidelines will be agreed at ECOFIN in June and submitted to the Seville European Council.

Political agreement was reached on the draft directive for financial conglomerates and on the articles of the draft directive on market abuse. After clarification of the recitals, the market abuse directive will return at the 4 June ECOFIN for political agreement on the text as a whole.

ECOFIN discussed a Presidency key issues paper on energy taxation. It was agreed that further preparatory work should be undertaken, with a view to reaching political agreement at the 4 June ECOFIN.

The Commission gave an oral update on progress with third countries on the savings tax directive. Ministers updated the Council on progress with dependent territories.

The Commission introduced the Preliminary Draft Budget for 2003. Along with colleagues, I stressed the importance of respecting the Berlin Financial Perspective ceilings. I also welcomed the Commission's proposals to target a greater proportion of external aid at the poorest countries, and called for further progress towards meeting the EU's November 2000 Development Strategy. The draft budget for 2003 will be agreed at the Budget Council in July.

ECOFIN discussed the Council's proposal for a revised Financial Regulation. Italy maintained its reserve on the article allowing delegation of aid delivery to member state agencies. Ministers requested further discussion of this by EU Ambassadors in COREPER to enable the regulation to be agreed at the 4 June ECOFIN.

Under Any Other Business, the Swedish Finance Minister emphasised the need to keep track of member states' progress in meeting the development aid target agreed at the recent Monterrey Conference. It was agreed that ECOFIN would consider the issue at a later date.

Following discussion over lunch, ministers also adopted texts on the economic and financial aspects of the EU-Latin America summit and on further work on arrangements for financial supervision and stability.

No votes were taken at the meeting.

Bingo

Mr. Evans: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much tax revenue was raised from the bingo sector in the latest year for which figures are available; and what his projections are for such revenue in each of the next five years. [55258]

Mr. Boateng: Duty receipts from bingo can be found in the HM Customs and Excise statistical bulletin "Receipts from Betting, Gaming and Lottery Duties", a copy of which can be found in the House of Commons Library. Details of the amount of VAT received from the bingo industry are not readily available.

Projections for total revenue from duty on betting and gaming, including bingo, were published on 17 April in the Financial Statement and Budget Report 2002. Revenue projections for bingo are not made separately.

Home Energy Efficiency

Ms Walley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will increase investment in home energy efficiency to meet the improvement target proposed in the Energy Review. [55275]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Performance and Innovation Unit's Energy Review is a report to the Government and was published in February 2002. The Government are currently considering the issues raised by the PIU, including its recommendations on energy efficiency. A consultation paper to inform the Government's response will be issued shortly. Decisions on public expenditure for home energy efficiency measures will be taken in the context of the current Spending Review.

Beer Duty

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost to the Treasury of extending the reduced rate of duty on beer from small breweries to those local breweries that produce between 30,000 hectolitres and 200,000 hectolitres, using the brewery rate formula published in the Finance Bill. [55599]

Mr. Boateng: Extending the relief for small breweries to breweries producing up to 200,000 hectolitres would raise the cost in 2002–03 from £10 million to £15 million by bringing around 25 additional brewers with turnovers up to £25 million within the scope of the relief.

Orphan Assets

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the value is of orphan assets held in the life assurance sector in the UK. [55640]

Ruth Kelly: A precise figure is not available. Any estimate would be subject to a wide margin of error.

Sustainable Development

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans his Department has to assess the impact of the 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review on sustainable development; and if he will make a statement. [55689]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Improving quality of life and promoting sustainable development is an overarching aim of SR2002. The Treasury has for the first time in this spending review provided Departments with specific guidance on how to consider sustainable development systematically. This guidance has been made publicly available. Ministers are currently considering all aspects of departmental proposals to the Spending Review, including their implications for sustainable development. A statement on the outcome of the review will be made in due course.

Tax Credits

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the numbers of families and persons receiving *(a)* the working families tax credit, *(b)* the child care tax credit supplement to WFTC and *(c)* the disabled persons tax credit. [55791]

Dawn Primarolo: The latest figures appear in "Working Families' and Disabled Person's Tax Credit Statistics. Geographical analyses. November 2001", a copy of which is in the Library.

Christian Groups (Annuities)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what discussions he has had with Christian groups on alternative provision of annuities for those who are not able to purchase an annuity because of Christian conscience; [55618]

(2) what proposals he has considered as alternatives to a life annuity for those groups that cannot take out such a policy because of Christian conscience. [55619]

Ruth Kelly: The Treasury and the Inland Revenue have had several meetings with a Christian group to discuss their concerns about annuities and alternative approaches to retirement income consistent with their beliefs.

Royal Family (Tax Status)

Paul Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the principles of the arrangement made between the Government and the monarchy for the payment by the royal family of *(a)* income tax, *(b)* inheritance tax and *(c)* capital gains tax. [56421]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The arrangements are set out in full in the Memorandum of Understanding in the Royal Trustees report (HC 464) published on 11 February 1993.

Norman Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to ensure inheritance tax is paid on the estate of the Her late Majesty the Queen Mother. [55825]

Mr. Gordon Brown: Inheritance tax is payable in accordance with the normal rules and paragraph 21(b) of the 1993 Memorandum of Understanding in the Royal Trustees report (HC 464).

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

London Underground

Mr. Mark Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the *(a)* total passenger capacity and *(b)* the theoretical maximum capacity of London Underground was at peak periods in 1996–97 and 2001–02; and what changes in capacity resulted from (i) new lines, (ii) new trains, (iii) signal upgrades, (iv) speed restrictions, (v) signal failures, (vi) supply failures, (vii) line failure and (viii) structural problems. [54264]

Mr. Jamieson: This is an operational matter for London Underground (LU).

(a) LU advise me that they do not measure, as part of their regular monitoring, the number of passengers which they are able to carry on the tube network as a whole. Instead, they have information which shows that in 1996–97 and 2001–02, during peak hours, the busiest short sections of the underground's lines carried totals of 133,450 and 142,401 passengers per hour respectively.

(b) LU have figures for the design capacity of their rolling stock. This is the number of customers the rolling stock can physically carry and is defined by the manufacturer without taking into account the quality of the journey. An assessment can be made of the design capacity of trains scheduled per hour, at peak times on the same busiest short sections of each line. This gives figures of 308,278 for 1996–97 and 315,514 for 2001–02.

(i) to (viii) LU inform me that this information does not form part of their regular monitoring and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on the application of the phrase "minimum ambiguity" to deciding who is responsible for tube assets under the PPP. [54287]

Mr. Jamieson: London Underground is responsible for development of the PPP plans for the modernisation of the underground's infrastructure. I understand that when London Underground was restructured into an operating company and three infrastructure companies in April 2000, that restructuring was effected by an asset transfer scheme. It is correct to say that the requirement of "minimum ambiguity" as to the responsibility for asset maintenance within the underground has been a guiding principle for the development of the PPP Service Contracts with the infrastructure companies following the asset transfer scheme. During the period of shadow running since April 2000 there has been considerable work carried out to develop detailed asset information. with clear allocation principles to be incorporated in the contract documents, the application of which will enable responsibility for maintenance and renewal of underground assets to be determined.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on the results of the recent consultation regarding the proposed Private Public Partnership for the London Underground; and if he will place a full report of it in the Library. [55809]

Mr. Jamieson: London Underground Ltd. has addressed London Regional Transport's consultation with the Mayor of London and Transport for London in its "Update to Final Assessment Report". This document is available on London Underground Ltd.'s website.

Network Rail

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress made by Network Rail to raise sufficient funds to acquire Railtrack's assets. [55779]

Mr. Jamieson: This is a matter for Network Rail.

Network Railcard

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what his response is to ATOC's proposals further to limit the validity of the Network Railcard. [55079]

Mr. Jamieson: Since privatisation in 1993 the SouthEast Network Railcard has been an regulated fare. As a result its implementation and conditions are a matter for train operators.

Airports

Mr. Mark Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) what plans he has to *(a)* enforce and *(b)* improve the code which controls the distances between aircraft and customs that incoming and outgoing passengers are required to walk at UK airports; [54996]

(2) which body has the authority to enforce standards and rules on the maximum distances which incoming and outgoing passengers are required to walk between aircraft and customs at UK airports. [54995]

Mr. Jamieson: We are not aware of the existence of any such standards, rules or code governing these matters.

Annex 9 to the Chicago Convention contains the recommended practice that: "Particular attention should be given to passenger routes involving long distances to be covered on foot and the possibility should be studied of facilitating travel over these routes by mechanical systems."

My Department has commended this guidance to the industry, but it is for airport operators to decide how to apply it at individual airports, taking into account any relevant customer service standards.

Special arrangements for elderly and disabled people are the subject of a Code of Practice currently being developed between my Department and representatives of the aviation industry and the various disability organisations; it is hoped to finalise the text shortly.

A1

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many *(a)* cars, motorbikes and vans, *(b)* lorries and *(c)* camper-vans and caravans use the A1 between Newcastle and Edinburgh each day. [54607]

Mr. Byers: The average numbers of vehicles per day on the A1 between Newcastle and Edinburgh in 2000, are given in the following table.

Vehicle type	*Number*
Cars	11,621
Motorcycles	80
LGV (vans)	1,468
HGV (lorries)	1,543

Road Pricing

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if there is *(a)* current and *(b)* proposed European Union guidance on the implementation of (i) congestion charging, (ii) road pricing and (iii) workplace parking charging. [55268]

Mr. Byers: I am informed that there is no current or proposed EU guidance of this nature.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if his Department produces guidance to local authorities on the recommended daily rates for *(a)* congestion charging and *(b)* workplace parking charging; and if he will make a statement. [55267]

Mr. Byers: My Department has issued no guidance. It is for local authorities to decide, after local consultation, on the structure and level of any road user or workplace parking levy charges.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the estimated revenue is from *(a)* workplace parking charges and *(b)* congestion charging in each year of his Department's 10-year transport plan. [55266]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to her on 15 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 741W.

Traffic Disruption

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what restrictions govern the movement of slow moving wide loads on public highways in England and Wales; and what steps he has taken to keep traffic disruption caused thereby to a minimum. [55795]

Mr. Spellar: The movement of slow moving and wide loads is regulated by the requirements laid down in the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986, as amended and the Motor Vehicles (Authorisation of Special Types) General Order 1979, also as amended. Under these regulations there is a requirement on the haulier to inform the police about the movement of such loads. The police have the powers to vary the time or date of the move on the grounds of road safety and congestion to suit local conditions.

Road Safety (Children)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will introduce a telephone hotline for members of the public who witness the carriage of children without seat belts. [56144]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department has no plans for such a hotline for reports about unrestrained children carried in vehicles. It is the responsibility of the police to enforce road traffic legislation including that relating to the use of child restraints. It is always open for members of the public to make specific complaints directly to the police.

Roadside surveys indicate that the wearing rate for child restraints/seat belts by children in the rear seats of cars is over 90 per cent. The Department will nevertheless continue with its publicity and information campaigns to encourage even greater use of restraints by adults and children.

10-Year Transport Plan

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has to revise the 10-year transport plan to incorporate rural proofing. [55921]

Mr. Byers: I will be publishing a first year report detailing progress on delivery of the 10-year transport plan in July. Rural transport concerns were fully incorporated when the 10-year plan was published in 2000.

Infrastructure Projects

Jon Cruddas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has to streamline the inquiry procedures for major infrastructure projects. [56518]

Ms Keeble: My right hon. Friend has today laid before Parliament a Statutory Instrument: The Town and Country Planning (Major Infrastructure Project Inquiries Procedure) (England) Rules 2002. A Departmental Circular (DTLR Circular 02/2002) is also being issued today to accompany the new Statutory Instrument. This Circular explains the new procedures for handling inquiries into those major infrastructure projects in England, as defined in the schedule to the Rules. Copies of the Statutory Instrument and the Circular have been placed in the House Libraries.

The new arrangements for major infrastructure project inquiries, which are due to come into force on 7 June, are part of the package of measures announced by my right hon. Friend on 20 July 2001, to streamline the planning procedures for major infrastructure projects. The Department has also consulted on a key part of that package which is the proposed introduction of new procedures to enable Parliament to make a decision in principle on applications for major projects before the detail of the application is considered at a public inquiry.

The new Rules build on the improvements already made to inquiry procedure rules more generally in August 2000.

The key changes are

the introduction of round table sessions will allow parties to discuss areas of concern with each other. Experience at other inquiries has shown that these can be a very effective mans of agreeing facts, and narrowing areas of disagreement, both before and during the inquiry.

the introduction of a technical adviser, who will be tasked with assessing the technical evidence of all parties and will produce his own independent report on the technical issues.

the introduction of mediation into inquiry proceedings which will help to narrow the issues before and during the inquiry.

A date for the delivery of the Inspector's report will be announced at the end of the inquiry. This will give certainty to the parties about the length of time.

the provision to limit cross examination where the inquiry timetable is put at risk has been introduced so that a situation should not arise where people at the beginning of an inquiry are not allowed to encroach into cross examination time allocated to those at the end of the inquiry.

All these measures, included in the Rules, will help to improve the inquiry system for major infrastructure projects.

Rural Affairs

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has to include rural areas in the *(a)* National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and *(b)* Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. [55917]

Mr. Byers: The Government's policy is to tackle deprivation wherever it lies. It is not limited to urban areas but is concerned with removing social exclusion wherever it exists.

The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal is a new long-term initiative designed to address the underlying causes of deprivation. Delivering the National Strategy will require changes to the way key services are delivered in all deprived areas—urban or rural. The Neighbourhood Renewal Fund aims to supplement this by enabling the 88 most deprived authorities to improve the services they provide. At least 16 of these 88 areas contain substantial rural areas.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what discussions his Department has had with the Countryside Agency on the application of rural proofing to the work of his Department. [55918]

Mr. Byers: Both the Minister for Housing, Planning and Regeneration and I have met the chairman of the Countryside Agency to discuss a range of rural issues. Officials from my Department have regular contact with their counterparts at the Countryside Agency about rural proofing and other matters.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has to increase rural proofing in his Department in line with the Countryside Agency's report, "Rural Proofing in 2001–02". [55919]

Mr. Byers: My Department is taking a number of measures to further enhance its rural proofing activity. Those measures include:

(i) nomination of a ministerial "rural champion": Lord Falconer will assume overall responsibility for the co-ordination of rural issues within the Department;

(ii) the introduction of an integrated policy appraisal tool that guides policy makers towards assessment of the full range of policy impacts, including specifically those on rural areas;

(iii) staff awareness raising activity: a number of actions are envisaged, including articles in internal DTLR journals, presentations to staff on integrated policy appraisal and rural issues, etc.;

(iv) enhanced role for the DTLR official level rural "focal point": the focal point will be taking a more pro-active role in co-ordinating DTLR's activity as it impacts on rural areas, and will liaise regularly with the Countryside Agency.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what guidance he has issued to the Strategic Rail Authority on the application of rural proofing to its work. [55920]

Mr. Byers: Paragraph 8.6 of the Directions and Guidance I gave to the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) on 11 April requires the authority to use their published planning criteria in appraising rail schemes. These criteria requires costs and benefits relating to environment, accessibility, integration, safety and economy to be taken into account, many of which could identify specific rural impacts.

Financial assistance is provided to rural rail services as part of the Rail Passenger Partnership programme (RPP). RPP funding contributes to the provision of new or enhanced local and regional rail services or facilities. Projects cover both urban and rural networks, but have so far included increased services to rural areas, new stations and schemes to improve accessibility.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what account is being taken of rural proofing in the Department's review of the Standard Spending Assessment formula for local authorities. [55922]

Mr. Byers: We are working to develop options for a fairer and more intelligible grant distribution system. Representatives of rural authorities are members of the technical working groups my Department is running. We will consult on options over the summer and will consider the responses, including those on factors that relate to rural areas, when we come to take decisions.

National Land Use Database

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement in respect of each of the English regions on *(a)* how many local authorities provided the necessary information on the review of the national land use database and *(b)* what action he plans to take to ensure that those regions who have not reported satisfactorily do so. [55615]

Ms Keeble: The number of local authorities providing returns for the 2001 update of the national land use database of previously developed land is shown in the following table. My Department is working with local authorities, English Partnerships, the Government Offices and other regional bodies to improve response rates for the 2002 update.

Government office	*Number of authorities in region*	*Number of authorities returning in 2001*	*Percentage of authorities returning in 2001*
North-East	24	13	54
North-West	44	36	82
Yorkshire and Humberside	24	17	71
West Midlands	34	23	68
East Midlands	40	23	58
East of England	49	24	49
South-West	47	23	49
South-East	67	43	64
London	33	23	70
England	362	225	62

Firefighters' Pensions

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's advice to local authorities on whether they will permit widows and widowers of firefighters to retain their pensions on remarriage. [55614]

Dr. Whitehead: Under the current rules of the firefighters' pension scheme, the surviving spouse of a firefighter who remarries will lose the rights to a widow's/widower's pension. There are no proposals at present to amend the scheme in this respect and therefore we could not advise local authorities to permit surviving spouses to retain their pensions on remarriage. We continue to discuss amendments to the current scheme with the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council which includes representatives of the Scottish Executive, the Northern Ireland Administration, fire service employers and unions and staff associations.

Registered Social Landlords

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what his estimate is of the comparative costs of *(a)* loans entered into by registered social landlords for capital developments and *(b)* the equivalent cost to local authorities; and if he will make a statement. [55626]

Ms Keeble: Information to make a direct comparison of the cost of loans to registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities for housing investment is not held by my Department.

RSLs are private sector organisations who borrow directly from banks, building societies and other financial institutions. Loan costs will vary according to the RSL taking the loan, the type of loan and when it is taken out.

Borrowing for housing investment by local authorities is generally from the Public Works Loans Board. Loan costs will also vary due to the type of loan, when it is taken out and the local authority involved. The cost of servicing the loans is met through housing revenue account subsidy.

Emergency Services (Radio Communications)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) what plans he has to provide inter-operability between emergency services and their radio communications systems; [55468]

(2) which organisations from industry are advising Ministers on the procurement details for the fire and ambulance services for the replacement of their radio communications systems; [55469]

(3) which Department has responsibility for taking decisions on the replacement of radio communication systems for fire and ambulance services; [55466]

(4) what consultations he has had to determine the procurement process for the fire and ambulance service for the replacement of their radio communications systems. [55467]

Dr. Whitehead *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* DTLR has policy responsibility for fire services in England and Wales and the Department of Health for ambulance services.

The requirements for inter-operability reflect identified needs following the attack on the World Trade Centre. The Presidents of the associations representing the Chief Officers of the emergency services have now agreed a new and enhanced requirement for the inter-operability of radio systems between the services.

On 7 May 2002 I made an announcement about the procurement of a national radio communications system for the Fire Service in England and Wales. DTLR will now be discussing with fire authorities how best to implement the new national strategy. A new specification reflecting this enhanced requirement is being prepared. There will be competitive procurement for the fire services in accordance with EU procurement legislation.

Right to Buy

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what

proportion of tenants have bought their homes through right to buy schemes in rural areas in the last 15 years; and if he will make a statement. [55332]

Ms Keeble *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* In the 15 years to 31 March 2001, 23 per cent. of local authority dwellings in rural areas have been sold under the right to buy scheme.

When selling properties under the right to buy scheme, landlords may impose restrictions on their resale if they are located in national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty, or certain rural areas designated for this purpose. An owner may be required to offer the property back to the landlord (if they wish to resell within ten years) or to people who have lived or worked locally for three years. The intention is to try to ensure that more of the existing housing in rural areas is available to local people. There are currently 24 designated rural areas, and our November 2000 Rural White Paper "Our Countryside: The Future" encouraged other local authorities to consider seeking designation.

Empty Homes (South-west)

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many empty homes there are in the south-west region. [56025]

Ms Keeble: The number of empty homes in the south-west region on 1 April 2001 (latest available data) was 68,200.

Notes: figure rounded to the nearest 100

Sources: DTLR's 2001 Housing Strategy statistical appendix return and Housing Corporation's 2001 Regulatory and Statistical Return (RSR).

Mobile Phone Masts

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what steps his Department has taken to monitor the incidence of mast sharing by mobile phone operators. [55207]

Ms Keeble: The Government's policy is firmly to encourage mast and site sharing where that is the optimum environmental solution. Planning Policy Guidance Note 8, "Telecommunications" provides guidance on this.

In addition, as part of the mobile phone industry's 10 commitments to improve the handling of telecommunications development, operators have pledged to publish clear, transparent and accountable criteria and cross-industry agreement on site sharing.

The industry sends site sharing statistics to the Department on a quarterly basis as part of this commitment. Latest figures show that, out of the current 10,416 sites that are capable of some form of mast/tower share, 3,669 sites have at least one sharer present. In addition, 2,713 applications for site share are pending.

St. Thomas' Hospital

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions whether the Government Office for London has provided him with a brief on the site at St Thomas' Hospital known as Block 9. [55410]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government Office for London provides Ministers with a wide range of briefs but it is not the practice to disclose details of internal discussion and advice.

Planning

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what new planning guidelines will be introduced on the role of regional assemblies in planning applications. [55196]

Ms Keeble: We are not proposing to introduce any new planning guidance in relation to the existing role of regional assemblies in planning applications.

Regional planning bodies already offer advice to local planning authorities and give evidence at an appeal where the planning application raises regional or sub-regional issues relevant to the delivery of regional planning guidance.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 7 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 24W, if he will place a copy of the analysis by Smith and Williamson of responses to the Planning Green Paper in the Library. [56005]

Mr. Byers: I have placed a copy of the consultation analysis in the Library of the House. As Smith and Williamson make clear in their report:

> "It should be emphasised that this report represents only a partial analysis of the responses to the Green Paper. Many of the standard responses that have been quantitatively analysed have been initiated and influenced by organised campaigns. We suggest that in order to gain a more complete picture of opinions and suggestions regarding the Green Paper's proposals, it will be necessary to consider in more detail the many suggestions and qualifying comments on the standard forms and also the large number of more detailed responses, which it has not been possible to code and quantify, submitted by a wide variety of organisations, groups and individuals."

I have also therefore placed in the Library a copy of the memorandum provided to the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Select Committee which attempts to provide this more qualitative analysis of the detailed responses.

Housing

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he expects to relax the limitations on local authorities' borrowing against their assets for housing improvements or construction. [55613]

Ms Keeble: A change is to be made allow authorities to borrow without Government consent where they can afford to service the debt from available revenue resources. This change requires primary legislation and will be made as soon as the parliamentary timetable permits.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assessment the Government have made of the likely number of new dwellings that would be required in *(a)* London and *(b)* the south-east in order to satisfy predicted housing demand in the next 10 years. [55616]

Ms Keeble: Regional Planning Guidance for London and the south-east (RPG9) provides that 23,000 additional dwellings should be provided in London and 39,000 in the rest of the south-east (including, for these purposes, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Essex) each year on average until such time as the figures are reviewed.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) what recent assessment he has made of the costs of building *(a)* pre-fabricated houses and flats and *(b)* non-pre-fabricated permanent houses and flats; [56003]

(2) what recent discussions he has held with the house building industry on the merits of pre-fabricated housing. [56004]

Mr. Byers: It is not the normal practice of Governments to release details of specific meetings with private individuals or companies.

The Government do not hold benchmark costings on the difference between modular and traditional build. The Peabody Trust have said that their pioneering modular development at Murray Grove was slightly more expensive than a similar sized traditional build development. Costs could be expected to fall with greater volume in further developments.

Parishes

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many parish councils in England have a population of *(a)* under 3,000, *(b)* 3,000 to 10,000, *(c)* 10,001 to 20,000, *(d)* 20,001 to 30,000 and *(e)* over 30,000. [55724]

Dr. Whitehead: My Department does not hold current statistics on the populations of all parish councils in England. A survey[1] was carried out in 1997 by the Aston Business School, from which the following data have been drawn:

Population size band	*Councils in England*	*Percentage*
Less than 500	3,252	40
500–999	1,734	21
1,000–2,499	1,591	20
2,500–4,999	760	9
5,000–9,999	487	6
10,000–19,999	251	3
20,000 and above	64	1
Total	8,139	100

[1] DETR 1998 "Local Councils' Use of Section 137: A financial review of parish and town councils in England and their discretion to spend under Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972"; ISBN 1 85112 118 8.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many parishes are exempt from the right to buy as a consequence of their population. [55725]

Ms Keeble: No parishes are exempt from the right to buy.

However, when selling properties under the right to buy scheme, landlords may impose restrictions on their resale if they are located in national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty, or certain rural areas designated for this purpose. An owner may be required to offer the property back to the landlord (if they wish to resell within ten years) or to people who have lived or worked locally for three years. The intention is to try to ensure that more of the existing housing in rural areas is available to local people. There are currently 24 designated rural areas, and our November 2000 Rural White Paper "Our Countryside: The Future" encouraged other local authorities to consider seeking designation.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many parishes are able to claim business rates relief on village shops as a consequence of their population. [55726]

Dr. Whitehead: This information is not available.

To be eligible for rate relief under the village shop scheme, the business must be located in a qualifying rural settlement. Qualifying rural settlements must have a population of no more than 3,000, and be wholly or partly in a rural area that has been designated by the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. However, it is the responsibility of the local authority to determine which settlements in its area meet the criteria for the scheme, to identify their boundaries and to place them on its local rural settlement list. Information on their number is not held centrally.

Local Authority Services

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how he will ensure that the new finance system for local authorities will provide an effective framework within which councils can initiate innovative ways of delivering customer-focused services. [54800]

Dr. Whitehead: Our comprehensive agenda for reform of the local government finance system was set out in last December's White Paper "Strong Local leadership—Quality Public Services". Our finance reforms will give councils more space to innovate and respond in ways that are appropriate to local circumstances by providing local authorities with greater freedom to borrow, invest, trade, charge and set spending priorities. Our White Paper implementation plan is available on the DTLR website at http://www.dtlr.gov.uk/local-regions/sll/implement/plan/index.htm.

Electoral Register Sales

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans to allow local authorities to sell electoral registers to third parties. [54590]

Mr. Raynsford: We have today published a policy paper and draft regulations setting out the Government's intentions for regulations making provision about access to and sale and supply of electoral registers.

The approach we are adopting strikes a balance between the individual elector's right to privacy and the needs of others to receive the data to carry out their functions. There will be two versions of the register, the

data in which will have been compulsorily obtained—a full one, and an edited one containing particulars about only those electors who have not requested that their details be removed from the edited register.

The full register will be available for electoral purposes, for law enforcement and crime prevention and for other purposes where there is a strong public interest in preserving availability. These include checking identity for credit purposes. The edited register will be available for sale to anyone for any purpose.

Both the policy statement and the draft regulations have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and on the internet for public comment on the regulations. Our aim, subject to parliamentary approval, is to make the regulations to have effect from the 2002 canvass.

Special Advisers

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will publish the names and responsibilities of *(a)* his special advisers and *(b)* special advisers of his Ministers. [55977]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 12 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 908W.

Letters of Comfort

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions on how many occasions his Department has issued letters of comfort to a private sector contractor. [54285]

Dr. Whitehead: As there is no central list of "letters of comfort", this information can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will place in the Library copies of each version of the internal guidance which have been drawn up by his Department since 1 January 1999 to assist staff in his Department to answer subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 1998. [53375]

Dr. Whitehead: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Stephen McCabe) on Thursday 25 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 446W.

Aga Khan

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what meetings he has had with *(a)* the Aga Khan and *(b)* his staff in the last 12 months. [55411]

Mr. Raynsford: It is not the normal practice of Governments to release details of specific meetings with private individuals or companies.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Developing Countries (Electricity)

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what projects she has financed in the last three years to improve electricity supply in developing countries, indicating the cost of each and which use renewable technologies. [54614]

Clare Short: We are all increasingly providing financial assistance to our partner countries via payments through their central budgets in collaboration with other donors. Under these circumstances it is not possible to separate out the contributions of any one donor to any particular sector.

We do, however, still have a number of ongoing specific energy projects in some countries. Brief details of our major country projects, together with details of our research projects in this sector and a full list of our activities in the energy sector over the past three years will be placed in the Library of the House.

We are also contributors to the multi-donor technical co-operation facilities (ESMAP and PPIAF) which have activities in the energy sector, some of which include renewables. Brief details of this work are also available in the Library of the House.

Fraud and Corruption

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption was in *(a)* her Department's Vote 1 budget and *(b)* her Department's Vote 2 budget for (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [54720]

Clare Short: Losses in DFID's Vote 1 and Vote 2 accounts were disclosed separately in the Losses Statement of the Appropriation Accounts 1999–2000 and the Accountability Notes of the Resource Accounts 2000–01.

The estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption in DFID's Vote 1 budget in 1999–2000 and 2000–01 was £21,000 and £13,000 respectively. Of these amounts, £11,000 and £8,000 can be attributed to the theft of assets, which, in line with Treasury guidance, has been classified as involving departmental staff either directly or through collusion.

There was no loss in DFID's Vote 2 budget in 1999–2000, but a loss of £0.2,000 was recorded in 2000–01.

Details of suspected or proven fraud are provided to the Treasury on an annual basis. The annual report that the Treasury prepares on fraud is deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Refurbishment

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she was informed that sapele timber had been used in the refurbishment of 1 Palace Street. [56044]

Clare Short: Standard DFID procedures were followed for this refurbishment project. These do not require me to be advised.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Israel

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral statement of 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 668, on Israel, what risk assessment has been made regarding the protection of the deployed supervisory wardens from radical groups in the west bank. [54622]

Mr. Straw: An assessment has been made of the monitors' security situation in Jericho. I judge this to be satisfactory in the circumstances, though it is plainly not possible to eliminate all risk. Measures have been put in place to enhance the level of protection afforded to the team. They are kept under constant review.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral statement of 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 668, on Israel, what contingency plans are in place to ensure the evacuation of the British personnel deployed as supervisory wardens. [54621]

Mr. Straw: Contingency plans are in place for the evacuation of personnel deployed as monitors in Jericho, as they are for staff at our consulate-general in Jerusalem. They are kept under constant review.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* the UN and *(b)* other Governments on a role for international forces in peacekeeping between Israelis and Palestinians. [55575]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. the Foreign Secretary is in constant contact with his US and European counterparts about the middle east peace process. He also has regular contact with the UN Secretary General and the parties. These discussions cover the full range of issues including the role of the international community in helping Israel and the Palestinian Authority achieve a ceasefire and the resumption of negotiations.

There is broad international consensus that an international peacekeeping operation cannot work without the agreement of both parties; a ceasefire to maintain; and a parallel political process. These do not now exist, so the immediate priority must be to help rebuild confidence and create such conditions for progress.

Fraud

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption was in *(a)* his Department's Vote 1 budget and *(b)* his Department's Vote 2 budget for (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [54710]

Mr. Bradshaw: The information is as follows.

Losses to fraud and corruption

£

	April 1999 to March 2000	*April 2000 to March 2001*
Vote 1 budget		
FCO fraud	11,183	16,326
Sum recovered	11,183	15,553
Net loss	0	773
Vote 2 budget		Nil

Middle East

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made to the International Criminal Court regarding human rights abuses as a result of the on-going conflict in the middle east; and if he will make a statement. [54989]

Mr. MacShane: The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court will enter into force on 1 July 2002. The Court, which will formally come into existence on that date, will have no powers to investigate crimes retrospectively.

Belarus

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Belarusian Government about the Iraqi military delegation visit to Minsk in October 2001; what reports he has received about *(a)* the aim and *(b)* the outcome of the visit; and if he will make a statement. [55154]

Mr. Bradshaw: We are aware of press reports from October 2001 that an Iraqi delegation visited Belarus to receive military training and purchase arms. We view any report of actual or proposed transfers of weapons or weapons-related materials to Iraq—by any country—with serious concern. We have no doubt about Iraq's desire to acquire sophisticated weapons systems. We have expressed our concern about the October 2001 reports to the Belarusian Government and raised our concerns at the United Nations Iraq Sanctions Committee. We made clear in both instances our expectation that the Belarusian Government will continue to take all possible steps to ensure that arms sales and other transactions that violate UN Security Council resolutions will not take place.

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what publicly owned accommodation is made available to him in his official role; how many nights he has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost was of maintaining each of these properties in the last 12 months. [55093]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 9 May. 2002]:* The official London residence of the Foreign Secretary is at 1 Carlton Gardens. I use the day rooms on the ground and first floors for meetings, receptions and entertaining. There is a self-contained residential apartment on the upper floor, which I have never occupied. This was occupied by my

right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) when he was Foreign Secretary, and continues to be occupied by him, as President of the Council. As Foreign Secretary he was 35 nights in residence between 1 April 2001 and 7 June 2001. Total maintenance costs during this period were £2,790.68. From 8 June 2001 the costs of the residential apartment are to be met by the Privy Council Office. I do have both official and private use of Chevening House, Sevenoaks. This is owned by a private trust.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs under what circumstances *(a)* British nationals and *(b)* British passport holders would receive official help to leave Zimbabwe. [55597]

Mr. Bradshaw: There are approximately 26,000 British nationals registered with the British High Commission in Harare. The British High Commission in Harare stands ready to offer what assistance they can to British nationals of all categories who seek their help to leave Zimbabwe.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department has drawn up contingency plans to help UK citizens and UK passport holders evacuate Zimbabwe in the event of a breakdown of law and order there. [55596]

Mr. Bradshaw: We have a Civil Contingency Plan in place for Zimbabwe, as we do for many other countries. This is under constant review. Any evacuation would be a last resort and by whatever means available at that time.

Madagascar

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British citizens are resident in Madagascar; and what relationships are established between Madagascar and the United Kingdom in the *(a)* economic, *(b)* political and *(c)* cultural fields. [55204]

Mr. MacShane: Our embassy in Antananarivo estimates that there are some 160 British citizens in Madagascar.

Bilateral links between Madagascar and the UK are strong. We have been working hard to maintain these, despite the difficult political and economic situation that has developed since the disputed presidential election in December 2001. We continue to support the efforts of the Organisation of African Unity to broker an agreement between the parties which will break the political impasse.

The UK supports a number of small scale projects in Madagascar, particularly in the area of penal reform, and a number of British environmental NGOs are active there. Cultural links are growing: the BBC World Service rebroadcasts locally on FM, and there is increasing interest in learning English.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his assessment is of the political agreement reached on 22 April by the rival presidential contenders in Madagascar; and what steps he will take to seek the investigation of human rights violations and the establishment of a permanent mechanism for the protection of human rights for all sections of the population. [55203]

Mr. MacShane: We welcomed the signature of the Dakar Accord by Marc Ravalomanana and Didier Ratsiraka on 18 April. We regret that the parties have not, since then, been able to take the necessary steps to break the political deadlock. We continue to believe that the Dakar Accord provides the best basis for a settlement, and therefore support President Wade of Senegal's initiative for a second round of talks in Dakar on 14–15 May.

We, with our EU partners, the US, the OAU and UN will continue to encourage the two parties to work together to find a peaceful solution to the impasse, including the need to respect the human rights of all the Malagasy people.

Visitor Visas

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many people were refused visitors' visas by British high commission offices in *(a)* India, *(b)* Pakistan and *(c)* Sri Lanka in the last 12 months. [55197]

Mr. Bradshaw: The total number of visitor visa applications (including family visit applications) refused between April 2001 to March 2002 is as follows:

Pakistan: 32,133

India: 23,891

Sri Lanka: 4,199

Statistics for April 2002 are not yet available.

British Indian Ocean Territory

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans his Department has to enable Ilois people to be able to visit the Chagos Islands; and if he will make a statement. [55604]

Mr. Bradshaw: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 56W.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from environmental organisations concerning the protection of the British Indian Ocean Territories; and if he will make a statement. [55605]

Mr. Bradshaw: The BIOT Government receives representations from various environmental organisations such as the United Kingdom Overseas Territories Conservation Forum and the Friends of Chagos on environmental matters in BIOT. The BIOT Government invests considerable time and effort on environmental and ecological issues.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what environmental impact assessments he holds concerning the effects of US military activity on Diego Garcia; and if he will make a statement. [55623]

Mr. Bradshaw: The BIOT Government employ a Conservation Consultant who makes annual visits to the territory to assess the state of the environment and report to the Commissioner. The last such visit was in February/March 2002.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what income has been received from the USA for the use of Diego Garcia as a military base since its establishment; when the lease expires; and if he will make a statement. [55606]

Mr. Bradshaw: The United States pays no rent or makes any similar payment in respect of its right to use the British Indian Ocean Territory, including Diego Garcia, for defence purposes. However, in 1965, when it became clear that the costs of setting up the territory as a separate dependency would exceed original estimates, the US Government agreed to contribute £5 million towards these costs.

No part of the British Indian Ocean Territory, including Diego Garcia, has been leased to the United States. Under the 1966 Agreement between the UK and USA Governments, the islands will remain available to meet the defence needs of both Governments until 2016, and then for a further period of 20 years, unless either side has previously given notice of termination.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his officials have had on the licensing of fishing for commercial purposes within the British Indian Ocean Territories. [55607]

Mr. Bradshaw: The BIOT Government regularly holds talks with their fisheries consultants who are responsible for negotiating commercial fishing rights within BIOT waters. The fishing licences themselves are issued by the BIOT Government in London.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what preparations have been made by his Department for the receipt of passport applications by Ilois people living in *(a)* Mauritius, *(b)* Seychelles and *(c)* elsewhere. [55608]

Mr. Bradshaw: Chagossians living in Mauritius and Seychelles apply for British passports to the British high commissions in those countries. They should continue to do so when section 3 of the British Overseas Territories Act 2002 comes into force on 21 May 2002. Arrangements have been made so that, in the event of a large number of applications being received, the British high commission in Pretoria, which has a large passport issuing section, will issue their passports. Chagossians living elsewhere should apply to their nearest British passport issuing office.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to authorise the processing of British passport applications from Ilois people within the terms of the British Overseas Territories Act 2002. [55624]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs signed a Commencement Order on 1 May which will bring the citizenship provisions of the British Overseas Territories Act 2002 into force on 21 May 2002.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to receive and publish a report on the possibility of resettlement of the Chagos Islands; and if he will make a statement. [55609]

Mr. Bradshaw: The results of Phase 2B of a study investigating the feasibility of resettlement on some of the outer islands of the Chagos Archipelago are expected to be available by mid 2002.

India

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress he has made with the Government of India regarding bilateral training initiatives in counter terrorism. [54096]

Mr. Bradshaw: In January 2002 my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee agreed to enhance significantly our bilateral co-operation in counter-terrorism, including training. This commitment was soon followed by a visit to India by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's counter terrorism adviser to discuss areas where we could deepen existing bilateral counter-terrorism co-operation. We subsequently held a successful aviation security course in New Delhi for officials from India and the region. On 25 April, the UK/India Joint Working on Terrorism met in London to discuss international terrorism as well as opportunities for further co-operation on training.

British Prisoners Overseas

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women of British nationality are serving a prison sentence in an overseas country; and in which country the sentence is being served in each case. [54246]

Mr. Bradshaw: On 30 April 2002 we were aware of 2,030 British nationals serving custodial sentences in prisons overseas. Of these 1,753 are men and 277 are women. The table gives details of how many prisoners are in each country. The statistics represent only those prisoners who have asked the local authorities to inform the British consulate of their arrest and sentence.

Country	*Number of prisoners*
Albania	0
Algeria	0
Angola	0
Antigua	1
Argentina	3
Armenia	0
Australia	101
Austria	11
Azerbaijan	0
Bahamas	0
Bahrain	1
Bangladesh	3
Barbados	24
Belarus	0
Belgium	31
Belize	0
Bolivia	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0
Brazil	7
Brunei	0
Bulgaria	0

Country	Number of prisoners
Burma	0
Burundi	0
Cambodia	1
Cameroon	0
Canada	51
Chile	1
China	1
Colombia	5
Costa Rica	4
Croatia	0
Cuba	5
Cyprus	7
Czech Republic	0
Denmark	10
Dominica	1
Dominican Republic	1
Ecuador	6
Egypt	2
El Salvador	0
Estonia	1
Ethiopia	1
Finland	3
France	163
Georgia	0
Germany	130
Ghana	0
Grand Cayman	0
Greece	8
Grenada	13
Guatemala	0
Guyana	2
Haiti	0
Honduras	0
Hong Kong	8
Hungary	1
India	23
Indonesia	6
Iran	0
Ireland	104
Israel	6
Italy	23
Jamaica	110
Japan	52
Jordan	0
Kazakhstan	0
Kenya	2
Kuwait	1
Latvia	0
Lebanon	1
Lithuania	0
Madagascar	0
Malawi	1
Malaysia	2
Mali	0
Malta	6
Mauritius	2
Mexico	1
Mongolia	0
Monteserrat	0
Morocco	13
Mozambique	0
Namibia	0
Nepal	1
New Zealand	7
Nicaragua	0
Nigeria	0
Norway	2
Oman	2
Pakistan	2
Panama	5
Papua New Guinea	0
Peru	8
Philippines	14
Portugal	10
Qatar	2
Romania	2
Russian Federation	2
Rwanda	0
Saudi Arabia	16
Senegal	0
Seychelles	0
Sierra Leone	1
Singapore	10
Slovakia	0
Slovenia	0
Solomon Islands	0
South Africa	29
South Korea	1
Spain	221
Sri Lanka	0
St. Lucia	6
St. Vincent and Grenadines	5
Surinam	1
Swaziland	0
Sweden	34
Switzerland	2
Syria	1
Tanzania	0
Thailand	31
The Gambia	1
The Netherlands	48
Togo	0
Tonga	0
Trinidad and Tobago	13
Tunisia	0
Turkey	7
Turkmenistan	0
Ukraine	0
United Arab Emirates	22
United States of America	537
Uzbekistan	0
Uruguay	0
Vanuatu	0
Venezuela	25
Vietnam	1
Yugoslavia	0
Zambia	0
Zimbabwe	0
Total	2,030

Gibraltar

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his recent visit to Gibraltar. [55858]

Peter Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) on 7 May 2002, *Official Report*, columns 151–52W.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had regarding *(a)* shared sovereignty and *(b)* the Spanish claim to full sovereignty of Gibraltar with the Spanish Foreign Minister during the talks in Valencia. [55861]

Peter Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle) on 24 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 294–95W.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had with the Government of Gibraltar prior to announcing his intention to visit Gibraltar. [55063]

Peter Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) on 7 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 152W.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the recent findings by the European Commission of breaches by Spain of EU law which affect Gibraltar; and if he will make a statement. [54574]

Peter Hain: To answer this question would incur disproportionate cost. It would be necessary to identify and review every case in the European Court of Justice between the European Commission and Spain, since Spain's accession to the EU in 1986, to ascertain whether a breach of EU law was found, and consider whether the judgment had any affect on Gibraltar's law. The judgments of the European Court of Justice are published in Reports of Cases before the Court of Justice and the Court of First Instance, which can be found in the House of Commons Library.

Any judgment of the ECJ against a member state potentially has implications for the law of another member state. The UK Government look to the Commission to ensure that all EU member states, including Spain, abide by their EU obligations.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Renewable Energy

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for each of the last five years, how much financial support and what percentage of the whole allocation her Department allocated for research and development as sources of energy of *(a)* wind, *(b)* wave, *(c)* biomass, *(d)* solar, *(e)* hydrogen, *(f)* nuclear, *(g)* coal and *(h)* gas; and in each case what percentage this represented of the whole sum spent on such matters by her. [53825]

Mr. Wilson: Over the last five years, the Department of Trade and Industry has spent the following amounts on energy research and development, covering renewables (including wind, wave, biomass, solar and hydrogen); nuclear (where DTI spending has been confined to research on fusion); coal; and oil and gas. The table gives the percentages spent in each of these categories.

The DTI supports research and development on sustainable energy technologies both through its Sustainable Energy Programme and through the Research Councils. Over the last five years, expenditure through the programme on wind energy has been in the range £1.2 million to £1.7 million per year; on wave energy, in the range £0 to £0.9 million per year; on biomass, in the range £1.8 million to £2.2 million per year; on solar, in the range £1.4 to £2 million per year; and on fuel cells (including some expenditure on hydrogen), in the range £1.2 million to £1.8 million per year. Relevant work supported through the Research Councils would be additional to these figures. The Sustainable Energy Programme also supports cross-technology work in the areas of technology transfer, export promotion and policy support.

Provision for research and development through the Sustainable Energy Programme increases to £19 million for 2002–03 and through the Research Councils to £5.6 million. Additionally, the DTI has been assigned a further £5 million over three years for wave and tidal demonstration projects and a further £4 million for net metering, storage and control demonstration projects.

The Government have also set up capital grants programmes in the following areas to bring forward new renewable energy technologies:

£74 million for offshore wind (including £10 million from the New Opportunities Fund);

£69 million for bioenergy (including £36 million from the New Opportunities Fund and £3 million for biomass heating);

£20 million for photovoltaics (PV).

The R and D and capital grants programmes supplement the substantial boost for renewable energy being provided by the Renewables Obligation. Estimated maximum payments available under the Renewables Obligation for England and Wales and the corresponding Renewables Obligation (Scotland) for 2002–03 are £282 million. The level of the Obligation is set to rise each year to 2010–11, when maximum payments for the year are estimated to reach £1 billion.

DTI expenditure on energy R and D[1]

	1997–98		*1998–99*		*1999–2000*		*2000–01*		*2001–02*	
	(£ million)	*(Percentage)*	*(£ million)*	*(Percentage)*	*(£ million)*	*(Percentage)*	*(£ million)*	*(Percentage)*	*(£ million)*	*(Percentage)*
Sustainable energy										
DTI programme	13.0	35.3	11.3	36.9	12.5	38.6	13.1	39.7	12.2	34.4
Research Councils	2.9	7.9	3.1	10.1	2.4	7.4	2.8	8.5	5.0	14.1
Total	15.9	43.2	14.4	47.1	14.9	46.0	15.9	48.2	17.2	48.6
Nuclear fusion	16.6	45.1	12.6	41.2	14.4	44.4	14.3	43.3	14.3	40.4
Coal[2]	4.1	11.1	3.4	11.1	2.9	9.0	2.6	7.9	3.7	10.5
Oil and gas	0.2	0.5	0.2	0.7	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.6
Total	36.8	100	30.6	100	32.4	100	33.0	100	35.4	100

[1] £ million and percentage of total DTI energy R and D spend for the year.

[2] Cleaner Coal programme.

Notes:

1. The DTI Sustainable Energy Programme supports work on export promotion and technology transfer as well as projects relating to specific renewable energy technologies. Figures include programme management costs.
2. The figures for oil and gas relate to the SHARP programme covering improved oil recovery and gas research.
3. There may also be some Research Council supported R and D relating to coal, oil and gas.
4. 2001–02 figures are subject to revision.

Alternative Fuels

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions her Department has held with companies regarding the conversion of fleet vehicles to alternative fuels. [51966]

Mr. Wilson: I refer to my answer given to the hon. Member previously on 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 298W.

Sellafield

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Health and Safety Executive were first informed that the sludge storage tanks in building B241 at Sellafield were leaking. [53632]

Mr. Wilson: BNFL staff first discussed a suspected leak to ground from sludge tank number 4 in B241 with the Health and Safety Executive's nuclear inspectors at a meeting in October 1993.

British Aerospace

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much financial assistance she granted to British Aerospace, and what the purpose was of each element, in each of the last five years. [53826]

Alan Johnson: In March 2000 HMG committed £530 million to BAE SYSTEMS in launch investment towards the design and development costs of the wings for the Airbus A380 "superjumbo". This commitment was subsequently novated to Airbus UK in anticipation of the restructuring of Airbus from a consortium to a single integrated company, which took effect in July 2001.

In the past 5 years British Aerospace / BAE SYSTEMS received the following funding for a number of projects under the DTI's civil aeronautics research programme:

Year	*£ million*
1997–98	2.8
1998–99	2.1
1999–2000	3.4
2000–01	2.0
2001–02	1.5

Following the restructuring of Airbus, a number of the civil aeronautics research projects—which had a value of £1.1 million in 2001–02—were novated to Airbus UK.

The company has also participated in a number of LINK collaborative projects, part-funded by DTI.

Rural Awareness

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) when her Department will have rural proofing embedded in policy-making procedures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, "Rural Proofing in 2001–02"; [54432]

(2) when her Department will establish rural targets and monitoring as part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, "Rural Proofing in 2001–02"; [54411]

(3) when her Department will introduce measures to raise rural awareness through staff *(a)* training, *(b)* development and *(c)* secondments as part of overall rural proofing measures set out in the Countryside Agency's report "Rural Proofing in 2001–02". [54421]

Alan Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to this question by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 9 May 2002, *Official Report*, columns 273–74W.

Refrigerants

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations she has received concerning the equity of international standards-setting guidelines for refrigerants; and if she will make a statement. [54628]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has received several representations from manufacturers of hydrocarbon refrigerants.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations she has made concerning United Kingdom Government policy on HFCs to the international standards-setting body responsible for refrigeration standards. [54627]

Mr. Wilson: None. The standardisation process is independent of governments: representation is made through national standards bodies which, for the UK, is the British Standards Institution.

Milk

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will refer the matter of the sale of milk to the competition authorities. [54222]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Under UK competition legislation the Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring markets and investigating allegations of anti-competitive behaviour. Any evidence of anti-competitive behaviour should be sent directly to the Office of Fair Trading.

Directory Inquiries

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the market for directory inquiries services will be open to new entrants. [54823]

Mr. Alexander: The opening of the market for Directory enquiries is a matter for Oftel. New Codes facilitating the introduction of competition in this area will be introduced from October 2002.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by what method directory inquiry calls will be routed after the market is opened to new entrants. [54820]

Mr. Alexander: The regulation of the market for directory inquiries services is a matter for the Office of Telecommunications (Oftel). The Director General of Telecommunications will write to the hon. Member with details of how directory inquiry calls will be routed after the market is opened to new entrants.

Chronic Bronchitis and Emphysema Claims

Paddy Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will set out the policy issues which need to be resolved to enable final settlements to be made to chronic bronchitis and emphysema claims. [55004]

Mr. Wilson: The Department has now agreed a revised version of Schedule 10 of the Claims Handling Agreement (CHA) with the claimants' solicitors. Schedule 10 determines the level of special damages to which a claimant is entitled. In addition, small cohorts of claimants are affected by on-going negotiations on surface dust and coal-mining related co-defendants.

Consignia

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to her answer of 1 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 792W, what discussions between Consignia and parties other than the Dutch post office regarding a possible sale of, merger with, or equity investment in, Consignia have taken place in the last 12 months. [55012]

Mr. Alexander: Apart from the negotiations with TPG about a possible merger as set out in my answer on 1 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 792W, the Department have not been notified, during the last 12 months, about any discussions between Consignia and other parties regarding a possible sale of equity, merger or equity investment.

Universal Bank

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made with discussions with the European Commission on the EU rules which forbid the Governments of member states from subsidising banks in relation to the proposed universal bank project. [55005]

Mr. Alexander: The European Commission has decided not to raise any objections to universal banking services. It informed the Government in February 2002 that it considers the measures notified to it to be compatible with the common market.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much has been spent by the administration section of the Export Credits Guarantee Department under code B4 (Grant and transfers: current) in the appropriation accounts on IT expenditure in the last five financial years; how much was paid to each IT company; what the nature of the project was; and if she will make a statement. [54361]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* Details of amounts of money paid to individual companies are commercially confidential. I have listed ECGD's total spend on IT for each financial year 1997–98 to 2000–01 and broken the total down into five areas of expenditure. Copies are available in the Library. Also provided are the names of the companies employed by ECGD to provide IT services in those years and an outline of the services provided. I have not included figures for 2001–02 as these have yet to be audited.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much has been spent by the administration section of the Export Credits Guarantee Department under code B4 (Grant and transfers: current) in the appropriation accounts on consultancy fees in the last five financial years; how much was paid to each consultancy company; what the nature was of the project in each year; and if she will make a statement. [54358]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* Details of amounts of money paid to individual companies are commercially confidential. I have listed ECGD's total spend on consultancy for each of the financial years 1997–98 to 2000–01, the names of the companies or individuals employed by ECGD as consultants in those years and an outline of the service provided. Figures for 2001–02 have not been included as these have yet to be audited.

Year 1997–98: Consultancy spend £146,501.71

Company or individual	*Service provided*
C.O.I.	Publications
CDR International	Training
Coda plc	Accountancy
Doyle Clutton Associates	Accountancy
Four Acre Accountants Ltd.	Accountancy
French Thornton	Change Management Consultancy
Hays Accountancy Personnel	Recruitment
Idon Ltd.	Training
KPMG CHAPS	Recruitment
Marketing Improvements Group plc	Customer Survey
Pricewaterhouse Coopers	Review of Aircraft Finance Practice
Record Currency Management Ltd.	Training
Standard and Poors NY	Corporate Risk Consultancy

Year 1998–99: Consultancy spend £331,821.49

Company or individual	*Service provided*
David Parker	Translation
Emslie Phelps	Training
Environmental Resources Management	Environment Policy Consultancy
French Thornton	Change Management Consultancy
IBM UK Ltd.	IT Services
KPMG	Internal Audit Consultancy
Lavant Consulting Ltd.	Business Adviser
Marketing Improvements Group	Customer Survey
Rimell Associates	IT Services
Standard and Poor's Rating Group	Risk Management Consultancy
Standard and Poor's NY	Risk Management Consultancy

Year 1999–2000: Consultancy spend £514,649.98

Company or individual	*Service provided*
CMG (UK) Ltd.	IT Services
David Parker	Translation
Deloitte and Touche	Accountancy
Emslie Phelps	Training
Ernst and Young	Risk Management
Jean Caines	Press and Public Relations Consultancy
KPMG	Risk Management Review
National Economic Research Assocs.	Economic Rationale Review
Record Currency Management Ltd.	Financial Risk Management
Standard and Poors Rating Group	Training

Year 2000–01: Consultancy spend £757,681.14

Company or individual	*Service provided*
Alan Brown	Risk Management
Atalink Ltd.	Publications
Berry Palmer and Lyle Ltd.	Active Portfolio Management Project
C.O.I.	Publications
CMG (UK) Ltd.	IT Services

Year 2000–01: Consultancy spend £757,681.14

Company or individual	*Service provided*
Coda Group Holdings Ltd.	Financial
Deloitte and Touche	Accountancy
Dion Durrell and Associates Ltd.	Active Portfolio Management Project
Hays Accountancy Personnel	Recruitment
National Economic Research Assocs.	Economic Rationale Review
Record Currency Management Ltd.	Financial Risk Management
Risk Control Ltd.	Risk Management
Small Computer Company	Training

Cold Calling

David Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans the Government have to regulate the practice of cold calling. [55181]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Protection is provided by the Consumer Protection (Cancellation of Contracts Concluded away from Business Premises) Regulations 1987, the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000, the Telecommunications (Data Protection and Privacy) Regulations 1999 and the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000.

Business Grants

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the grants and other help that she administers that are available to industrial and commercial businesses located in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* Pendle. [55428]

Alan Johnson: DTI does not administer any grants or funding for businesses in Scotland or Wales with the exception of the Coal Operating Scheme. Other grants and funding are covered by the relevant devolved Administrations.

Grants and business support services for small companies can be accessed via the local business link which is administered by the Small Business Service. The Small Business Service itself covers the whole UK but in Scotland and Wales the arrangements for business support delivery are again a matter for the devolved Administrations.

In addition, small and medium sized enterprises in Pendle can apply for the Enterprise Grant Scheme, most of Pendle is covered by transitional Objective 2 of the European Structural Funds until 2005, and the North West Development Agency aims to promote business development in the region.

The DTI publication 'Financing your Business' describes the various types of business finance available and lists sources of further information.

Postal Deliveries

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many derogations there are for addresses in *(a)* Aberdeenshire and *(b)* Banffshire where Royal Mail are not obliged to provide a delivery service direct to the door; and if she will make a statement. [55164]

Mr. Alexander *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) on 25 February 2002, *Official Report*, columns 847–48W.

Since I gave that answer Postcomm issued a third interim Direction (which is still in force) on 26 March 2002 and I am placing a copy of that Direction in the Libraries of the House.

CASIM Project

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made in the assessment and location of the CASIM project. [55482]

Ms Hewitt: Peer review assessments of both elements of the project, CASIM 4GLS and CASIM SIRIUS were considered by the Director General of Research Councils and the Research Councils' chief executives at a meeting on 16 April 2002. It was agreed that 4GLS should proceed to the next stage of the Office of Government Commerce Gateway review process. In the case of SIRIUS it was recommended that further discussions between the Office of Science and Technology and the Department of Health, the two main prospective funders, should take place before any decision was taken on project viability or location.

Edmonton B Power Station

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she will decide on the development of the Edmonton B power station. [55349]

Mr. Wilson: A decision will be announced shortly.

Unfair Trading

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many complaints have been received by the Competition Commission in respect of unfair trading in each year since its formation. [55812]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Complaints of unfair trading are received by the Office of Fair Trading. Relevant statistics can be found in the OFT's annual report, a copy of which is available in the Libraries of the House.

Electricity Regulation

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she intends to update the electricity safety, quality and continuity regulations; and if she will make a statement. [56139]

Mr. Wilson: The proposed Electricity Safety, Quality and Continuity Regulations will replace the existing Electricity Supply Regulations 1988 (as amended). The main objective of the proposed Regulations is to improve safety standards in the new electricity market while preserving important public safety, power quality and supply continuity requirements in the existing Regulations. The draft Regulations will be finalised shortly following the public consultation exercise carried out last year and further discussions with interested parties since then. Allowing time for the approval process and publication of detailed Guidance Notes 12 weeks in advance of the introduction of regulations in accordance with Government guidelines, it is anticipated the new regulations will commence in November 2002.

In addition to the Guidance Notes, the Government's response to the comments received during the public consultation exercise will be published in due course.

Energy Review

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry as a result of the recent energy review, what discussions she is having with energy providers to ensure that account is taken of local security of supply. [55617]

Mr. Wilson: I have requested a study into the resilience of the electricity supply networks in an emergency, in order to obtain reassurance that we have the best possible systems in place to avoid or minimise supply failure, together with examples of good practice in emergency preparedness. Our consultants, British Power International (BPI), visited all the electricity transmission and distribution licence-holding companies in mainland Britain during March, and will be reporting shortly.

DTI's Engineering Inspectorate has been dealing with a small number of cases in which consumers in rural areas are complaining about frequent interruptions to their electricity supply, and Ofgem has taken important steps to strengthen the incentives on distribution companies to provide a good quality of service to consumers. From 1 April 2002 a new Guaranteed Standard of Performance was introduced which will mean that consumers that suffer more than three interruptions of more than three hours duration over the course of the year will receive a compensation payment of £50. This protection is directly aimed at 'worst-served' consumers. Ofgem has also introduced an incentive scheme for distribution companies that focuses on key areas quality of service—the number of interruptions to supply, the duration of interruptions to supply and the quality of telephone response provided by distribution companies. Taken together these mechanisms provide significant additional protection to consumers in respect of the quality of service they receive from distribution companies.

The introduction of widespread distributed generation in electricity networks will certainly raise some technical issues not previously faced by electricity distributors. Close monitoring of developments in embedded generation is necessary by all those involved to ensure the emerging security of supply issues are identified and managed. Following on from the report of the joint DTI-Ofgem Embedded Generation Working Group (EGWG) in June 2001 www.dti.gov.uk/energy/egwg/index.htm, the Government has recently established a Co-ordinating Group, jointly led by the DTI and Ofgem, to monitor the implementation of the EGWG recommendations and to advise Ministers of potential problems.

PRIME MINISTER

Royal Family

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the agreement in force between the Government and the Royal Family on the payment of death duties by members of the Royal Family. [55572]

The Prime Minister: The inheritance tax arrangements are set out in paragraphs 20 to 23 of the Memorandum of Understanding in the Royal Trustees report (HC 464) published on 11 February 1993.

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will take steps to ensure the will of the Her late Majesty the Queen Mother is published. [55826]

The Prime Minister: In line with a long standing convention for dealing with the wills of senior members of the Royal Family, an order has been made by the High Court for the sealing up of the will of the late Queen Mother, which means that the will cannot be inspected or published. Therefore, I do not intend to take any steps to ensure publication of the will.

European Commission

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his policy towards the direct election of the President of the European Commission. [55692]

The Prime Minister: It is not our policy.

Annual Government Report

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Prime Minister if he will reconsider publishing an annual Government report. [56277]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 12 July 2001, *Official Report*, column 638W.

Young Offenders

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Prime Minister if the work of Professor Michael Barber contributed to his recently announced initiative to reduce child benefit payments to the mothers of persistent young offenders; and if he will make a statement. [56006]

The Prime Minister: No. This is one of a range of proposals which the responsible Departments are looking at.

Civil Servants

Mrs. May: To ask the Prime Minister how many Ministers have concluded contractual agreements with civil servants which include a clause restricting the ability of parties to the agreement to make public statements since 1 May 1997. [55923]

The Prime Minister: All civil servants are employed under terms and conditions set out in the Civil Service Management Code. Responsibility for personnel matters within individual Departments is delegated by the Minister to the Permanent Head of the Department.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Criminal Justice

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many construction projects are planned for use of agencies or organisations associated with the criminal justice system; for each project, what his estimate is of *(a)* completion date and *(b)* total cost to completion; what the involvement of the private sector is;

and what provision has been made for the display of flags, emblems and other symbols on the exterior and interior of buildings within each project. [34127]

Mr. Browne: I am sorry for the delay in answering.

Two construction projects are planned for the use of the Juvenile Justice Board (scheduled to become the Youth Justice Agency with effect from April 2003). The projects relate to the rationalisation of the Juvenile Justice Estate and were announced in Parliament by the then Northern Ireland Minister of State, Adam Ingram on 29 November 2000.

The first project, phase 1, involves upgrading security and refurbishing the accommodation on the existing Rathgael site in Bangor, to facilitate the closure of Lisnevin. The construction project is scheduled to be completed by autumn 2002. The contract was awarded as a design and build project at a tender cost of £2.8 million. Private sector involvement in phase 1 relates to the appointment of a design team and main building contractor. No provision has been made for the display of flags, emblems and other symbols on the exterior and interior of buildings within this project.

The second project, phase 2, is the provision of a new, purpose designed centre, also to be located on land at Rathgael. When fully commissioned, the new centre will replace the phase 1 facility. Planning the phase 2 project is at a very early stage. It is estimated to take about four to five years to complete the project. It is not possible to give an accurate estimated cost, but based on similar facilities, it is anticipated that the cost should be in the region of £12 million to £15 million. In keeping with Government policy, we will be examining various procurement methods including PFI/PPP. It is intended to utilise various expertise from the private sector to establish the most cost-effective method of procuring this facility. The extent of their involvement will become clearer once the project has been properly scoped and all the issues addressed as part of the outline business case.

As in phase 1, no provision has been made for the display of flags, emblems and other symbols on the exterior and interior of buildings within this project.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service has three construction projects planned at present, a new inmates kitchen at HMP Maghaberry, at a cost of £1.9 million which will be completed in October 2003. New programmes village at HMP Magilligan at a cost of £1 million which will be completed in December 2002 and a new visitors reception at HM YOC Hydebank at a cost of £800,000 which is due for completion in January 2003.

A private sector contractor will be involved in the design and construction of the inmates kitchen at HMP Maghaberry. The remaining projects will involve the private sector in the construction phase only. No provision has been made for the display of flags, emblems, and other symbols on the exterior or interior of the buildings.

The Northern Ireland Court Service is at the very early stage of plans to build new courthouses in Lisburn and North Down with anticipated completion dates of 2005 and 2006 respectively. Public private partnership is the preferred funding route and, in this event, the only costs incurred at completion would be consultancy from the private sector estimated at £500,000. All construction work will be carried out by the private sector. Construction work for a courthouse in Dungannon is already under way and is due for completion in November this year, at an approximate cost of £11 million. This is not a public private partnership project. Provision for the display of flags, emblems or other symbols at these venues will be in accordance with Government policy as articulated in the Criminal Justice Review Implementation Plan and the Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill. The practical steps to give effect to this policy would be taken at the appropriate stage in the construction project.

The Northern Ireland Office has entered into an agreement with the Northern Ireland Bar to rent a new headquarters building for the Department of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP). The building is currently being constructed by Bar Library Services Ltd. and is due to be completed by 31 December 2002.

As part of the Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland the DPP will be undertaking an exercise to consider the development of offices outside Belfast. The extent and number of such have not yet been identified.

The Government's policy on the display of flags at Government buildings is set out in the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000. The display of emblems and other symbols is in accordance with the Belfast Agreement which acknowledged the sensitivity of the use of symbols for public purposes, and the need to ensure that such symbols are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division.

De Chastelain Process

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the de Chastelain process is responsible for monitoring terrorists groups' acquisitions of new weapons. [54825]

Jane Kennedy: No. General de Chastelain's remit is to facilitate the decommissioning of all paramilitary weapons as set out in August 1997 in the Agreement between this Government and the Government of the Republic of Ireland.

Castlereagh Police Station

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the report into the break-in at Castlereagh Police Station on 17 March will be completed. [55016]

Jane Kennedy: Sir John Chilcot is currently conducting his review into the national security implications of the break-in at Castlereagh police station which is running in parallel with the criminal investigation. Both the review and the investigation must be allowed to take their course and I have not set a deadline for Sir John to complete his work.

Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) whether the Belfast International Airport Constabulary will be brought within the remit of the new Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice; [55829]

(2) what progress has been made since 19 April to produce a comprehensive list of organisations to come within the remit of the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice. [55722]

Mr. Browne: During the passage of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill through the House of Commons, I undertook to review the list of organisations within the remit of the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice. I have written to initiate consultations with 19 organisations and I am awaiting final responses from a number of these. It is important that there is proper consultation with these organisations before final decisions are taken. As part of the consultation process, and to assist in identifying functions within these organisations which it might be appropriate to bring within the inspectorate's remit, a number of useful exploratory meetings have taken place. The Belfast International Airport Authority is one of the bodies with whom consultations are progressing.

Departmental Spending

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list for 1997–98 and each subsequent financial year the amount spent by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies in respect of hotel and other similar privately-provided accommodation (i) in the UK and (ii) abroad for (A) Ministers, (B) staff and (C) other persons; if he will list the proportion of this cost incurred in respect of (x) food and (y) alcohol in each case; and if he will list the average cost per hotel room or similar unit of accommodation provided in each case. [34378]

Dr. John Reid: The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list for 1997–98 and for each subsequent financial year, including the current year to date, the amount spent by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on (i) food and (ii) alcohol, indicating how much was spent on guests, and how much in respect of (A) Ministers and (B) staff, broken down to show how much was provided directly by his Department and how much reclaimed. [34453]

Dr. John Reid: The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Pensions

42. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what the annual financial effect was on the Church of England's pension arrangements of the removal of the payable tax credit was in the last 12 months. [54003]

Mr. Bell: The removal of the tax credit has reduced the Church Commissioners' investment returns and cut the amount of money available to support the Church by £7 million p.a. It has also increased the cost of pension contributions over the last 12 months by £3 million. Both these sums have had to be raised by dioceses and parishes from their congregations.

Church Repairs

44. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what the cost was to the Church Commissioners of church repairs in the last financial year. [54005]

Mr. Bell: The cost of church repairs is borne by the individual church congregations and figures are not held centrally. However, as the House will already know from previous answers, following a survey the estimated cost of repairs to and maintenance of Anglican Churches in 1999 was £120 million. No more recent survey has been undertaken.

These figures do not include the huge hidden subsidy of voluntary support within parishes or of the expert guidance within the faculty jurisdiction system.

The Commissioners have some small liabilities for the chancels of around 800 parish churches. In 2000, this cost almost £700,000.

Franks Allotments, Walcote

45. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the proposal by the Diocese of Leicester to sell the Franks allotments in Walcote. [54006]

Mr. Bell: No, Sir. The land in question belongs to the Leicester Diocesan Board of Education and the Church Commissioners have no connection with any proposals to sell it.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Accommodation Centres

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what legislation is required to permit the construction of the proposed asylum accommodation centres; what powers his Department has to prepare for their construction before such legislation has received Royal Assent; and if he will make a statement. [35641]

Angela Eagle: I am sorry the hon. Member has not received an earlier reply, this was due to an administrative error.

There are existing powers in part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 which permit the Home Secretary to acquire property for the purposes of providing accommodation for destitute asylum seekers and their dependants.

New powers in relation to accommodation centres are in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill which was published on 12 April 2002.

Asylum and Immigration Legislation

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish a bill on asylum and immigration; and if he will make a statement. [43238]

Angela Eagle: I am very sorry for the delay in replying to my hon. Friend; this was due to an administrative error. The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill was published on 12 April 2002.

Asylum Seekers

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is planned that monetary support for asylum seekers through the ARC card system will be provided in cash only; and if he will make a statement. [44442]

Angela Eagle: All financial support for asylum seekers is being provided in cash using existing systems. Later in the year it is envisaged that asylum seekers will use their Application Registration Care (ARC)—which will provide a useful way of verifying their identity—to access their financial support which will be provided in cash.

Mr. W. R. Glenie

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will instruct the Immigration Office to return the passport belonging to Mr. W. R. Glenie of Kingsbridge, Devon, lodged on 14 December 2001, by 21 March; and if he will make a statement on the reasons for the delay in processing it. [43836]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 18 March 2002]:* I am very sorry for the delay in replying to the hon. Member this was due to an administrative error. Mr. Glenie's documents were returned to him on 18 March 2002 following completion of his fiancée's application for leave to remain.

Unpaid Advisers

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the names of the unpaid advisers appointed by him and his predecessor since June 1997, stating in each case *(a)* the date of their appointment, *(b)* the duration of their appointment and *(c)* the project or projects on which they have been engaged. [43382]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 25 March 2002]:* Since the period June 1997, the Home Office has not appointed any unpaid advisers in line with the requirements of paragraph 51 of the Ministerial Code.

For details of unpaid appointments made by the Home Office to task forces, review groups and other ad hoc advisory groups, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. friend for Shipley (Christopher Leslie) on 16 November 2001, *Official Report,* column 958W.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what new initiatives his Department has taken in 2001–02 to assist in achieving its public service agreement targets. [47411]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* Information about progress on Public Service Agreement targets will be published in the Home Office's 2002 Departmental Report.

UK Citizenship

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to revoke the UK citizenship of a person whose name has been communicated to him; and if he will make a statement. [53083]

Mr. Blunkett: There are no present plans to deprive the person in question of British citizenship, but we will keep this under review.

Robert Brown

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps are being taken to initiate the rehabilitation of Robert Brown. [53755]

Beverley Hughes: Mr. Brown has been offered a range of offending behaviour work and non offence-related courses, including for example, anger management, reasoning and rehabilitation and a pre-release course. He has declined most of these but this should not inhibit him from progressing towards his release. In addition, he has been offered the opportunity for escorted town visits to aid his reintegration into the community but has declined to participate. He has also been encouraged to engage in the sentence planning process and has been assisted to address his use of drugs in prison successfully. His suitability for transfer to a resettlement regime in an open prison will shortly be considered by the parole board.

Inter-country Adoption

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the countries from which young children up to the age of five years were allowed entry into the UK for legal adoption in the last 12 months. [53869]

Angela Eagle: Information on the number of children admitted to the United Kingdom from overseas countries for adoption is not currently available.

The information that is available covers the number of children up to the age of five years given indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom (UK) on the basis of adoption. This number excludes those children given limited leave to remain and who are subsequently adopted through the UK courts, becoming British citizens on the date that the final adoption order is made.

A total of around 20 adopted children up to the age of five were given indefinite leave to remain in 2000, the latest information available. The nationalities of the children were:

Chile
China
Guatemala
India
Jamaica
Lebanon
Nigeria
Pakistan
St. Lucia
Trinidad and Tobago
Ukraine
United States of America
Vietnam
Zimbabwe.

We aim to publish 2001 data in July/August 2002.

National Asylum Support Service

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many supported asylum seekers received a £50 additional single payment from the National Asylum Support Service under regulation 11(1) of the Asylum Support Regulations 2000 in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02; and what the total amount paid out in the form of such payments by NASS is since 3 April 2000. [54103]

Angela Eagle: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) does not keep central statistics in respect of the number and total value of single additional payments it makes to supported asylum seekers.

Payment of a single additional payment (SAP) is achieved by increasing one of the regular weekly subsistence payments by the required £50. The value of all regular weekly payments is stored within each individual's computer record, together with associated explanation. NASS can, therefore, confirm the payment of a SAP to an individual and could ultimately obtain the requested statistics, but the cost in doing so would be disproportionate.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will answer the letter from the hon. Member for Torbay of 9 January concerning Hazir Ymeri. [54241]

Angela Eagle: My right hon. and noble Friend Lord Rooker wrote to the hon. Member on 8 May 2002. I apologise for the delay.

MI5

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons sought to obtain agreement from the Director General of MI5 to allow them to begin paid employment outside the service in each year from 1 May 1997. [54670]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* Since 1 May 1997 three people of Director grade or above sought the Director General's agreement before accepting employment, or establishing or engaging in consultancies, within two years of retirement or resignation. In each case the applications were approved unconditionally.

Any member of staff, irrespective of grade is required to seek approval from the Director of Establishments for the Service before taking up employment with a business or organisation with which they have had direct or indirect dealings within the last two years of service. No central record is kept of such requests or authorisations.

Illegal Meat Imports

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with other Government Departments on the *(a)* level of illegal meat imports to the UK and *(b)* effectiveness of port controls and enforcement measures to tackle illegal meat imports in respect of his responsibilities for border control and immigration. [19545]

Angela Eagle: I am extremely sorry for the delay in replying to the hon. Member. This was due to an administrative error.

Home Office Ministers regularly have discussions with ministerial colleagues and officials in many parts of Government. In line with the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information details of such confidential discussions are not normally disclosed.

Department officials have met colleagues in other Government Departments to assist in co-ordinating action across Government to ensure that rules on imports of all products are enforced effectively. The Immigration Service has instructed its officers at ports of arrival to be vigilant and where appropriate, to refuse entry to the United Kingdom to those offenders identified as being engaged in the illegal importation of meat and meat products.

Building Projects

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the building projects under construction; and what coolant will be used for the building services water chilling system for such projects. [52047]

Angela Eagle: A list covering the projects in construction for the Home Office, including Prison Service, but excluding maintenance works and non-departmental public bodies has been placed in the Library. Most of the projects listed, do not involve the use of cooling systems. Records are not held centrally of the type of cooling systems or the coolants used and to provide this information would be at disproportionate cost. Where coolants are to be used on non-prison projects, these are currently planned to be either R407(a), R407(c) or R134(a) although these could be subject to change in the course of the works.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Functions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the functions of his Department that have been *(a)* market tested and *(b)* outsourced in each of the last five years, specifying the (i) money saving and (ii) percentage saving in each case. [42994]

Mr. Wills: The Lord Chancellor's Department has not market-tested any functions over the last five years. It has outsourced the following functions during this period:

December 1997: ARAMIS, a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract for the provision of accounting, financial, payroll and Management Information Services—a money saving of £122.41 million over 9 years three months at 1998 prices;

July 1999: Probate Records Centre, a PFI contract for the design, build, financing and operation of central probate records store for England and Wales—a money saving of £16.4 million over 25 years at 1999 prices;

September 2001: Pensions administration—a money saving of £260,759 over three years at today's prices.

The answer does not provide money saving and percentage saving because the combination of the two would allow contractual payments to contractors to be

identified. This information is commercially confidential and is withheld under exemption 13 of the Code of Practice On Access to Government Information.

WORK AND PENSIONS

PCS Union Strike

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if it is his policy that participation of staff in the PCS Union strike action be taken into account in future decisions on promotion. [30431]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: No.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the publications issued by his Department in each of the last four years; and what the *(a)* circulation, *(b)* cost and *(c)* purpose of each was. [34189]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: To keep people aware of their rights, responsibilities and eligibility for benefit the Department issues many hundreds of publications each year. To list each title, its circulation, cost and purpose would be at disproportionate cost.

Housing Payment Scheme

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what the budget for the discretionary housing payment scheme is broken down by local authority; [41487]

(2) what the budget was for the exceptional hardship payment scheme in *(a)* cash and *(b)* real terms since 1997, broken down by local authority; [41488]

(3) what the reasons were for changing from the exceptional hardship payment scheme to the discretionary housing payment scheme; and how the change was announced. [41489]

Malcolm Wicks: From 2 July 2001 we replaced the exceptional hardship and exceptional circumstances schemes with improved arrangements that are broader in scope than the old regulatory provisions. Subject to certain conditions, local authorities are now able to give additional payments to any person whose housing benefit or council tax benefit is restricted where they are satisfied the person is in need of further financial assistance with housing costs or council tax liability. Unlike the old scheme there are no prescribed definitions of either "exceptional hardship" or "exceptional circumstances". The new measures give local authorities and incentive to direct funds to helping those people most in need.

The introduction of the discretionary housing payments scheme was announced in the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) on 13 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 638W. Implementation of the scheme was deferred until July 2001 in response to representations from local authorities.

The discretionary housing payments scheme budget for 2002–03 by local authority is in Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Circular A/2002, a copy of which is available in the Library.

The available details of the budget by local authority for the exceptional hardship scheme since 1997 (and for the discretionary housing payments scheme between July 2001 and March 2002) in both cash and real terms have been placed in the Library.

E-business

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the percentage of business transactions that are capable of being carried out electronically by his Department. [43360]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 14 March 2002]:* Currently our customers can easily access electronic information on all our benefits and services via the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) website or through the life episodes on UKonline. People looking for work can access the worktrain website and Job Bank to interactively search for job opportunities—this is one of the most used Government sites.

In addition, almost 70 of our benefits have claim forms available on the internet which customers can access, fill out, print out and submit back to us. Electronic payments can also be made directly into customers' bank accounts.

But, in line with the cross-Government target of electronically e-enabling all services by 2005, and also rising trends in our customer base to use interactive media, we are undertaking a programme of radical change to our IT systems which will allow full e-enablement.

Criminal Damage

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the cost has been of criminal damage to his Department's buildings in each of the last four years. [44848]

Malcolm Wicks: Under the terms of the Prime contract, responsibility for meeting the costs of repairing damage to former DSS buildings falls to Trillium. Accordingly, no central records are kept and this information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Public Bodies

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what have been the total salary costs of each of the non-departmental public bodies for which he is responsible in each of the last five years. [50300]

Mr. McCartney: The information requested is not available for the period before April 2000. Such information that is available is in the following table. The costs given in the table are the total fees paid to members of each of the non-departmental bodies for the year stated.

The amount paid out in fees is mainly dependant upon the number of referrals made by the Department to the three advisory councils. Increased activity required of the advisory councils in 2001–02 has therefore resulted in an overall increase in the amount of fees paid.

Fees for non-departmental public bodies

	2000–01			2001–02		
	Number of members claiming fees	*Number of claims for fees*	*Total amount of fees paid (£)*	*Number of members claiming fees*	*Number of claims for fees*	*Total amount of fees paid (£)*
Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board	21	119	27,248.60	20	130	35,192.33
Industrial Injuries Advisory Council	15	77	8,097.16	15	85	9,110.72
Pensions Compensation Board	2	4	684.00	2	6	1,056.00
Social Security Advisory Committee	13	96	23,067.24	16	113	29,283.27
Total	51	296	59,097.00	53	334	74,642.32

Mr. W. J. Baber

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Leominster dated 27 February on behalf of Mr. W. J. Baber concerning non-payment of incapacity benefit in the first three days of illness. [50630]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I replied to the hon. Member on 18 April.

Autism

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what training employment advisers are given in respect of the needs of people with autistic spectrum disorders who are seeking work. [51205]

Maria Eagle: The administration of Jobcentre Plus is a matter for the chief executive, Leigh Lewis. I have asked him to reply to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Dr. Stephen Ladyman, dated 13 May 2002:

As Jobcentre Plus is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning the training employment advisers are given in respect of the needs of people with autistic spectrum disorders who are seeking work.

Disability awareness open learning materials are available to all advisers, and are an important pre-requisite for attendance on all disability training courses. The open learning materials contain information provided by the National Autistic Society and its associated 'Prospects' employment programme to support people with Asperger syndrome. The topics covered are;

What is autism?

What causes autism?

What is Asperger syndrome?

What causes Asperger syndrome?

Tips for advisers

Useful techniques for interviewing

Potential benefits of employing people with autism/Aspergers syndrome

Difficulties that may occur in the work place

Employment Support

Where to go for more help

In addition, advisers have access to a Special Needs External Organisations Directory which includes information on autism and Asperger syndrome.

I hope this is helpful.

Long-stay Patient Benefit

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how many people in the United Kingdom are in receipt of long-stay patients' benefit; [51541]

(2) how many people in the United Kingdom are in receipt of long- stay patient benefit. [51544]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows:

As at 30 September 2001 there were 10,000 retirement pensioners whose pension had been reduced because they had been in hospital for more than 52 weeks.

As at 30 November 2001 there were 13,000 incapacity benefit and severe disablement allowance recipients whose benefit was reduced due to them being in hospital for more than 52 weeks.

As at 30 November 2001 there were 3,000 income support recipients who had their benefit reduced due to being in hospital for more than 52 weeks.

The hospital downrating rules prevents double provision from public funds as the publicly funded NHS maintains people while they stay in hospital as well as providing free treatment. Social security maintenance benefits are also paid from state funds. They are therefore not paid in full indefinitely where a person is in a NHS hospital and having their day to day living expenses met through the NHS.

The double provision principle is a key cornerstone of the system of national insurance introduced over 50 years ago.

Recruitment

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many net additional staff his Department has recruited in each month since June 2001 at *(a)* executive officer level and *(b)* administrative level. [52431]

Maria Eagle: Data on staffing levels in the civil service are collected by the Cabinet Office twice yearly, with figures being reported as at 1 April and 1 October. Headline figures are published under National Statistics guidelines via a press notice. Those for October 2001 were published on 21 February 2002 and are available in the Library. Figures are not collected centrally on a month to month basis.

Digital Equipment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many digital radios are owned by his Department for use in departmental buildings from which Ministers work; and what the *(a)* cost and *(b)* date of purchase of each radio was. [52859]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* None.

Access to Work Scheme

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many applications have been received monthly since the creation of Access to Work; and what proportion of those applications have been *(a)* accepted and *(b)* rejected broken down by grounds for rejection. [53042]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: From the start of the Access to Work programme in June 1994 to 31 March 2001, 54,481 applications have been supported, an average of 262 new applications a month. Eligibility is discussed prior to any application being made, so applications are made only by those eligible for help through Access to Work.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

Electoral Process (Participation)

39. **Martin Linton:** To ask the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, if he will ask the Electoral Commission to report on measures to increase participation in elections following the turnout in the local elections. [54000]

Mr. Beith: In accordance with its statutory obligations, the Electoral Commission will be evaluating the pilot schemes implemented by 30 local authorities across England at the May 2002 local elections. These pilot schemes were aimed at increasing turnout and modernising the electoral process. The Commission will submit its evaluation reports to the Secretary of State for the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions by 2 August, and the reports will be published.

Misleading Election Material

40. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, what assessment the Electoral Commission has made of the effect on turnout of the distribution of deliberately wrong information in election material. [54001]

Mr. Beith: I understand from the Chairman that the Commission has made no assessment of the effect on turnout of the distribution of deliberately wrong information in election material. The publication of false statements of fact in relation to a candidate may amount to an illegal practice under section 106 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 and should be reported to the police.

Local Elections (Administration)

41. **Simon Hughes:** To ask the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission when the Electoral Commission will assess the operations of the local elections of 2 May; and if he will make a statement. [54002]

Mr. Beith: The commission has a statutory duty to report on the conduct of a range of elections, including Parliamentary general elections, European Parliament elections, and elections to the Scottish Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly and National Assembly for Wales. There is no statutory obligation for the commission to report on the operation of local elections, but the commission will be evaluating the electoral pilot schemes held in 30 local authority areas in May 2002. The commission's evaluation is expected to be published in August 2002.

Public Bodies (Scrutiny)

43. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what extra resources the commission will provide to enable the National Audit Office to carry out more examinations of executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [54004]

Mr. Alan Williams: Following the commission's consideration in March of the National Audit Office's Estimate for 2002–03, I wrote the Comptroller and Auditor General asking him how the NAO, through further Value for Money Studies (on top of the 50 or so a year at present), could expand the scope of scrutiny—and thus the perceived risk of scrutiny—among accountable bodies, in particular executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies. The commission will consider any proposals in this direction from the Comptroller and Auditor General when they review the National Audit Office's Corporate Plan for 2003 to 2006 in the summer.

Proportional Representation (Scotland)

John Robertson: To ask the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, what recent discussions the Commission has had with the Scottish Executive regarding proportional representation in Scotland. [53997]

Mr. Beith: I understand from the Chairman of the Commission that Commissioners and staff meet regularly with members and staff of the Scottish Executive. However, no discussions regarding proportional representation have taken place with the Scottish Executive. The Commission has no statutory responsibilities in respect of local elections in Scotland and so does not intend to comment on the Executive's current consultation exercise about the possible extension of proportional representation to local government elections.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Pre-school Funding

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, pursuant to the answer of 8 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 711W, on pre-school funding, when the Ofsted and QCA files referred to will be placed in the Library. [39422]

Margaret Hodge: Following further investigation into the matter with staff operating in the area at the time, we have established that the decision was reached on the basis of verbal discussions between the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority and the Department for Education and Employment, in 1997. No records of those discussions have been traced.

Given that the guidelines have been in place for a significant time I will keep the situation under review.

Criminal Damage

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the cost has been of criminal damage to her Department's buildings in each of the last four years. [44834]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The cost of criminal damages against the Department's buildings where the police were involved was approximately £5,000 in 2001. During the previous three years no costs were incurred.

Further Education Colleges

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will make a statement on the effectiveness of the outcomes of imposing efficiency targets on further education colleges since 1997. [52565]

Margaret Hodge: The Government has sought to improve the efficiency of further education since 1997 and colleges have delivered real improvements in value for money. Since 1996–97 the participation funding for each full-time equivalent (FTE) student has remained constant in real terms, while total funding for each FTE student has increased by 12 per cent. in real terms (reflecting the additional funds targeted on much needed capital developments, standards and teachers pay). Over the same period colleges have widened participation among learners, broadened programmes of study for 16–19- year-olds and increased basic skills provision. Qualification success rates for long (24 weeks or over) qualifications have increased from 51 per cent. in 1996–97 to 56 per cent. in 1999–2000 (the latest year available). When shorter courses are also taken into account, qualification success rates have increased from 56 per cent. in 1996–97 to 60 per cent. in 1999–2000. The Government recognises that investment is important for raising standards further and will set out future funding plans for colleges as part of the Spending Review outcome.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what requirements have been *(a)* placed on and *(b)* removed from further education and sixth form colleges in the last year for which information is available. [54436]

Margaret Hodge: The following major requirements were placed upon further education colleges and sixth from colleges in England during the financial year 2001–02.

A requirement for all new teachers entering further education from 1 September 2001 to hold, or acquire within two to four years, an FE teaching qualification or schools equivalent.

Colleges have been made subject to inspection by Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate by virtue of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

A requirement for colleges to follow replacement Instrument and Articles of Government for all colleges in the FE sector effective from 1 April 2001.

The requirement to meet the terms of the previous Instrument and Articles of Government was removed.

In addition, the Learning and Skills Council is responsible for funding further education and sixth form colleges, and also places requirements on colleges. I have therefore asked the chief executive of the LSC, John Harwood, to write to you directly on this matter.

Work-based Learning

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment she has made of whether there are sufficient resources in the Standards Fund for 2002–03 to improve the provider infrastructure for work-based learning. [53097]

Margaret Hodge: We have increased standards funding from £160 million in 2001–02 to £185 million in 2002–03. We have also ensured that work-based learning providers have access to the new Learning and Skills Standards Fund from April 2002. Local LSCs will allocate standards funding to providers based on individual need and national and local priorities and targets. An evaluation of the impact of the new Fund's operation, including provision for work-based learning, is planned to start in the Autumn of 2002.

Teachers' Salaries

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will award additional resources to the Learning and Skills Council to cover salary increases for *(a)* sixth form staff and *(b)* general FE staff agreed as part of their central negotiation structure. [53121]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* The investments we are making via the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to support both school sixth forms and further education colleges should ensure that staff receive appropriate salary increases this year. The real terms guarantee (RTG) for schools with sixth forms means that their funding will be protected at least at 2000–01 levels, providing pupil numbers are maintained. Indeed in 2002–03 around two thirds of sixth forms will benefit with higher funding from the LSC's formula funding and the remaining third will be funded at their RTG level.

We are also investing significant funding in the FE sector. In 2001–02, £527 million extra was planned for FE—a 12 per cent. real terms increase, with a further 3 per cent. increase this year. By 2003–04, annual funding for FE will have increased by £1.4 billion compared with 1997–98, a real terms increase of 26 per cent. It is for each college to agree annual pay rises and conditions of employment with its staff in the context of the overall resources available to them. Within the total funds for FE, the Teaching Pay Initiative (TPI) budget is £311 million over the period 2001–04. This is to reward excellent teaching and is over and above any general pay rise.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will take steps to ensure parity of pay scales between teachers working in further education and teachers working in schools. [54625]

Margaret Hodge: Teachers in maintained schools are subject to national school teachers' pay and conditions. Further education sector colleges are run by independent corporations established under the Further Education and Higher Education Act 1992 and there is no national pay structure in place. Colleges are free to establish pay scales that meet their needs and can be agreed with their staff. This Government have acknowledged the historic funding gap between schools and FE and we have pledged to bring up levels of funding and ensure upward convergence over time. The Teaching Pay Initiative (TPI) budget is £311 million over the period 2001–04. This is to reward excellent teaching and is over and above any general pay rise. The additional investment we are making in the FE sector should help support the pay aspirations of their staff.

Higher Education

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what recent improvements the Government have made to buildings and teaching facilities in higher education. [53629]

Margaret Hodge: In 1999–2000 the Government made available £35 million in England for higher education capital funding. In the succeeding years, the amounts made available were £50 million, £100 million, £145 million, and in 2003–04 £194 million, to support the teaching infrastructure, modernise and improve the estates and build new medical schools. Of this, £56 million over two years to 2003–04 is to help institutions meet the cost of the statutory changes relating to the access parts of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001.

To this, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) adds funding which it finds from its own resources to promote capital investment, often with contributions from others. For example, between 1998–99 and 2002–03 the HEFCE Poor Estates Initiative has invested £291 million in the sector, supporting 149 projects at 80 institutions with a total value of £950 million.

Alongside this, the Government, in partnership with the Wellcome Trust, have plans to invest some £1.75 billion in research infrastructure in universities and elsewhere over the four years to 2003–04.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much more investment has been put into higher education in the current spending review than in the previous year. [53630]

Margaret Hodge: Since 1998, the total additional funding for institutions is £1.7 billion, an increase of 37 per cent. in cash terms or 18 per cent. in real terms over the six years to 2003–04. Publicly planned funding for higher education in England in 2001–02 is £396 million more than in 2000–01, so that for the first time in over a decade funding per student will rise in real terms, and further expansion of student places will be fully funded in the following two years. In addition the sector will benefit from £1 billion joint Welcome Trust and Government investment in research and technology infrastructure between 2002 and 2004, plus further funding of £250 million over the three years to 2003–04 through the Office of Science and Technology for priority research in areas such as e-science and genomics.

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what her Department's definition is of higher education in the context of her Department's target for 50 per cent. of all 18 to 30-year-olds to experience higher education by 2010; and if she will make a statement. [55060]

Margaret Hodge: The Government are committed to increasing and widening participation in higher education so that more young people benefit from the opportunities that higher education brings in terms of employability, earnings and quality of life. At the same time, we want to ensure that we meet the UK's needs for a highly skilled, competitive work force.

We measure participation in higher education by means of the Initial Entry Rate (IER). The IER includes all courses of one year or more, above A-level and its equivalents, which lead to a qualification awarded by higher education institutions or widely recognised national awarding bodies (eg. the Institute of Management).

We are also currently seeking advice from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority regarding a very small number of professional qualifications of less than one year's duration, for example in nursing, law, business and management. The QCA will advise us whether the nature and content of these qualifications could appropriately be classified as being of higher education standard.

Child Care

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many children's places there were in *(a)* Southwark, *(b)* London and *(c)* England in (i) May 1997, (ii) May 2001 and (iii) April 2002; and if she will make a statement. [52033]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The information is not available in the form requested. The available information, which was provided by local authorities, is shown in the table.

Latest figures on day care facilities in England were published by my Department in the Statistical Bulletin "Children's Day Care facilities at 31 March 2001 (08/01)" in October 2001, a copy of which is available from the Library. An electronic copy of this publication is also available on my Department's website (www.dfes.gov.uk/statistics).

From 1998 to 2001 Southwark has received £837,370 of child care and European Social Fund supported grant funding. In 2001–02 £240,765 of European Social Fund money and £2,961,854 of child care funding was available for Southwark's early years development. Of this £2,301,424 is funding from the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative (NNI), which hopes to create 45,000 child care places in Neighbourhood Nursery Centres in disadvantaged areas over the period 2001–04. In 2002–03 Southwark will receive £754,430 of child care and European Social Fund supported grant funding.

Day care places for children under 8 in 1997 and 2001—Southwark, London and England (position at March 31 each year)

	Day nurseries		Childminders		Playgroups		Out of school clubs		Holiday schemes[1]	
	1997	2001	1997	2001	1997	2001	1997	2001	1997	2001
Southwark	1,650	1,906	1,048	1,081	1,111	904	2,077	3,113	2,305	4,940
Greater London	27,650	44,834	47,562	38,504	41,534	31,111	13,731	32,207	45,574	140,261
Inner London[2]	15,052	22,751	13,106	10,639	9,899	8,405	8,180	20,422	19,210	63,180
Outer London[2]	12,598	22,083	34,456	27,865	31,635	22,706	5,551	11,785	26,364	77,081
England	193,800	285,100	365,200	304,600	383,700	330,200	78,700	152,800	209,000	598,000

[1] Holiday schemes cannot be directly compared due to changes in instructions given to data providers.
[2] The 2001 definition of inner and outer London is used.

Engineering Qualifications

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what recent representations she has received in respect of new vocational qualifications in engineering; if she will make it her policy to extend funding approval for existing qualifications pending further consultation on the curriculum design of the new qualifications; and if she will make a statement. [53827]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: I have received representations from the National Forum for Engineering in Colleges. I am aware of the importance of existing qualifications to the continued running of Modern Apprenticeships and have consequently asked the Learning and Skills Council to identify which are essential until new accredited qualifications can replace them. The LSC is working closely with relevant sector bodies, including EMTA for engineering, to that end. Once the qualifications are identified and following consultation with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, I will take action to approve them. Outside the Modern Apprenticeship context, approvals will be limited to qualifications accredited by the QCA. Persons over 19 should have no problem in accessing existing courses, as LSC funding for them is not dependent on there being an approved qualification.

Engineering Course

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what assessment she has made of whether the new AVCE engineering course has been introduced as intended; and if she will make a statement on the opportunity the course gives students to achieve grades that will enable them to follow their chosen career paths; [54543]

(2) what action she is taking to ensure that students undertaking the AVCE engineering course will attain grades appropriate to their achievement in their course of study; [54544]

(3) what discussions she has had with the Chief Inspector on the examination of the AVCE course in engineering; [54545]

(4) what action she has taken to ensure high quality assessment of students undertaking the AVCE course; [54546]

(5) what discussions she has had with further education colleges on the AVCE engineering course examinations assessment; [54547]

(6) what action she is taking to ensure that examination boards for the AVCE course in engineering are able to evaluate the course content that students have studied. [54548]

Margaret Hodge: The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is monitoring all new AVCE qualifications, including engineering, as part of its remit to review the performance of the awarding bodies in delivering qualifications. AVCE courses give students suitable opportunities to achieve grades to enable them to follow their chosen career paths, including progression to employment, higher education or further training such as modern apprenticeships.

QCA's work in monitoring the work of awarding bodies includes ensuring that qualifications are suitable for purpose and that students have the opportunity to achieve grades which reflect their achievement.

The Secretary of State has not had discussions with the Chief Inspector on the subject in question. However, Ofsted Inspectors have programme of visits and inspections of schools and colleges to enable them to inspect standards. QCA held a two-day conference for awarding body chief examiners in November 2001.

AVCE qualifications have been designed to ensure that they are fully comparable with GCE A levels. QCA is charged with the task of maintaining standards of assessment and ensuring that it is consistent across all awarding bodies.
QCA and departmental officials have visited FE colleges to discuss the AVCE engineering course assessment.

Awarding bodies provide training and guidance to examiners on assessment. QCA is working with the awarding bodies to ensure that this training and guidance is appropriate and effective and that assessment gives a fair appraisal of students' achievement.

Special Needs

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much was spent in total by local education authorities on transport for special needs pupils in the latest year for which figures are available. [54865]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Provisional figures for 2000–01, the latest year for which figures are available, show that £245.2 million was spent by local education authorities on transport for pupils with special education needs.

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the funding allocations for special educational needs *(a)* in the east midlands and *(b)* in Nottinghamshire are in 2002–03; and what the average is in England. [55416]

Mr. Timms: Local education authorities' budget statements contain information about the notional allocations made to schools for pupils with special educational needs and the funding retained centrally by the authority. The Department is in the process of collecting data relating to the 2002–03 financial year. I shall write to my hon. Friend when the information is to hand.

London Weighting

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans she has to equalise the London weighting allowance for staff working in further education and tertiary colleges. [54595]

Margaret Hodge: General further education colleges and sixth form colleges are independent corporations and determine their own staff pay and allowance policies. The allowances will, therefore, vary from college to college and the Government have no plans to change this.

Playground Safety

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures she has introduced to improve the safety of playgrounds at *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools. [54795]

Mr. Timms: The Department's publication "School Grounds, A Guide to Good Practice", contains detailed advice on design and management. This includes guidance on safety issues in school playgrounds.

While there is not any specific funding for upgrading playgrounds, the Government's capital investment in schools in England has risen from £683 million in 1997–98 to £3 billion in the current year (2002–03), and will rise to £3.5 billion next year (2003–04). Local education authorities and schools may draw on this funding for projects which improve playground safety.

Nursery Education

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many children are in maintained nursery education. [54888]

Margaret Hodge: The available information on the number of three and four-year-old children in maintained nursery schools and nursery classes in maintained primary schools is shown in the table.

The figures for three and four-year-olds in schools and private and voluntary providers were published in Statistical Bulletin 11/01 "Provision for children under five years of age in England—January 2001" which is available at www.dfes.gov.uk/statistics/ and from the Library.

Number and percentage of three and four-year-olds[1,2] in maintained nursery schools and nursery classes in maintained primary schools: England—1997–2001

Position in January each year

	Number[3]	*Percentage*
1997	367,400	29
1998	368,400	29
1999	366,900	30
2000	362,700	30
2001[4]	—	—

[1] Head count of children aged three and four at 31 December in the previous calendar year, rounded to the nearest 100.

[2] Numbers of three and four-year-olds may include some two-year-olds.

[3] Number attending provider expressed as a percentage of three and four-year-old population.

[4] This information is not available for 2001 due to the transition to new methods of data collection.

Information and Communication Technology

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will make a statement on the recent Ofsted report on ICT in schools. [54890]

Mr. Timms: We welcome the report, it shows that National Grid for Learning (NGfL) and New Opportunities Fund (NOF) initiatives along with sustained standards fund spending is making a real impact on both standards of teaching and the willingness of teachers to embrace ICT. We particularly welcome the report's confirmation that Government funding of ICT resources through the NGfL continues to make an important contribution to the development of the ICT curriculum and the use of new technologies in schools, and the recognition that this is beginning to impact on teaching and learning.

The report acknowledges that the existence of the NOF programme has raised the profile of ICT training in many schools and it has helped teachers to improve their ICT skills significantly. However, we recognise that the report also raises concerns that this has not had as widespread an effect on classroom practice as intended, or as might reasonably be expected at this stage of the programme. We will be working with NOF and the Teacher Training Agency to ensure that the concerns are addressed and that we establish the most effective support for teachers who are crucial to the successful implementation of the overall programme. We also note, however, that the report recognises the excellent take up of this training and we look forward to increased evidence of impact as more schools complete their training.

The report highlights personal access as one of the strongest influences toward successful training and classroom usage. We have provided over 50,000 teachers with PCs through various Government initiatives over the past few years, of which around 32,000 have been supplied via the Computers for Teachers Scheme. The current £100 million Laptops for Teachers scheme will supply a further 100,000 teachers with computers from September 2002. Our Curriculum Online project will enable online access to digital learning materials that are easily accessible to teachers and which they can use to support the teaching across the curriculum.

Protection Rackets (Schools)

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what information she has collated about the presence of protection rackets in secondary schools involving teenage pupils. [54892]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We do not specifically collect any information about the presence of protection rackets in secondary schools involving teenage pupils.

Teacher Numbers (Worcestershire)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many teachers were in service in Worcestershire in *(a)* January 2001 and *(b)* January 2002. [54979]

Mr. Timms: There were 4,430 full-time equivalent teachers in service in the maintained schools sector in Worcestershire in January 2001.

Data for January 2002 are not yet available at local education authority level.

Information on teachers in service in January 2002 by local education authority will be published in the Teachers in England statistical volume in December 2002.

Part-time teachers have been converted to an estimate of their full-time equivalence and added to full-time numbers.

Teachers' Pensions

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the annual percentage increase in teachers' pensions is in the next financial year. [54981]

Mr. Timms: Teachers' pensions, in common with all other public service pensions, are increased in line with the retail prices index. Increases are confirmed in the annual Pensions (Increase) Review Orders: the increase for the financial year 2002–03, as specified in the 2002 order, is 1.7 per cent. The order confirming the increase for 2003–04 will be published next spring.

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many teachers applied for medically-supported retirement for the Teachers' Pension Scheme in each of the last three years; and what the average time to reach a decision on these applications was. [55706]

Mr. Timms: The numbers of applications for ill health retirement by members of the Teachers' Pension Scheme (which covers schools, FE and some HE and independent establishments) in each of the last three years were:

	Number
1999–2000	4,394
2000–01	4,388
2001–02	4,270

The scheme administrator and the contracted medical advisers work to agreed service levels for actioning cases at the different stages in the process. The target is to process applications within 25 working days (cumulative). Current performance reports show that the target is achieved in 98 per cent. of cases. Periods during which cases are in abeyance pending receipt of additional information to enable a decision to be reached (most frequently further medical reports) are not included in the 25 day target.

University Requirements

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what requirements have been *(a)* placed on and *(b)* removed from universities in the last year for which information is available. [55083]

Margaret Hodge: Universities in England comply with statutory and Regulatory requirements approved by Parliament as well as conditions of grant set by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and requirements placed on them by a number of professional bodies.

During 2001–02 no additional statutory requirements were placed on higher education institutions by this Department. The Student Support Regulations for 2001–02 replaced those for 2000–01, but these have not appreciably changed the burden on institutions.

The Secretary of State's priorities for the higher education sector are disseminated annually through her grant letter to HEFCE each November. Some of these priorities, when implemented by the Funding Council, will result in requirements being placed on higher education institutions.

During this same period, consultations on a new method of quality review in institutions were undertaken and new arrangements will be in place from 2002. This represents a significant reduction in review activity carried out at institutions.

Key Stage 2

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will review the revised targets for Key Stage 2 national tests for 2004. [55567]

Mr. Timms: Primary school standards have improved considerably since 1997, and we are committed to raising standards further. We have set challenging targets for 2004, that 85 per cent. of 11-year-olds should achieve the expected standard, level 4, and that 35 per cent. should achieve level 5. We are confident that we will see further improvements in the Key Stage 2 results this year, which will provide a good platform for achieving the 2004 targets.

Teachers

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many local authorities operate their own schemes to supply teaching staff to schools; and if she will list the authorities which do not operate schemes to provide teaching staff to schools. [55180]

Mr. Timms: This information is not collected centrally. However, most local education authorities support schools in a variety of ways to find supply cover, and to recruit teachers. This includes traditional supply

lists, preferred agency suppliers, and full agency-type operations. The Quality Mark for supply teacher agencies announced on 2 May will assist LEAs in identifying options for their schools. 97 recruitment strategy managers are attached to LEAs, co-ordinating recruitment and retention strategies.

School Governors

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what new requirements have *(a)* been removed from and *(b)* been placed on school governors in the last year for which information is available. [55184]

Mr. Timms: We have recently introduced a gatekeeping system to help assess and manage proposals for giving new responsibilities to governing bodies. The information in the form requested will not be available until the gatekeeping system has bedded in.

Correspondence

David Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when she will reply to the letter of 12 March from the hon. Member for Walsall, North regarding St. Thomas More School, Willenhall. [55924]

Mr. Timms: The hon. Member's letter of 12 March was not received in the Department until 19 April. I replied on 9 May.

National Curriculum

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what percentage of 14 year old *(a)* boys and *(b)* girls reached level 5 in national curriculum tests in (i) English, (b) mathematics and *(c)* science in each of the past five years. [55418]

Mr. Timms: The table shows the percentage of pupils who achieved level 5 or above in the Key Stage 3 tests in England in 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001.

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*[1]
English					
Boys	48	56	55	55	56
Girls	67	73	73	73	73
All	57	65	64	64	64
Mathematics					
Boys	60	60	62	64	65
Girls	60	59	62	65	67
All	60	59	62	65	66
Science					
Boys	61	57	55	61	66
Girls	60	55	55	58	66
All	60	56	55	59	66

[1] 2001 data are provisional.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what percentage of *(a)* boys and *(b)* girls reached level 4 in national curriculum tests in (i) English, (ii) mathematics and (iii) science in each of the past five years. [55419]

Mr. Timms: The table shows the percentage of pupils who achieved level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 tests in England in 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001.

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*[1]
English					
Boys	57	57	65	70	70
Girls	70	73	76	79	80
All	63	65	71	75	75
Mathematics					
Boys	63	59	69	72	71
Girls	61	58	69	71	70
All	62	59	69	72	71
Science					
Boys	68	70	79	84	87
Girls	69	69	78	85	88
All	69	69	78	85	87

[1] 2001 data are provisional.

Pupil Funding

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the average amount of *(a)* capital and *(b)* revenue spending was for (i) primary school pupils and (ii) secondary school pupils in each LEA in England in each of the past five years. [55420]

Mr. Timms: The information requested is contained in the tables, which have been placed in the Library.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the average amount of *(a)* capital and *(b)* revenue spending per pupil was in specialist schools in England in each of the past five years. [55421]

Mr. Timms: Information on all capital and recurrent spending in specialist schools is not held centrally. The following table details the additional funding per pupil allocated to schools as a result of their designation as a specialist school:

Specialist schools capital and recurrent allocations expressed as £ per pupil

	1998–99		*1999–2000*		*2000–01*		*2001–02*		*2002–03*	
LEA	*Cap.*	*Rev.*	*Cap.*	*Rev.*	*Cap.*	*Rev.*	*Cap.*	*Rev.*	*Cap.*	*Rev.*
Barking and Dagenham	—	100	—	109	—	111	27	100	—	113
Barnet	—	105	30	95	—	109	—	109	23	103
Barnsley	—	—	118	72	—	121	—	123	—	123
Bath and north-east Somerset	—	110	50	85	20	106	—	116	20	111
Bedfordshire	—	—	77	47	—	96	—	107	56	84
Bexley	—	110	—	112	—	122	—	123	44	85
Birmingham	—	105	36	84	45	87	36	113	4	135
Blackburn and Darwen	—	—	70	151	—	91	—	127	—	130
Blackpool	—	100	48	92	—	116	—	112	29	94
Bolton	—	45	99	71	55	83	19	99	—	112
Bournemouth	—	100	—	75	83	68	—	97	—	110

Specialist schools capital and recurrent allocations expressed as £ per pupil

LEA	1998–99		1999–2000		2000–01		2001–02		2002–03	
	Cap.	Rev.	Cap.	Rev.	Cap.	Rev.	Cap.	Rev.	Cap.	Rev.
Bracknell Forest	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Bradford	—	99	28	87	29	100	26	108	—	128
Brent	—	110	—	112	—	122	26	102	21	108
Brighton and Hove	100	60	—	105	36	82	—	106	34	85
Bristol	—	49	—	112	47	91	32	100	38	93
Bromley	—	110	—	103	—	106	16	98	13	99
Buckinghamshire	23	100	—	105	19	104	43	95	9	105
Bury	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Calderdale	—	110	—	109	—	79	74	63	42	91
Cambridgeshire	—	94	48	77	—	106	34	119	—	134
Camden	—	100	30	94	22	97	—	108	—	108
Cheshire	32	92	22	100	19	104	18	112	40	97
City of London	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cornwall	38	97	—	103	9	105	22	101	—	111
Coventry	22	90	—	43	17	102	—	102	—	111
Croydon	112	62	—	106	—	116	—	114	82	86
Cumbria	38	61	—	95	19	106	35	99	10	110
Darlington	—	52	52	156	46	116	30	112	—	123
Derby, City of	—	76	—	98	44	81	27	95	—	108
Derbyshire	23	98	—	111	20	102	43	86	—	112
Devon	11	85	—	93	—	97	—	108	17	97
Doncaster	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	45	65
Dorset	—	101	50	87	37	104	13	106	12	113
Dudley	—	100	—	110	—	120	—	123	73	79
Durham	133	121	30	79	17	98	9	119	8	120
Ealing	—	78	39	71	28	95	32	92	13	102
East Riding of Yorkshire	39	88	—	106	34	88	14	103	12	106
East Sussex	35	84	—	104	38	91	35	94	34	93
Enfield	—	45	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Essex	8	92	15	95	20	99	16	100	11	106
Gateshead	39	75	36	71	—	99	14	98	—	105
Gloucestershire	18	101	37	94	17	103	15	106	27	105
Greenwich	36	82	—	76	18	78	—	160	25	147
Hackney	61	79	61	91	—	120	23	110	—	121
Halton	—	—	—	—	90	67	58	95	—	117
Hammersmith and Fulham	—	—	—	—	100	74	—	107	—	107
Hampshire	—	105	—	104	43	65	16	123	46	94
Haringey	—	100	—	104	—	107	—	107	82	127
Harrow	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	304	205
Hartlepool	121	60	—	112	51	86	—	113	27	96
Havering	—	53	—	112	—	122	48	95	30	98
Herefordshire	—	100	52	95	—	115	—	112	—	112
Hertfordshire	38	87	19	96	26	104	28	102	27	103
Hillingdon	46	91	31	93	—	109	—	109	—	109
Hounslow	49	78	—	104	—	106	—	104	27	90
Isle of Wight	—	50	—	112	46	90	29	72	—	106
Isles of Scilly	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Islington	—	—	—	—	111	68	—	113	—	113
Kensington and Chelsea	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kent	—	108	22	94	9	107	22	106	23	103
Kingston-upon-Hull	—	—	61	44	49	94	—	80	—	106
Kingston-upon-Thames	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kirklees	24	111	17	101	—	114	—	114	—	114
Knowsley	142	60	—	112	60	97	32	96	—	115
Lambeth	78	88	—	112	42	103	—	109	—	123
Lancashire	7	104	7	105	12	108	13	113	16	109
Leeds	43	73	27	81	46	89	26	122	18	115
Leicester City	—	—	95	60	31	95	18	93	—	111
Leicestershire	28	102	17	89	—	103	15	107	7	107
Lewisham	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lincolnshire	17	85	83	433	43	91	43	94	20	115
Liverpool	19	94	—	98	15	95	31	93	17	101
Luton	—	110	35	67	—	105	—	107	—	77
Manchester	23	90	—	109	38	95	—	114	11	108
Medway	—	61	—	93	31	96	23	104	—	115
Merton	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Middlesbrough	—	—	—	—	—	—	94	70	—	116
Milton Keynes	69	66	—	79	—	100	—	110	—	110
North-east Lincolnshire	—	—	—	—	61	53	—	196	—	94
Newcastle	22	108	—	88	31	84	—	108	—	108
Newham	45	124	—	83	—	100	30	92	—	108

Specialist schools capital and recurrent allocations expressed as £ per pupil

	1998–99		1999–2000		2000–01		2001–02		2002–03	
LEA	*Cap.*	*Rev.*	*Cap.*	*Rev.*	*Cap.*	*Rev.*	*Cap.*	*Rev.*	*Cap.*	*Rev.*
Norfolk	31	102	22	98	43	84	15	104	13	105
North Lincolnshire	—	—	—	112	54	98	34	103	29	113
North Somerset	102	60	43	78	41	84	17	103	13	101
North Tyneside	64	132	—	112	—	122	28	111	—	123
North Yorkshire	93	86	—	74	35	89	30	125	12	130
Northamptonshire	13	110	17	97	14	101	—	107	6	105
Northumberland	35	114	—	99	43	99	12	110	—	116
Nottingham, City of	—	42	—	112	—	118	—	116	24	92
Nottinghamshire	40	68	—	83	—	99	17	98	57	91
Oldham	—	—	—	—	85	68	—	113	44	91
Oxfordshire	22	106	13	83	11	97	16	89	—	110
Peterborough, City of	—	—	—	112	—	118	39	86	25	94
Plymouth	—	100	27	56	30	64	—	88	23	160
Poole	—	—	—	—	—	—	86	68	36	106
Portsmouth	—	—	—	—	—	—	79	62	41	84
Reading	—	—	—	111	—	108	—	98	—	109
Redbridge	—	100	—	98	26	90	32	91	—	107
Redcar and Cleveland	—	91	—	96	—	102	—	103	37	82
Richmond	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	101	73
Rochdale	30	72	—	94	—	110	22	104	—	115
Rotherham	49	82	—	107	—	114	41	87	—	113
Rutland	—	110	—	112	—	121	—	123	59	97
Salford	—	—	184	72	55	86	—	111	—	111
Sandwell	68	63	—	97	—	111	—	115	—	115
Sefton	42	85	—	97	26	91	—	110	43	103
Sheffield	22	79	—	92	—	104	44	88	17	102
Shropshire	—	106	—	94	—	105	74	79	47	95
Slough	—	—	—	112	—	122	130	235	53	165
Solihull	—	93	—	97	—	104	—	106	27	91
Somerset	64	85	24	103	36	111	14	113	30	104
South Gloucestershire	35	555	24	70	—	98	—	107	—	107
South Tyneside	—	100	—	97	—	99	—	105	—	105
Southampton	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	96	71
Southend on Sea	—	—	83	60	—	100	70	88	27	104
Southwark	—	100	—	40	—	—	112	74	55	98
St. Helens	—	—	—	—	79	67	24	96	—	110
Staffordshire	31	70	—	106	—	109	37	84	35	94
Stockport	—	—	—	93	—	102	—	105	—	105
Stockton	—	—	122	86	—	113	—	111	—	112
Stoke on Trent	—	—	—	—	127	74	76	84	—	115
Suffolk	60	103	21	110	26	101	32	99	—	115
Sunderland	—	111	58	79	—	111	21	98	—	110
Surrey	19	92	—	98	8	103	13	102	17	104
Sutton	—	110	—	102	—	107	—	108	—	108
Swindon	—	—	103	70	—	114	—	108	—	108
Tameside	—	55	—	112	44	88	—	110	—	110
Telford and Wrekin	—	—	—	110	—	120	—	123	—	123
Thurrock	—	—	—	—	—	—	100	74	45	89
Torbay	—	—	—	112	—	120	—	121	44	89
Tower Hamlets	60	77	—	112	39	107	25	102	—	101
Trafford	58	142	—	106	—	110	40	97	17	90
Wakefield	—	90	—	86	25	87	15	90	20	95
Walsall	—	110	54	80	—	108	29	90	24	103
Waltham Forest	—	110	—	109	43	94	33	103	—	113
Wandsworth	—	100	—	91	16	79	—	146	—	148
Warrington	37	122	—	79	25	90	—	111	19	104
Warwickshire	63	90	34	85	44	95	—	115	34	95
West Berkshire	—	110	23	115	—	99	28	103	—	109
West Sussex	42	104	—	91	9	98	—	108	20	98
Westminster	156	60	—	112	—	122	56	96	—	123
Wigan	23	112	15	97	13	109	—	111	—	111
Wiltshire	50	83	—	102	43	87	10	107	—	112
Windsor and Maidenhead	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	92	68
Wirral	41	84	—	97	28	94	34	93	14	100
Wokingham	—	—	85	61	—	101	46	90	—	112
Wolverhampton	—	101	—	96	42	103	—	129	—	129
Worcestershire	—	44	65	68	16	98	26	104	21	105
York, City of	38	78	—	101	21	75	—	88	—	89

Notes:
1. Specialist schools receive a one-off grant of £100,000 in their first year of designation for a capital project to support their specialist schools development plan. This matches the minimum £50,000 sponsorship which they are required to raise from the private sector when they apply for specialist school designation.
2. In addition, an annual grant is available for the four years of specialist school designation to support the costs of implementing the development plan. Assuming schools are successful in meeting the targets they set out in their initial application they can apply for re-designation for a further three years.
3. The annual grant is currently calculated at a rate of £123 per pupil up to 1,000 and over 1,200 pupils (special schools designated as specialist schools are funded at five times this rate). Funding in 1998–99 was calculated at the rate of £100 per pupil up to 1,000 pupils and this was increased to £120 per pupil in September 1999 to allow schools to develop the community element of their development plans. A further rise of £3 per pupil was implemented in September 2000.
4. The 2002–03 figures do not include schools that are currently being considered in the March 2002 competition.

HEALTH

Christmas Trees

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of potential risks to health caused by the chemical treatment of trees used as Christmas trees. [26702]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The Department has made no assessment to the potential risks.

Locum Doctors

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his strategy is to boost the numbers of locum doctors available in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary care; and if he will make a statement. [48060]

Mr. Hutton: It is the responsibility of primary care trusts and NHS trusts to identify their own need for locum doctors in the primary and secondary care sectors respectively. It is accepted that locum doctors are an essential part of the NHS workforce.

However, the focus of our plans to increase the size of the medical workforce is to increase the number of permanent doctors. Following the spending review settlement announced by the Chancellor in the Budget we have committed ourselves in "Delivering the NHS Plan" to increasing the medical workforce by at least 15,000 more consultants and GPs by 2008. This is on top of the 9,550 increase in doctors in the NHS since 1997.

Food Standards Agency

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the programme to improve business efficiency, referred to on page 41 of the 2001 report of the Food Standards Agency. [49229]

Yvette Cooper: The Food Standards Agency (FSA) continues to develop ways of improving organisational performance through a co-ordinated programme of activity designed to improve business efficiency.

A major programme of staff training and development to ensure staff have the knowledge and skills to deliver a higher level of performance in meeting the FSA's business needs commenced in 2001. This provides the basis for the successful delivery of the other strands of the efficiency programme.

The programme to improve business efficiency also encompasses the implementation of an effective procurement strategy, development and implementation of an e-strategy including the launch of a new 'user-friendly' website, and a critical appraisal of research programmes and management systems. A comprehensive information technology/information systems strategy has been developed leading to the re-letting of the FSA's IT system support contract.

Dental Therapists

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when restrictions on dental therapists' rights to work throughout the dentistry sector are due to be lifted; [52061]

(2) what efforts are being made to recruit and retain dental therapists in the NHS. [52062]

Mr. Hutton: The Dental Auxiliaries Regulations 1986 need to be amended by affirmative resolution to permit dental therapists to work in all fields of dentistry. We have now laid amending regulations before Parliament and they are to be debated during May. A much wider range of employment opportunities will become available to dental therapists once the restriction is removed which will make careers in dental therapy more attractive. In planning training commissions in the future we would expect workforce development confederations to take account of the contribution that dental therapists can make to dental services.

Speech Therapists

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the reasons why some NHS trusts listed in the answer of 18 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1185W, on speech therapists, are omitted from the list of NHS trusts deposited in the Library following the answer of 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 991W. [55916]

Mr. Hutton: The information placed in the Library lists all trusts who employ speech and language therapists.

The vacancy rates for Royal Free Hampstead NHS trust and Tower Hamlets Healthcare NHS trust were not included because of doubts about data quality. Both trusts recently indicated that their vacancies as at 31 March 2001 were considerably lower than they had originally reported to the Department. Rates for a number of other trusts are not given where the sum of staff in post and vacancies is less than 10.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Retained Organs Commission Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53855]

(2) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Treatment Agency Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53861]

(3) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service Appointments Commission Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54052]

(4) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Care Standards Act 2000 (Commencement No. 2 (England) and Transitional Provisions) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53840]

(5) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Special Trustees for the Former United Birmingham Hospitals (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53838]

(6) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Special Trustees for Newcastle University Hospitals (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53834]

(7) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Assistance (Assessment of Resources) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54047]

(8) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Special Trustees for St. George's Hospital (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53833]

(9) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Isles of Scilly (Primary Care) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53849]

(10) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Restriction on Pithing (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53852]

(11) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Special Trustees for the Former United Birmingham Hospitals (Transfer of Trust Property) Revocation Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54054]

(12) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Medicines for Human Use and Medical Devices (Fees and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54050]

(13) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Dental Services) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53839]

(14) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Special Trustees for the Former United Birmingham Hospitals (Transfer of Trust Property) No. 2 Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54053]

(15) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Assistance (Assessment of Resources) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53829]

(16) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health Act 1999 (Commencement No. 10) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53836]

(17) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Functions of Health Authorities and Administration Arrangements) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53856]

(18) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Optical Charges and Payments) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53854]

(19) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals National Health Service Trust (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54051]

(20) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Isles of Scilly (Health) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53851]

(21) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Disabled Children (Direct Payments) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53845]

(22) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Trustees for the North and East Devon Health Authority (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53865]

(23) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Care Standards Commission (Membership and Procedure) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54048]

(24) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Feeding Stuffs (Sampling and Analysis) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53850]

(25) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Special Trustees for St. Bartholomew's Hospital (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53863]

(26) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Assistance (Sums for Personal Requirements) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54049]

(27) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Medical Services) Amendment (No. 2) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54044]

(28) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Dental Services) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53848]

(29) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Dental Charges) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53846]

(30) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Welfare Food (Amendment) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54055]

(31) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Optical Charges and Payments) and (General Ophthalmic Services) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53843]

(32) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Trustees for the Central Sheffield University Hospitals National Health Service Trust (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53831]

(33) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Avon and Western Wiltshire Mental Health Care National Health Service Trust (Change of Name) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53837]

(34) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Charges for Drugs and Appliances) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53857]

(35) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Care Standards Act 2000 (Commencement No. 3) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53860]

(36) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Ophthalmic Services) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54046]

(37) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Birmingham Children's Hospital National Health Service Trust (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53842]

(38) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53859]

(39) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Medical Services) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53847]

(40) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Assistance (Assessment of Resources) (Amendment) (No. 3) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54045]

(41) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the University Hospital Birmingham National Health Service Trust (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53841]

(42) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Carers (Services) and Direct Payments (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53844]

(43) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Special Trustees for the Royal London Hospital (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53864]

(44) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Trustees for the Royal Brompton and Harefield National Health Service Trust (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53862]

(45) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Care Standards Act 2000 (Commencement No. 4) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54043]

(46) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) (Charges) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53853]

(47) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health Authorities (Membership and Procedure) Amendment (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54056]

(48) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Special Trustees for King's College Hospital (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53832]

(49) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Trustees for the Northern General Hospital National Health Service Trust (Transfer of Trust Property) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53835]

(50) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Primary Care Trusts (Functions) (England) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [53858]

(51) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Pensions Scheme and Additional Voluntary Contributions) (Pension Sharing) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54309]

(52) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the South Tees Acute Hospitals National Health Service Trust Change of Name and (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54307]

(53) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the North Mersey Community National Health Service Trust (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54302]

(54) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Care Standards Act 2000 (Commencement No. 6) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54308]

(55) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Adoption of Children from Overseas Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54311]

(56) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Lowestoft Primary Care Trust (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54306]

(57) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Gelatine (Intra-Community Trade) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54305]

(58) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Southampton East Healthcare Primary Care Trust Change of Name and (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54303]

(59) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Adoption (Inter-Country Aspects) Act 1999 (Commencement No. 5) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54310]

(60) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Southern Derbyshire Mental Health National Health Service Trust Change of Name and (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54304]

(61) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Dental Services) Amendment (No. 3) Regulation 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54301]

(62) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Dental Services) Amendment (No. 4) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54530]

(63) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Blood Authority (Establishment and Constitution) (Amendment) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54529]

(64) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Patient Safety Agency Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54526]

(65) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Winchester and Eastleigh Healthcare National Health Service Trust (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54536]

(66) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Retained Organs Commission (Establishment and Constitution) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54531]

(67) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Southampton Community Health Services National Health Service Trust (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54537]

(68) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health Act 1999 (Commencement No. 11) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54540]

(69) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Residential Accommodation (Relevant Premises Ordinary Residence and Exemptions) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54533]

(70) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Chiropractors Act 1994 (Commencement Order No. 5 and Transitional Provision) 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54541]

(71) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the General Social Care Council (Appointments and Procedure) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54527]

(72) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Daventry and South Northamptonshire Primary Care Trust (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54538]

(73) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Medicines (Aristolochia and Mu Tong etc.) (Prohibition) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54532]

(74) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Uttlesford Primary Care Trust (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54539]

(75) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Functions of Health Authorities) (General Dental Services Incentive Scheme) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54525]

(76) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Rotherham Priority Health Service National Health Service Trust (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54535]

(77) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the North Sefton and West Lancashire Community National Health Service Trust (Establishment) Amendment Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54534]

(78) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Miscellaneous Food Additives (Amendment) (England) (No. 2) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54970]

(79) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Ophthalmic Services) Amendment (No. 2) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54962]

(80) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service Trusts (Membership and Procedure) Amendment (No. 2) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54972]

(81) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Assistance (Residential Accommodation) (Disregarding of Resources) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54946]

(82) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Poultry Meat, Farmed Game Bird Meat and Rabbit Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54956]

(83) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Care Homes Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54922]

(84) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Dental Services) Amendment (No. 7) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54920]

(85) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Preserved Rights (Transfer of Responsibilities to Local Authorities) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54971]

(86) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service Trusts (Membership and Procedure) Amendment (No. 3) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54928]

(87) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Medical Services) Amendment (No. 4) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54965]

(88) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Care Standards Act 2000 (Commencement No. 8) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54953]

(89) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Abolition of the NHS Tribunal (Consequential Provisions) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54967]

(90) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Colours in Food (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54958]

(91) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 (Commencement No. 3) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54952]

(92) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Charges for Drugs and Appliances) (Electronic Communications) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54939]

(93) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Lowestoft Primary Care Trust Change of Name and (Establishment) (Amendment) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54933]

(94) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Care Standards Commission (Registration) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54925]

(95) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 (Commencement No. 7) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54935]

(96) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Treatment Agency (Amendment) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54930]

(97) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Pharmaceutical Services and Misuse of Drugs) (Electronic Communications) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54940]

(98) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Medical Services) (Electronic Communications) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54942]

(99) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Care Standards Act 2000 (Commencement No. 10 (England) and Transitional Savings and Amendment Provisions) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54936]

(100) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Medicines (Sale or Supply) (Miscellaneous Provisions) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54917]

(101) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 (Commencement No. 5) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54969]

(102) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Children's Homes Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54923]

(103) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Care Trusts (Applications and Consultation) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54974]

(104) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Family Health Services Appeal Authority (Procedure) Rules 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54968]

(105) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Data Protection (Subject Access) (Fees and Miscellaneous Provisions) (Amendment) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54951]

(106) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Feeding Stuffs and the Feeding Stuffs (Enforcement) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54955]

(107) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 (Commencement No 2) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54949]

(108) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Children (Leaving Care) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54937]

(109) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Medical Services) Amendment (No 3) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54954]

(110) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Dental Services) Amendment (No. 6) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54964]

(111) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Care Standards Commission (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54926]

(112) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Private and Voluntary Health Care (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54924]

(113) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Southern Norfolk Primary Care Trust (Establishment) (Amendment) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54934]

(114) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Medicines (Products Other than Veterinary Drugs) (General Sales List) Amendment (No. 2) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54932]

(115) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Primary Care Trusts (Membership, Procedure and Administration Arrangements) Amendment (No. 2) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54973]

(116) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 (Commencement No. 6) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54961]

(117) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Prescription Only Medicines (Human Use) Amendment (No. 2) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54919]

(118) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Family Health Services Appeal Authority (Primary Care Act) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54966]

(119) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Mental Health Act 1983 (Remedial) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54960]

(120) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Assistance (Residential Accommodation) (Additional Payments) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54947]

(121) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Prescription only Medicines (Human Use) (Electronic Communications) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54941]

(122) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service Trusts (Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges) Amendment (No. 3) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54929]

(123) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Foster Placement (Children) and Adoption Agencies Amendment (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54943]

(124) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 (Commencement No 1) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54938]

(125) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Assistance (Residential Accommodation) (Relevant Contributions) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54948]

(126) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Southampton Community Health Services National Health Service Trust (Establishment) Amendment (No 2) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54950]

(127) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges) Amendment (No 2) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54944]

(128) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Medicines (Pharmacies) (Applications for Registration and Fees) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54921]

(129) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health Authorities (Membership and Procedure) Amendment (England) (No. 3) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54931]

(130) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Amendment Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54927]

(131) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Care Standards Act 2000 (Commencement No. 9 (England) and Transitional and Savings Provisions) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement. [54918]

(132) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health Service Medicines (Information on the Prices of Specified Generic Medicines) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54916]

(133) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Optical Charges and Payments) and (General Ophthalmic Services) Amendment (No 2) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54945]

(134) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 (Commencement No. 4) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54959]

(135) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Medical Services Supplementary List) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement. [54963]

136 what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Assistance (Residential Accommodation) (Additional Payments and Assessment of Resources) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [54957]

(137) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Specified Risk Material (Amendment) (England) (No. 2) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [55760]

(138) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the North Middlesex Hospital National Health Service Trust (Change of Name) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [55761]

(139) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Sweeteners in Food (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [55762]

(140) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 (Commencement No. 1) (England) Order 2001; and if he will make a statement; [55759]

(141) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (General Dental Services) Amendment (No. 5) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [55766]

(142) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Primary Care Trusts (Membership, Procedure and Administration Arrangements) Amendment (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [55763]

(143) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service (Dental Charges) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [55758]

(144) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the National Health Service Trusts (Membership and Procedure) Amendment (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement; [55765]

(145) what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the Health Authorities (Membership and Procedure) Amendment (England) (No. 2) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement. [55764]

Ms Blears: Costs associated with regulatory proposals are considered at the policy development stage. A regulatory impact assessment (RIA) is completed for regulatory proposals unless there are no or negligible costs, and sets out the impact, in terms of costs, benefits and risks of the proposed regulation which could affect businesses, charities or the voluntary sector. RIAs are available from the Library.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 14 May 2002

DEFENCE

Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress with the Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment programme. [53520]

Mr. Hoon: The Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme work was completed in 2001. A summary of the study and its conclusions was placed in the Library of the House in February 2002.

Kosovo

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans there are for the Multinational Brigade Centre led by the United Kingdom in Kosovo to be merged with the French-led Multinational Brigade North; and if he will make a statement. [54834]

Mr. Ingram: The future of the Multinational Brigades in Kosovo will be decided in the light of the major review currently being undertaken by NATO of its operations in the Balkans. The review, entitled the Joint Operational Area Review, will be discussed by NATO Foreign Ministers later this month. We welcome the review and remain committed to maintaining a military contribution to NATO peacekeeping in the Balkans. The form that this contribution will take has yet to be decided.

NATO

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with the Chief of the EU military staff regarding organisational change in NATO; and if he will make a statement. [55569]

Mr. Hoon: None.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with his *(a)* EU and *(b)* NATO counterparts regarding organisational change in NATO; and if he will make a statement. [55568]

Mr. Hoon: Preparations for this November's NATO Summit in Prague include work on a range of issues (including NATO's command and force structures, enlargement, resource management and Headquarters structures and processes) with organisational implications. I discuss these issues on a regular basis with NATO colleagues. We also work to ensure good contacts with the EU in relevant areas.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with his US counterparts regarding creation of a Special Operations Coordination Centre at SHAPE; and if he will make a statement. [55571]

Mr. Hoon: None.

European Airlift Capacity

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent representations he has received from his US counterpart regarding a creation of European Mobility Command to coordinate existing and future European airlift assets; and if he will make a statement. [55570]

Mr. Hoon: None. We are working closely with allies and with NATO staffs to develop a capabilities improvements programme to build upon NATO's Defence Capabilities Initiative at the Prague Summit in November, and it is likely that improvements in airlift will continue to be a key objective. The existing European Airlift Co-ordination Cell already provides a means of sharing airlift capacity among a number of European countries.

European Air Chiefs Conference

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the European Air Chiefs Conference meeting of 18 April. [55695]

Mr. Hoon: This was the latest regular meeting of the heads of 20 air forces within the forum of the European Air Chiefs Conference (EURAC) which was established in 1993. The aim of EURAC is to improve co-operation and understanding among European air forces, thereby increasing their efficiency and effectiveness.

Copies of the recent EURAC Air Power Paper "A European Perspective on Air Power" have been placed in the Library of the House.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Graduate Training Scheme

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what action he is taking to establish a national graduate training scheme for local government. [56425]

Dr. Whitehead: The Employers' Organisation (EO) has put in place a national graduate development programme (NGDP) for local government, which begins in September this year. This programme is to address the need to recruit a new generation of managers with the leadership potential to shape the future of local government.

Vacant Council Seats

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many seats on parish and town councils in England and Wales were vacant on 1 January in each year since 1995. [55408]

Dr. Whitehead: This information is not held centrally.

Electronic Voting

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what research projects have been commissioned by his Department into electronic voting since June 2000; and if he will state in each case *(a)* the organisation or consortium members carrying out the research, *(b)* the cost, *(c)* the purpose and title, *(d)* the date on which the research was or is due to be delivered to his Department and *(e)* the date or expected date of publication of the results. [54138]

Dr. Whitehead *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The Department has commissioned one research project into this area since June 2000. It is entitled 'The Implementation of Electronic Voting' and is being undertaken by De Montfort university at a cost of £84,910. The project has examined the practical requirements for the implementation of remote electronic voting. It is intended to publish the research later this month.

Local Government

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) if he will take steps to rectify the disparity in total external support to local authorities covering the Bromsgrove area in the local government White Paper; [54801]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure that the new grant formula that will replace standard spending assessment will be *(a)* fairer, *(b)* simpler and *(c)* will address the needs of each classes of authority. [54798]

Dr. Whitehead: We are working to develop options for fairer and more intelligible grant distribution formulae. We will consult on options over the summer and will consider the responses when we come to take decisions.

MOX Fuel Shipment

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions whether a change in the material used to fill the package to be used to transport the mox fuel from Japan to Sellafield from argon gas to water requires the flask to be re-certified, proven and tested in compliance with the IAEA Safety Series 6 Regulations of the Safe Transport of Radioactive Materials. [54365]

Mr. Jamieson: The certificate of approval ceases to have effect in the event of any alteration to the composition of the package, the package design or in any of the facts stated in the application unless the Competent Authority confirms the certificate notwithstanding the alteration.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if the approval process for the shipment and the transport package for the mox fuel due to be returned from Japan to Sellafield has assessed the level of risk and consequences for all reasonably foreseeable incidents that could arise in United Kingdom territorial waters and during docking, handling and onward transport from Barrow to Sellafield, including *(a)* fuel criticality events, *(b)* flask drop and impact incidents, *(c)* fire and/or explosion on board the ship, *(d)* sinking of the ship and *(e)* significant incidents during the rail transport phase. [54364]

Mr. Jamieson: The approval process assesses against the performance standards and test conditions prescribed in the recommendations of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which establish standards of safety designed to provide an acceptable level of control of the radiation, criticality and thermal hazards to persons, property and the environment, taking into account routine, normal and accident conditions of transport.

QEII Centre

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what coolant will be used in the replacement of the air conditioning and water coolant for the QEII Centre. [56389]

Dr. Whitehead: Specialist advisers have considered all technological alternatives for the replacement of these air conditioning chillers. The choice of refrigerant will be in accordance with the relevant Government policies and I will be happy to confirm the final refrigerant selection within the next two months.

Parish Councils

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what role parish councils will play in the revised planning procedures envisaged by the Government for *(a)* major infrastructure projects and *(b)* other planning applications. [56032]

Ms Keeble: Local planning authorities are required to consult or notify various organisations and bodies. This includes parish councils that have asked to be notified of certain applications. We are concerned that the present arrangements for consulting expert bodies on planning and other cases are not working as effectively as they might. The distinction between statutory and non-statutory consultees has become blurred and consultation can often be a source of delay.

One option proposed in our consultation paper "Planning: Delivering a Fundamental Change" is to clarify the basis of determining whether bodies should be statutory consultees and reduce their number. Decisions about which bodies might in future be statutory consultees will be made in the light of the consultation. The consultation paper also contains a number of proposals to promote better engagement of local communities in shaping the future development of their areas.

We have proposed the introduction of a new procedure which would enable Parliament to make a decision in principle on certain major infrastructure projects. It is for Parliament to determine how this procedure might operate and how representations from interested organisations, such as parish councils, might be considered.

Local Authority Housing

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) if he will list *(a)* the deprived local authority housing estates and *(b)* the

local authority and local authority wards that those estates fall into, referred to in DETR, Housing Research Summary No.91 (1998); [54610]

(2) which of the deprived local authority housing estates referred to in DETR, Housing Research Summary No.91 (1998) have subsequently been part of a stock transfer to housing associations. [54611]

Mr. Byers: Housing Research Summary No. 91 (1998) is not about research on local authority estates as it presents findings from "Key research on easier home buying and selling".

Social Housing

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will announce the outcome of the round of applications for PFI credits for additional social housing and joint service centres. [56905]

Mr. Raynsford: I am announcing today the names of 10 local authorities with whom my Department will work on the development of PFI schemes. There will be five schemes providing additional social housing and five for joint service centres.

The authorities proposing the housing schemes are: Birmingham city council, London borough of Brent, London borough of Harrow, Slough borough council and Warrington borough council.

These schemes aim to provide additional social housing. They will help to increase the supply of affordable housing, help regenerate areas of low demand or provide housing for vulnerable groups.

The authorities seeking support for joint service centres are: Leeds city council, Manchester city council, Newcastle city council, North Tyneside council and Shropshire.

The purpose of these schemes is to give local communities improved access to a wide range of information and services and to integrate the information and services to be provided by the local authority with other local agencies.

We were impressed with the quality of all the bids received and it was a difficult choice as to which schemes were selected.

I congratulate those authorities which were successful in this round. We look forward to working with them to fully develop these bids into value for money projects.

Whether any of the above schemes ultimately proceed will depend on authorities working up business cases which satisfy the scrutiny of the interdepartmental project review group (PRG), which considers all local government PFI schemes seeking central Government support. Endorsement by PRG is essential before schemes can be put out to tender.

The total value of the PFI credits that will be allocated, if all these schemes are endorsed and proceed to contract signature, is £100 million.

Fire Services

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the total cost has been of carrying out the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council Fire Cover Review; what fees have been paid to external consultants; and what the cost has been per consultant used. [53682]

Dr. Whitehead: Details of the costs paid to date (end March 2002) to consultants during the review of fire cover commissioned by the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council are set out in the table.

Spent £000

Contractor	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*Total*
Entec	16	64	30	47	157
Systems Options	78	205	203	98	584
Mott MacDonald	--	27	37	7	71
KPMG	—	57	174	60	291
Greenstreet Berman	—	0	0	54	54
ORH Ltd.	—	0	0	61	61
Total	94	353	444	327	1,218

Costs have also arisen from time spent by DTLR and Home Office officials on aspects of the review, but it is not possible to accurately determine this amount without incurring disproportionate cost.

The cost of staff employed by fire brigades in connection with the pathfinder trials associated with the fire cover review can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions whom he plans to consult before concluding the fire cover review; and over what time frame. [53683]

Dr. Whitehead: The findings of the task group on the fire cover review will be considered initially by the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council. Following this, I expect to consult widely since I expect the review to provide the fundamental basis of planning delivery of service by fire brigades in the future.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when the task group on the fire cover review will deliver its final report to the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council. [53681]

Dr. Whitehead: The aim at present is to present the report for consideration by the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council immediately after the summer recess at the latest.

Driving Tests

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will take steps to make driving tests more difficult and increase the safety aspects of the test. [55333]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* Our "Road Safety Strategy" commits us to keep the driving test up to date. Since 1999, we have added 10 minutes more general driving to the practical car driving test so candidates can be assessed driving on higher-speed dual carriageways and rural roads wherever possible. Also, candidates who commit more than 15 less serious driving faults, as well as those who commit serious faults, fail the driving test.

Later this year we plan to introduce a moving-image hazard perception element to the theory test. This should mean that new drivers develop better skills in anticipation and reading the road.

We have also recently published our "Introducing a more structured approach to learning to drive" consultation paper. Although this does not discuss possible changes to the content of the driving test it does, however, include discussion about extending the learning period, the use of training logs and the introduction of probationary plates for new drivers.

Health Workers (Parking Restrictions)

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will take steps to ease parking restrictions which affect essential health workers in the performance of their emergency duties; and if he will make a statement. [55846]

Mr. Jamieson: Parking dispensations and waivers are a matter for consideration by local traffic authorities as part of their overall parking policies. In London, a Health Emergency Badge (HEB) already exists for doctors and others involved in primary healthcare (such as nurses, midwives and health visitors). It can be used when the HEB holder is undertaking emergency or urgent work with patients away from the badge holder's normal base allowing them to park without payment in paid for parking places, in residents' bays and, if no alternative parking spaces are available, on yellow lines.

The HEB scheme does not allow holders to park their vehicles in a dangerous or obstructive manner. Further details about the HEB scheme may be obtained from the Association of London Government Transport and Environment Committee, First Floor, New Zealand House, 80 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4TZ.

Ferry Services

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 18 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1096W, on ferry services, what the nature is of the representation he has made regarding the proposed EU directive on minimum conditions of service and wages for seafarer on intra-community ferry services. [56051]

Mr. Jamieson: We have made representations in European Community discussions generally recommending the proposed directive to fellow member states.

Network Rail

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assessment he has made of the financial risk to the Strategic Rail Authority of a future financial and management failure by Network Rail. [55780]

Mr. Jamieson: Negotiations are continuing on a commercially confidential basis. Details of any contingent liability would be notified formally to Parliament in accordance with established procedures.

Road Works (Injuries)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many individuals working on street or road works were *(a)* killed, *(b)* seriously injured and *(c)* slightly injured in each year since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [55852]

Dr. Whitehead: Following is the readily available information relating to the number of injuries to workers hit by vehicles occurring in the processes of road repairs and surfacing, and in street cleaning and verge maintenance.

Injuries to workers hit by vehicles occurring in the processes of road repairs and surfacing, and in street cleaning and verge maintenance—1996–97 to 2000–01

	Road repairs/surfacing/ maintenance	*Road verge maintenance*
Fatal injuries		
1996–97	3	—
1997–98	2	—
1998–99	2	—
1999–2000	2	—
2000–01[1]	5	1
Major injuries		
1996–97	14	1
1997–98	10	2
1998–99	12	—
1999–2000	14	1
2000–01[1]	10	—
Over 3-day injuries		
1996–97	23	—
1997–98	20	3
1998–99	19	1
1999–2000	23	2
2000–01[1]	19	2

[1] Provisional

HSE is temporarily only able to provide statistics on workers hit by vehicles because of essential enhancements currently being carried out to their database system but could provide data on all incidents covered in the processes in the table in due course. The table also only provides data from 1996–97 onwards. Access to earlier data is available only at disproportionate cost.

Notes:

Figures relate to employees and the self-employed.

Injuries reported under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) 1995.

Statistics relate to the planning year from 1 April to 31 March.

Public Transport (Recruitment and Retention)

Clive Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact of rates of pay on recruitment and retention of public transport workers and the delivery of the Government's transport objectives in London. [55793]

Mr. Jamieson: Recruitment and retention of public transport workers and their pay rates are the responsibility of the relevant transport operators. It is for them to manage their services to deliver the various performance targets set by the transport authorities within the context of the Government's policies. Measures to improve performance are taken as necessary.

Road Safety

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what statistics are collected by his Department on road safety; and if he will make a statement. [55853]

Mr. Jamieson: Personal injury road accident data in Great Britain are collected by the police and reported to the Department using the STATS19 accident report format. A full description of the data collected and an extensive selection of statistics are published in detail in "Road Accidents Great Britain—The Casualty Report". The report for 2000 was published on 20 September 2001 and a copy placed in the Libraries of the House.

Free Travel

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions which local authorities provide free travel on public transport for old age pensioners and the disabled. [55701]

Ms Keeble: There are six areas where free travel is provided for pensioners: London boroughs, Merseyside, West Midlands, Crawley, Reading and Redditch.

There are eight areas where free travel is provided for disabled people: London boroughs, Merseyside, Congleton, Crawley, Reading Redditch, Rutland and Warwick. In addition, there are a further 89 areas where free travel is provided for blind people.

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what recent assessment he has made of the level of access of pensioners to free bus transport. [55848]

Ms Keeble: From June 2001 the Transport Act 2000 provides a standard minimum requirement for concessionary travel in England and Wales. This ensures half fares for pensioners and disabled people on local buses, with no charge for the pass. Local authorities may make more generous provision at their discretion.

Following the introduction of the standard minimum requirement a survey taken last autumn shows that over half of authorities had a more generous scheme than previously and 17 authorities had introduced a concessionary fares scheme when none previously existed. Six areas provide free travel for pensioners.

Road Improvements

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what extra funding will be made available to county councils for road improvement in the next financial year. [55195]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government are providing over £30 billion for local road maintenance over the next 10 years, an extra 9 billion (23 per cent. in real terms) above the funding levels in the previous 10 years. The exact figures for 2003–04 will be announced in December this year.

Parking

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what restrictions are in place in respect of the spending of moneys by local authorities in respect of revenue raised by them from parking meters and paid parking schemes; what the basis is for such restrictions; and if he will make a statement. [55798]

Mr. Spellar: Section 55 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 requires local authorities to keep an account of income and expenditure in respect of designated on-street parking places. This section restricts expenditure of surplus on-street parking income to making good any charges against an authority's general fund, provision and maintenance of off-street parking, highway improvements and public transport schemes. There are no restrictions on the use of surplus income from authorities' off-street parking facilities.

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what powers he has to prevent local authorities in England and Wales from issuing a greater number of residents parking permits than the number of residents parking places that have been made available by such local authority. [55796]

Mr. Spellar: Local traffic authorities have powers to introduce traffic management schemes on their roads, including residents' parking schemes, by means of traffic regulation orders (TRO) made under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984. The Secretary of State has a reserve power under the provisions of Part 1 of Schedule 9 to the 1984 Act to intervene in the making of a TRO in a case where he believes that an authority is not satisfactorily discharging its duty under section 122 of the Act to secure the expeditious, convenient and save movement of vehicular and other traffic and the provision of suitable and adequate parking facilities on and off the highway.

The purpose of a residents' parking scheme is to ensure residents have preferential access to on-street parking in their area over others, such as those commuting into the area. Given the limited supply of kerbside parking space and possible multiple care ownership in individual households, an authority has to judge the balance between supply of spaces and the number of permits issued in drawing up a scheme. In practice a residents' parking scheme may not necessarily guarantee permit holders access to a parking space, but could be better than having an uncontrolled parking free for all.

London Underground

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the rate of return will be on each of the three PPP contracts. [56211]

Mr. Jamieson: The payments the private sector infrastructure companies receive from London Underground will depend on the performance they actually deliver. There is no guaranteed rate of return for shareholders under the three Public Private Partnership contracts.

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to his reply of 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 900W, on London Underground, if the appropriate regulatory clearances relating to *(a)* the procurement process, *(b)* the competition aspects and *(c)* the state aid aspects have been obtained; and if he will make a statement. [56207]

Mr. Jamieson: All appropriate regulatory clearances will be obtained before any PPP contracts take effect.

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the projected efficiency savings are in each of the first seven years of the PPP contracts for each of the consortia. [56213]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the final assessment report produced by London Underground. This report, which is available on London Underground's website, contains an assessment of the underlying costs of the bids for the tube modernisation contracts compared to the underlying costs of the relevant public sector comparators over the first seven and a half years of the contracts. A year-on-year analysis is not available.

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assumptions were made during PPP negotiations about the level of fare increases on London Underground in each of the first seven years. [56209]

Mr. Jamieson: London Underground fares are a matter for the Mayor. London Transport has for planning purposes assumed that fares would rise in line with inflation.

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how much London Transport has spent on consultancy costs for the London Underground PPP. [56210]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) on 4 December 2001, *Official Report*, column 296W.

Since 30 September 2001 a further 9 million has been spent.

Community Transport (Fuel Duty Rebate)

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when regulations will be made implementing the Government's commitment to extend eligibility for fuel duty rebate to a wide range of community transport services. [57134]

Ms Keeble: I am pleased to confirm that the Bus Service Operators Grant (England) Regulations 2002, implementing this proposal, were laid before Parliament on 10 April and came into force on 1 May 2002.

PPP Contracts

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what payment each of the three consortia will receive in each year of the first seven years of the PPP contracts. [56208]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the proposed comfort letter that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State reported to Parliament on Wednesday 20 March 2002. The actual level of payments received by the consortia will depend on the level of performance they deliver.

Gap Funding

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what representations he has received about his most recent proposals to replace gap funding. [55713]

Ms Keeble: We have received representations from three organisations; the St. John's Urban Village, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Council for the Protection of Rural England, in respect of the proposals for the housing, dereliction and heritage aid schemes. We are working closely with the regional development agencies, English Partnerships and English Heritage on the development of these schemes. We are also with the regional development agencies, English Partnerships and others on further possible schemes to notify to the European Commission.

Martin Sixsmith

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will place in the Library a copy of the statement made by his Department on 7 May regarding the resignation of Mr. Martin Sixsmith. [55850]

Mr. Byers: The statement agreed by my Department and Martin Sixsmith was placed in the Library on 7 May.

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to the answer of 12 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 906W, on resignations, if he will revise his response in relation to the resignation of Mr. Martin Sixsmith. [55751]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Member to the statement I made to the House on 9 May 2002.

Ministerial Speeches

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will list the speeches which *(a)* he and *(b)* other Ministers from his Department have made to external organisations and businesses since 7 June 2001, in each case providing details of where the speech is publicly available; if he will place copies of speeches not available in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [55844]

Dr. Whitehead: DTLR Ministers have undertaken a very wide range of speaking engagements since 7 June 2001. A record of all speeches is not held centrally and could be compiled only at disproportionate cost. Key ministerial speeches are available on the DTLR website address: http://www.dtlr.gov.uk/about/ministers/speeches/index.htm. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Technical Support Contracts

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what technical support contracts were awarded by the Health and Safety Executive between 1 January and 31 December 1997. [55778]

Dr. Whitehead: The information requested has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Religious Affiliations (Staff)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will collect statistics on the religious affiliation of staff employed in local government with special reference to Muslim women in the work force; and if he will make a statement. [55441]

Dr. Whitehead: My Department has no plans to do so. Some local authorities already collect and monitor statistics relating to diversity and equal opportunity issues. However, this does not currently include religious affiliation of staff. In 2003 legislation against discrimination of grounds of religion or belief will come into force in order to comply with our responsibilities under the employment directive. All employers, including local authorities, will need to consider how best to meet their responsibilities under this legislation. The best employers will recognise the advantages of a fully diverse work force.

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what publicly owned accommodation is made available to him in his official role; how many nights he has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost is of maintaining each of these properties. [55101]

Dr. Whitehead *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* No publicly owned accommodation is made available to the Secretary of State in his official role.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

MOX (Sellafield)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to her reply to the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), of 15 April 2002, *Official Report,* column 748W, on British Nuclear Fuels, if she will place in the Library a copy of BNFL's safety case for the receipt, handling and storage of the faulty mox on the Sellafield site. [54363]

Mr. Wilson: No. Safety cases submitted to meet HSE's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate's specific regulatory requirements are "relevant information" under s28 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and may not be made public when the licensee withholds consent.

Energy Policy

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans the Government have for consulting on energy policy; and if she will make a statement. [57109]

Mr. Wilson: I am pleased to announce today that the Government has launched a major consultation on energy policy. I have placed copies of the consultation document in the Libraries of the House.

We want to know how people think energy policy should develop.

I am determined to make the consultation process as open and inclusive as possible. It will run from now till the end of the summer, leading to a White Paper around the turn of the year. This will include a response to the Performance and Innovation Unit's Energy Review and to its emphasis on a low-carbon economy and greater energy efficiency.

Employment Law

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations she has received regarding a change in the law concerning probation periods; and what plans she has to review this part of employment law. [55902]

Alan Johnson: None. We have no plans.

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent research she has commissioned into the rights of employees working probationary periods prior to full-time contracts; and if she will publish the results of such research. [55910]

Alan Johnson: None.

Work Fatalities

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action she is taking to reduce the number of work-related illnesses and accidents that result in death. [55006]

Dr. Whitehead: I have been asked to reply.

The primary responsibility for avoiding fatalities arising from work-related accidents and ill health rests with employers and workers. The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) and Health and Safety Executive have statutory responsibilities to promote health and safety and, with local authorities to enforce the law.

In 1999 the Government and the HSC recognised that improvement in health and safety including reducing the number of fatalities had reached a plateau and for that reason launched a review of health and safety. This resulted in the Revitalising Health and Safety Strategy and the first ever 10 year national health and safety targets.

HSC's Strategic Plan sets out how HSC will focus its effort to deliver the Revitalising Targets. This includes priority programmes focusing on areas of major concern in relation to fatalities, as well as accidents and ill health.

HSC will be reporting regularly on this long-term plan. The next report will be in the autumn.

Advisory Committee Mandates

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the mandate of the Restricted Committee of the Safety and Health Commission for the Mining and other extractive industries is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55240]

Dr. Whitehead: I have been asked to reply.

The Restricted Committee of the Safety and Health Commission for the Mining and Other Extractive Industries (SCHMOEI) is a committee comprising

representatives from the governments of the member states of the European Union which meets immediately prior to the full meetings of the main committee. Its role is to prepare the meetings of the main committee which is a tripartite body.

SCHMOEI's terms of reference include:

following the developments regarding health and safety in coalmines and other extractive industries especially in matters of accident prevention;

advising on the issues involved in compiling comparable accident statistics;

facilitating the exchange of information and experience among persons responsible for health and safety matters;

proposing appropriate measures for ensuring the necessary liaison among the rescue services of the Community countries.

The UK members of the restricted committee are the Health and Safety Executive's Chief Inspector of Mines and the Head of Division with responsibility for safety policy for mining and other extractive industries.

The committee meets twice a year. The secretariat is provided by the European Commission, which provides interpreting services etc. The European Commission also pays the travel expenses of the representatives. The costs to UK public funds are therefore the accommodation costs for the staff attending meetings (less than £1000 per year) and their salary costs.

SCHMOEI publishes an annual report. As a tripartite body its meetings are open to representatives of employers and employees.

The European Commission has published proposals to merge SCHMOEI with the main Advisory Committee on Safety and Health.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bangladesh

James Purnell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much in *(a)* overseas aid and *(b)* debt relief assistance has been spent per year on Bangladesh by the Government since 1997. [55475]

Clare Short: The Bilateral Development Assistance and Debt Relief for Bangladesh since 1997 was:

£000

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Bilateral development assistance	39,078	67,361	71,794	76,920
Of which was debt relief	559	443	292	0

In addition the UK contributes development assistance via multilateral organisations. The estimated contribution for Bangladesh is as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1997	14.6
1998	41.8
1999	6.0
2000	37.7

James Purnell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how the Commonwealth debt initiative aided *(a)* Bangladesh and *(b)* other moderately-indebted countries; and what future plans the Government have to extend debt relief to Bangladesh. [55476]

Clare Short: The Commonwealth debt initiative does not apply to Bangladesh. The initiative was launched in 1997 to cancel aid debts of poorer Commonwealth countries who are committed to international development targets. Bangladesh had already had its UK aid debts written off under retrospective terms adjustment prior to that date.

Aid debt worth about £50 million has been written off under the Commonwealth debt initiative for middle-income countries largely in the Caribbean.

There are no plans to extend debt relief to Bangladesh since Bangladesh's current external debt burden is sustainable. But Bangladesh received £773.88 million in aid, of which £68.28 million came from the UK in 2000 (the latest year for which figures are available).

Sick Leave

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many days of sick leave were taken in her Department last year; how many related to employees suffering *(a)* stress and *(b)* other mental health problems; and what the cost was to her Department. [56479]

Clare Short: 8,399 days were taken in the year 2000, the last year for which published figures are available.

Information on sick leave is not held by these precise categories but can be provided in terms of staff suffering from stress related illnesses generally. The number of days lost in 2000 in this category was 1,277.

Information on costs is not readily available and could not be obtained without disproportionate cost.

Primary Education

Paul Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of her budget is allocated for the provision of primary education in developing countries; and if she will make a statement. [56440]

Clare Short: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) on 7 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1067W.

Disclosure of Interests

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what rules apply to the disclosure of interests on the part of those serving on public bodies which are responsible to her Department. [56458]

Clare Short: The holders of public appointments which are the responsibility of my Department have been advised of the requirements contained in the Cabinet Office Model Code of Practice for Board Members of Advisory Non-departmental Public Bodies which require declaration of any such interests and withdrawal from any discussion of matters in which they have an interest.

Humanitarian Assistance (Middle East)

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what meetings have taken place since 1 April between members of the British diplomatic staff in Israel and Israeli officials, with regard to securing the safe delivery of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian territories occupied by the Israeli Defence Force; what the outcome of these meetings was; and if she will make a statement; [55157]

(2) what meetings have taken place since 1 April between her Department and *(a)* Israeli officials and *(b)* members of the Israeli diplomatic staff in the UK with regard to securing the safe delivery of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian territories occupied by the Israeli Defence Force; what the outcome of these meetings was; and if she will make a statement. [55153]

Clare Short: In parallel with representations by Ministers and those made to Israeli officials by British diplomats in the UK, the British ambassador has on the instructions of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised our concerns about the safe delivery of humanitarian medical aid to those in need. The Israeli response has not been satisfactory. It is still not certain that the humanitarian agencies have unrestricted access to the affected areas. Israeli forces have obligations under international humanitarian law to allow these agencies to do their work in the Occupied Territories.

Timber

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures were taken to ensure the use of sustainable timber in procuring timber for the refurbishment of 1 Palace street; and if she will make a statement. [56038]

Clare Short: The contractual documentation required all such procurement to be carried out in accordance with standards set by the Building Research Environmental Evaluation Assessment Methodology (BREEAM) in relation to materials and the environmental implications of materials selection.

The background to this is that a small section of our new headquarters is grade 2 listed, and was built in 1861. It contains sections of mahogany doors and panelling. Under planning regulations we were required, when refurbishing the building, to match the appearance of the existing finishes. In order to do so the contractor obtained a quantity of Sapele wood veneer from F. R. Shadbolt and Sons, for use in this area of the building. Shadbolts are founder members of the WWF 1995+ group, a timber and timber buyers group set up by WWF for the purpose of improving forest management. The Sapele veneer supplied by Shadbolts came from existing stocks, bought in 1983, and which, with the consent of WWF, they are allowed to continue to supply.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will list the non-governmental organisations consulted in drawing up the Second UK Periodic report under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. [53773]

Mr. Denham: Although non-governmental organisations were involved in drawing up the Second UK Periodic report, it has not been possible to locate records of the full list of those consulted following the transfer of responsibility for this between Departments.

Teachers' Pensions

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if the teachers' pension index is linked; and if she will make a statement. [55730]

Mr. Timms: Teachers' Pensions, in common with all other public service pensions, are increased in line with the Retail Prices Index. The increase for the current financial year, as specified in the 2002 Pensions (Increase) Review Order, is 1.7 per cent.

Services for the Deaf

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many teachers are able to teach deaf children; and how many are able to teach using sign language. [55335]

Mr. Timms: My Department does not hold these statistics centrally. However we understand, from an exercise undertaken by the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) in January 2000, that, at that time, there were approximately 1,800 qualified teachers of the deaf in England and approximately 200 in training.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures are in place to ensure that deaf students are able to continue their education to the level of their choice. [55336]

Margaret Hodge: The Government are committed to ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to go as far as their talents and efforts will take them. The Learning and Skills Act 2000 sets out the statutory provision for the assessment of young people with learning difficulties and disabilities and the Connexions Partnerships will deliver that requirement. From April 2002, where a Connexions Partnership is not operational, the local careers service is required to draw up action plans for all statemented young people who are in their final year of compulsory schooling and who intend to leave school for further education or training. From the academic year starting September 2002, Connexions Partnerships, where operational, will be expected to conduct assessments for all young people with learning difficulties and disabilities (whether or not they have statements) who are in their last year of compulsory schooling, who are over compulsory school age but under 25, or if they are receiving or are likely to receive post-16 education or training or higher education.

Under the Learning and Skills Act 2000, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has a specific responsibility to help young people and adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD). For those learners who wish to pursue a programme of further education, the LSC provides funding to enable colleges to provide the learning support necessary to ensure individual learners have access to their chosen programme of study, for

example, to provide a signer to support a deaf/hearing impaired learner. Where learning needs are more complex or specialised, the LSC will work with Connexions and other agencies to secure appropriate boarding accommodation as part of a much broader learning package. Although most young people with learning difficulties should find their educational needs can be met locally, some will need to be placed in specialist colleges away from their home area. Connexions Partnerships can make flexible arrangements in the best interests of young people so that someone at a specialist college may be supported by a personal adviser from either their home or host area. We will ensure that Connexions and the LSC work together with learning providers, social services departments, health authorities and other support agencies, to ensure that young people with profound and complex learning difficulties have access to an appropriate mix of personal care and learning provision.

The Government have also demonstrated their commitment by introducing Part IV of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 as amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Act 2001. From September 2002, it will be unlawful for bodies responsible for the provision of further education, higher education, adult and community learning and youth services to discriminate against disabled students or other disabled people by treating them less favourably than others. The Act covers everything from physical disability, hearing and visual impairment, to mental health problems and dyslexia. The Government have made £172 million available over 2002–04 to support the implementation of the Act; this will enable responsible bodies to raise awareness of and make any adjustments necessary to meet the needs of disabled people. Additional funding, guidance and support will be made available through organisations such as the Disability Rights Commission, the LSC and the Higher Education and Funding Council for England.

Financial support is also available for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to complete their studies via their school, Connexions/careers service, college or university.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what PFI school building schemes have been approved by her Department; and, in each case, what *(a)* the date of approval, *(b)* the names of the schools covered by the scheme, *(c)* the actual or planned opening date of each school, *(d)* the capital cost of each school and *(e)* the capital cost per pupil place in each school were. [55070]

John Healey: 47 projects have now reached financial and/or commercial close, and a further 24 projects are in procurement, having been approved by the Treasury-chaired Project Review Group (PRG). Details of these projects can be found on the Department's website at www.teachernet.gov.uk/schoolsprivatefinanceinitiative. In addition there are a further 30 schemes which are currently preparing Outline Business Cases for consideration by PRG.

It would incur disproportionate cost to provide the further information.

Individual Learning Accounts

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when a replacement scheme for individual learning accounts will be launched. [55056]

John Healey: There will be a replacement ILA-type scheme building on the strengths of the ILA and taking in to account findings from the recently published stakeholder consultation and Select Committee reports. We will announce our plans in due course.

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if the new individual learning account scheme will allow individuals to top-up the Government's financial contribution to their education and training. [55055]

John Healey: We are currently considering a wide range of recommendations from a number of different sources for a new ILA- style scheme. The issue of the individual's own contribution to the costs of learning is among those being considered in the work under way to develop a successor programme.

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills whether it is her policy that small learning providers should continue to supply training under the new individual learning account scheme; and if she will make a statement. [55980]

John Healey: We are currently considering a wide range of recommendations for a new ILA-style scheme from a number of different sources, including the Education and Skills Select Committee report and the findings from our stakeholder consultation exercise. Among those consulted were small learning providers participating in the ILA scheme and the Federation of Small Businesses. We will announce our plans for a successor scheme, including delivery arrangements, in due course.

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if it is her policy that Capita should be the provider of the support infrastructure for the new individual learning account scheme. [55979]

John Healey: We are now moving closer to settling the design for a successor programme which will incorporate the lessons which we have learned following the closure of ILAs last November. We continue to work closely with Capita to wind down the current scheme and to ensure we learn the lessons for its successor scheme. We will announce our plans for a successor scheme, including delivery arrangements, in due course.

Criminal Offences

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many criminal offences have been *(a)* created and *(b)* abolished by her Department since 1997. [55436]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: A comprehensive list of new and abolished offences could only be provided at disproportionate cost. We can however provide the following information about the following education measures of the Department for Education and Employment enacted since January 1997 and before June

2001. No criminal offences have been created or abolished by the Department for Education and Skills since June 2001.

The Education Act 1997 created the offence of obstructing the Chief Inspector of Schools for England in the performance of his duties and a similar offence in relation to the Chief Inspector for Wales.

The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 created two offences: obstructing a member of the Inspectorate or a registered nursery education inspector in the exercise of his duties and a similar offence in the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Act 1996 which was repealed when the 1998 Act offence came into force.

The Learning and Skills Act 2000 created six offences, all concerned with the obstruction of persons carrying out school inspections in England or in Wales.

The SEN and Disability Act 2001 inserted section 28J into the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, creating an offence of failing to comply with a requirement to disclose documents.

Three offences not contained in education legislation but relating to teachers are section 3 of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2000 (having sex with a person under 18 where in a position of trust) and section 35 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 (a person disqualified from working with children applying to work in a regulated position, including teaching, and knowingly to offer such a person such work).

The total number of offences created and listed above is 14.

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, pursuant to the oral answer to the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) of 25 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 448, on the Learning and Skills Council, what the cost is of bringing funding for the education of 16 to 19 years olds in further education colleges in line with that of school sixth forms. [55276]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* Given the different ways in which schools and colleges are funded and the very much broader remit of colleges, comparisons on the funding of the education of 16 to 19 year olds are far from straight forward. My Department is currently considering the best basis for making sound comparisons. The Government remains firmly committed to bring up the level of funding of colleges towards that of school sixth forms. However, as we have repeatedly made clear, this will take time and must be done as resources allow.

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what publicly owned accommodation is made available to her in her official role; how many nights she has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost was of maintaining each of these properties in the last 12 months. [55099]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills does not have publicly owned accommodation available in her official role.

Business Development Unit

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, pursuant to her answer of 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 906W, on the Business Development Unit, what proportion of the £7.3 million sponsorship was *(a)* in cash and *(b)* in kind; and if she will list examples of the latter. [55405]

Mr. Timms: The £7.3 million sponsorship referred to in my answer on 2 May is divided into £2.7 million cash, and £4.6 million in-kind support. Examples of in-kind support include the provision of free or subsidised computers; presentational equipment and other resources for teaching such as books and CD-ROMs; training for teachers; ICT support; and employer and employee time.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans she has to introduce education maintenance allowances nationwide. [55703]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We will be taking decisions on any future extension of the scheme on the basis of the rigorous evaluation currently being conducted.

Margaret Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many pupils in Luton have benefited from the educational maintenance allowance pilot scheme since its introduction. [55755]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The education maintenance allowance became available in Luton in September 2000. During the academic year 2000–01, 886 students benefited from EMAs. In the current academic year 1,588 students have received weekly payments so far. Some of these students receiving EMA in this academic year will now be benefiting from a second year of support.

Sector Skills Council (Tourism Industry)

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what her policy is on the creation of a sector skills council to service the tourism industry. [56029]

John Healey: Five Trailblazer Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) were announced in December 2001. The expression of interest from the tourism and hospitality industry was not selected in this instance. However, non-selection as a trailblazer does not preclude a sector from submitting an expression of interest to form a SSC.

A business adviser has been working with the tourism and hospitality sector. A readiness assessment has been carried out to determine what further work needs to be done before proposals from the sector can be considered by the Sector Skills Development Agency. The sector will be advised of the outcome shortly.

Key Stage 1

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many classes at Key Stage 1 have more than

30 children in them; how many Key Stage 1 children are in classes of over 30; and when all Key Stage 1 children will be taught in classes of under 30 children. [55020]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 placed a duty on local education authorities and schools to ensure that infant classes for five, six and seven-year-olds taught by one teacher were limited to no more than 30 pupils by September 2001 at the latest. The legislation does allow the limit of 30 to be exceeded in certain circumstances. Such circumstances include, for example, the admission of an infant outside of the normal admission round, and for whom there is no other suitable school nearby, or on the direction of an admission appeal panel.

The January 2002 annual schools census found that out of a total of 61,527 infant classes, 329 (0.5 per cent.) classes containing 10,398 children, were reported as containing 31 or more pupils on the day of the count. Of these classes 249 contained 31 or more pupils because of reasons permitted by the legislation. Over 99 per cent. of all infants are now in classes of 30 or fewer.

Cleeve School, Cheltenham

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will make a statement on the reasons underlying her decision on the bid made by Gloucestershire county council for a PFI for Cleeve School, Bishop's Cleeve, Cheltenham. [54649]

John Healey *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* The application from Gloucestershire local education authority (LEA) for PFI credits in 2003–04 was not supported as it did not meet the criteria, as set out in the guidance issued to LEAs on 31 July 2001, to the same extent as those applications from other authorities which were supported. An official from the Department met with members and officers from Gloucestershire LEA on 26 April to provide detailed feedback and to explore how the application might be strengthened for future years.

Recruitment

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many net additional staff her Department has recruited in each month since June 2001 at *(a)* executive officer level and *(b)* administrative level. [52425]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The information requested is set out in the table as follows.

	Executive Officer level		*Administrative Officer level*	
Month/Type of staff	*Headcount*	*FTE*	*Headcount*	*FTE*
June 2001				
Permanent	−1	−1	−2	−1
Temporary	+1	+1	+7	+6
Total	—	—	+5	+5
July 2001				
Permanent	+4	+4	+3	+3
Temporary	+3	+3	+37	+36
Total	+7	+7	+40	+39
August 2001				
Permanent	−13	−13	−16	−15
Temporary	+2	+2	−11	−11
Total	−11	−11	−27	−26
September 2001				
Permanent	+4	+4	+5	+5
Temporary	−6	−6	−19	−19
Total	−2	−2	−14	−14
October 2001				
Permanent	+5	+5	−1	−1
Temporary	−1	−1	+7	+6
Total	+4	+4	+6	+5
November 2001				
Permanent	+25	24	+7	+6
Temporary	−3	−3	−12	−11
Total	+22	+21	−5	−5
December 2001				
Permanent	+4	+5	+7	+7
Temporary	+1	+1	−2	−1
Total	+5	+6	+5	+6
January 2002				
Permanent	+13	+13	+18	+18
Temporary	+2	+2	+4	+4
Total	+15	+15	+22	+22
February 2002				
Permanent	+5	+5	+3	+3
Temporary	+4	+4	−10	−9
Total	+9	+9	−7	−6
March 2002				
Permanent	−2	−2	−2	−2
Temporary	+6	+6	−9	−9
Total	+4	+4	−11	−11

+ = An increase in staffing numbers

− = A decrease in staffing numbers

Note:

Full-time equivalent (FTE) numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will place in the Library copies of each version of the internal guidance which have been drawn up by her Department since 1 January 1999 to assist staff in her Department to answer subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 1998. [53362]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills) gave to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) on 25 April 2002, *Official Report,* column 446W.

Teachers

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many *(a)* agency teachers and *(b)* teachers on contracts of one term or less were employed in schools in England, broken down by local education authority, in each of the last five years. [53663]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 30 April 2002]:* The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

School Transport

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many school buses are in use in England. [54861]

John Healey: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures she has introduced to increase transport for children on the daily school run. [54862]

John Healey: Local education authorities provide home to school transport which fulfils statutory requirements set out in the Education Act 1996. They also have discretion to make additional transport provision to meet local needs. There have been no recent changes to these arrangements.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans she has to improve the safety of children on their journeys to and from school. [54796]

John Healey: Home to school transport is the responsibility of local education authorities. They must monitor the condition of vehicles used for transporting pupils from home to school and report any safety defects to the Vehicle Inspectorate, which sponsors the annual Operation Coachman inspection of buses and taxis used for the school run.

This Department, in partnership with the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, is taking steps to improve the safety of children whenever they use the roads, on the school journey and at other times, through a combination of engineering, enforcement and education measures. An example is a scheme recently announced by my transport colleagues that is giving children from vulnerable backgrounds practical roadside training.

Departmental Functions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will list the functions of her Department that have been *(a)* market tested and *(b)* outsourced in each of the last five years, specifying the (i) money saving and (ii) percentage saving in each case. [42985]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: It will not be possible to answer this question without incurring disproportionate cost.

Post-16 Funding

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what recent representations she has received on the transparency of the arrangements for post-16 funding by the Learning and Skills Council; and if she will make a statement; [55086]

(2) what representations she has received from *(a)* schools, *(b)* local education authorities and *(c)* trade unions on the transition of post-16 funding from local education authorities to the Learning and Skills Council; and if she will make a statement. [55087]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: My right hon. Friend has received wide-ranging representations from a number of schools, local education authorities and trade unions.

The principles of the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) common funding approach are based on extensive consultations since 1999.

The funding system is designed to be transparent, objective, and flexible enough to cope with different modes of learning. Key elements are: national base rates weighted to reflect the higher costs of some forms of training; rewarding achievement; additional funding recognising disadvantage factors; and an uplift to reflect the higher cost of delivery in London and related areas. The foremost principle is that funding follows the learner.

The Real Terms Guarantee given to sixth forms means that their funding will be maintained relative to 2000–01 funding levels, provided pupil numbers are maintained. The Learning and Skills Council has calculated two figures for each sixth form—its adjusted RTG and its LSC formula allocation—and the school will receive the higher of the two. The Financing of Maintained School Regulations 2002 have been amended to ensure that sixth forms funded through the LSC formula see some benefit. For 2002–03 schools should gain a minimum of one third of the difference between the RTG and the formula allocation, where that allocation is higher. We intend to amend the regulations further for 2003–04 to ensure that such schools have a minimum two-thirds gain in that year.

Mathematics

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will list reports published by the Government between 1972 and 2002 that concern mathematics, including *(a)* the study and teaching of mathematics of school pupils from starting age to Advanced Level, *(b)* the shortage of mathematics teachers, *(c)* the declining levels of students undertaking mathematics courses in further and higher education and *(d)* the failure to engage the interest of pupils studying mathematics. [49852]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. A list is available of mathematics publications issued or sponsored by the Department for Education and Skills, its predecessors and non-departmental public bodies, during the period 1972–2002. However, the list is not comprehensive or official. I am placing a copy in the Libraries, together with figures for Higher Education students studying mathematics for the period 1994–95 to 2001–02.

Asylum Seekers

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what representations she has made to further education colleges regarding time taken off each month by students waiting for their asylum applications to be processed to report at Gatwick. [54158]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: None. Asylum processing arrangements are a matter for the Home Office. It is important that students attend Immigration Service reporting centres as required. I would expect further education colleges to plan learning for asylum seeker students as they would any other students and take account of an individual's personal circumstances wherever practicable.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills which chief education officers and other interested organisations were consulted on removing some asylum-seeking children from sections 13 and 14 of the Education Act 1996; and if she will place their responses in the Library. [54736]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* A consultation exercise was conducted with a very small number of chief education officers to gather views on the removal of some children of asylum seekers from sections 13 and 14 of the Education Act 1996. They were asked to treat this consultation as confidential. In view of the fact that those whose views were sought were approached on a confidential basis we do not consider it appropriate to list those who were consulted.

Sure Start

Linda Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when she plans to authorise a further round of local Sure Start programmes. [56841]

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills and I have today invited the following districts in England to set up 85 new sure start programmes:

Ashfield
Barking and Dagenham
Barnet
Barnsley
Bath and North East Somerset
Birmingham[1]
Blackburn with Darwen
Blyth Valley
Bradford
Breckland
Broxtowe
Burnley
Camden
Canterbury
Charnwood
Coventry
Derwentside
Doncaster
Dudley
Greenwich
Hackney
Halton
Hammersmith and Fulham
Haringey
Hull
Ipswich
Islington
Kirklees
Knowsley
Lambeth
Leeds
Leicester
Lewes
Lewisham
Lincoln
Liverpool[1]
Manchester[1]
Mansfield
Middlesbrough
Newcastle
Newham
North East Lincolnshire
North Lincolnshire
North Norfolk
Norwich
Nottingham
Oldham
Pendle
Penwith
Peterborough
Portsmouth
Preston
Rochdale
Salford
Sandwell
Sedgefield
Selby
Sheffield
Shrewsbury and Atcham
South Kesteven
South Tyneside
Southwark
St. Helens
Stockton on Tees
Stoke on Trent
Sunderland
Sutton
Tameside
Teesdale
Telford and Wrekin
Tower Hamlets
Vale Royal
Wakefield
Walsall
Waltham Forest
Wandsworth
Warrington
Warwick
Westminster
Wirral
Wolverhampton
Wycombe.

[1] Denotes districts which have been invited to develop two programmes in the sixth wave.

We have placed a copy of the guidance for this sixth wave of programmes in the Libraries.

These new programmes are an addition to the 437 programmes which are already delivering services to young children and their families in disadvantaged areas or currently developing their plans. This announcement brings the total number of sure start programmes announced so far to 522. They will become operational from summer 2003 when we will be well on schedule to meeting the public service agreement target of 500 programmes operating by 2004, reaching one third of all

poor children aged under four and their families in England. This will be a significant contribution to the Government's aim of eradicating child poverty by 2020.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

EU Enlargement

13. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met Foreign Ministers of EU applicant countries to discuss enlargement issues. [54380]

Peter Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I regularly meet our opposite numbers from the candidate countries. I visited Cyprus last month, and the Foreign Secretary plans to visit Bucharest, Budapest, Prague and Bratislava later this month.

23. **Mr. David:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress in negotiations with EU applicant countries. [54390]

Peter Hain: The Laeken European Council confirmed the EU's determination to complete negotiations with those countries that are ready at the end of this year, so that they can participate in the next European Parliament elections in 2004. The negotiations are on course to meet this timetable.

Currently 11 of the 12 countries in negotiations have opened 30 chapters. Cyprus has closed 27 chapters, Slovenia and Lithuania have both closed 26, the Czech Republic has closed 25, Hungary, Estonia, Slovakia and Latvia have closed 24, Poland has closed 23, Malta has closed 21, and Bulgaria has closed 17. Romania has opened 24 chapters and closed 11.

36. **Gillian Merron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures his Department is taking to help United Kingdom business prepare for EU enlargement. [54405]

Peter Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier in the House today to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Rosemary McKenna), at columns 635–36.

Cyprus

14. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will report on the recent ministerial visit to Cyprus; and if he will make a statement on progress on negotiations between the Greek and Turkish communities on the island. [54381]

Peter Hain: I visited Cyprus on 10 and 11 April and met, among others, President Clerides and Mr. Denktash. I remain hopeful that a settlement can be found that will enable a reunited island to join the EU.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the state is of the peace talks in Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [56161]

Peter Hain: Face-to-face talks with UN involvement for a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement are at an important stage. The UK and the international community hope to see a reunited Cyprus accede to the EU. We are working hard to help all involved to move negotiations forward and co-operating fully with the UN Secretary-General's special adviser, Alvaro de Soto.

As the UN Security Council stated on 2 May, the time has now come to set down on paper areas of common ground between the two sides, with the aim of establishing the component parts of a comprehensive settlement which takes full consideration of relevant UN resolutions and treaties; and, where differences remain, to narrow and remove those through a process of negotiation focused on compromise formulations.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has welcomed UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's visit to Cyprus, from 14 to 16 May. He said:

> "it is a timely contribution to the process launched by the two leaders in Cyprus. The Cyprus problem has gone on too long. It is time we saw decisive steps towards a settlement."

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact the peace talks in Cyprus will have on Cyprus' accession to the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [56162]

Peter Hain: The UK and the international community want to see a reunited Cyprus accede to the European Union. We are working hard to help all involved to move negotiations forward and co-operating fully with the UN Secretary-General's special adviser, Alvaro de Soto.

The UK supports agreement of the Helsinki European Council in 1999 that, taking into account all relevant factors, a political settlement on Cyprus would facilitate, but is not a precondition of, Cyprus' accession to the EU. Cyprus continues to make good progress in the accession negotiations and is expected to complete them at the Copenhagen European Council in December.

Greece (British Plane Spotters)

15. **David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has recently met the representatives of the British citizens recently convicted of security offences in Greece; and if he will make a statement. [54382]

Mr. Bradshaw: I have not met any representatives of the recently convicted British nationals in question. However, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary intends to meet a group on 23 May at the Foreign Office. My noble Friend the Baroness Amos who has responsibility for consular matters met the group on 22 January.

Colombia

16. **Paul Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance he is giving to efforts to renew the peace process in Colombia. [54383]

Mr. MacShane: We continue to play an active role in efforts to renew the peace process in Colombia. We condemn the violence, kidnapping and involvement in the drugs trade by all illegal groups in Colombia. We remain in close touch on this with our EU partners, the US Administration and the United Nations, together with the Colombian Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department has held with British-based corporations who are involved in mineral exploration in Colombia covering the rights of local people; and if he will make a statement. [55611]

Mr. MacShane *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* The FCO, in partnership with several leading international oil and mining companies, human rights NGOs and Corporate Social Responsibility organisations has developed a set of "Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights in the Extractive Industries". Launched in December 2000, they provide guidance on how companies can best fulfil their human rights objectives in security provision in conflict-prone regions. The participating companies, in dialogue with NGOs convened by Governments, have been working to implement the Principles of the ground. The Governments have organised in-country meetings in several countries, including Colombia, to promote local implementation of the Principles by oil and mining companies.

Sub-Saharan Africa

17. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about progress being made to maintain democracy and peace in sub-Saharan Africa. [54384]

Mr. MacShane: The FCO is working to bring peace and security to Sierra Leone, helping to end to the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea and to resolve the conflicts in the Great Lakes Region, Sudan and Angola, as well as co-ordinating international pressure on the Mugabe regime to respect democracy.

The United Kingdom also supports to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), aimed at improving political and economic governance in Africa.

Zimbabwe

18. **Dr. Murrison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Zimbabwe. [54385]

Mr. MacShane: What has happened in Zimbabwe is a tragedy, imposed by Robert Mugabe. The only way back is through respect for the rule of law, and a return to democratic principles and sensible economic policies.

Our policy towards Zimbabwe, in the aftermath of the election, is to work with Zimbabwe's friends in Africa and internationally to promote democracy, good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

25. **Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last had discussions with the Zimbabwean authorities about the security of British passport holders living in Zimbabwe. [54393]

Mr. Bradshaw: The security situation of British Passport holders in Zimbabwe is directly related to the general deterioration of law and order in that country and which affects all Zimbabweans. The Secretary of State has not discussed the matter with the Zimbabwean authorities. However our High Commission has made representations on behalf of British nationals and continues to provide all consular assistance it properly can to individual British Citizens when requested.

27. **Barbara Follett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy towards Zimbabwe. [54395]

Mr. MacShane: Our policy towards Zimbabwe, in the aftermath of the presidential election, is to work with Zimbabwe's friends in Africa and internationally to promote democracy, good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

34. **Mr. Bellingham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next expects to visit Zimbabwe to discuss bilateral relations. [54403]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has no plans to visit Zimbabwe.

Terrorism

19. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list his initiatives aimed at countering international terrorism in the less-developed world. [54386]

Mr. Bradshaw: We are working with a diverse range of countries that are willing to tackle terrorism. Our approach combines political, security and development initiatives.

Chemical Weapons

20. **Mr. Best:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out the reasons for the dismissal of Mr. J. Bustani, Director General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. [54387]

Mr. Bradshaw: A significant number of countries on the Organisation's Executive Council had lost confidence in Mr. Bustani. At a special conference called specifically to decide on the matter, a substantial majority voted to terminate his appointment.

Caspian Sea

21. **Mr. Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the political situation in the region of the Caspian sea. [54388]

Mr. Bradshaw: The Caspian basin countries face numerous challenges in pursuing political reform and in developing regional co-operation. The UK is working for security, stability and prosperity in the region.

Guyana

22. **Mr. Lammy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Guyana. [54389]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary visited Guyana last month. He met President Jagdeo and the Leader of the Opposition, Desmond Hoyte. I am pleased to say our relations with Guyana are excellent.

Future of Europe Convention

24. **James Purnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's aims are for the conclusions of the convention on the future of Europe. [54391]

Peter Hain: Our objective is an EU which is better understood, more democratic and which delivers the benefits our citizens expect.

29. **Mr. Hendrick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress made by the European Union convention on the future of Europe. [54398]

Peter Hain: The future of Europe convention is still in its early days, but has made steady progress since the inaugural meeting on 28 February. The current "listening" phase, due to last until end-Summer, will be followed by an "analytical" phase.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those *(a)* social partners, *(b)* professional associations, *(c)* consumer associations, *(d)* academic and student/youth associations, *(e)* Church representatives and *(f)* other foundations and associations of European interest, engaged in the Civic Forum for the Convention on the Future of Europe on behalf of the United Kingdom; what criteria were used for their selection; who selected them; and if he will make a statement. [55697]

Peter Hain: There is no selection procedure for taking part in the civic forum—any organisation can contribute. Full details of how to participate and those organisations already doing so are on the forum's website http://europa.eu.int/futurum/.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the submission of Mr. John Bruton to the Convention on the Future of Europe, with respect to improvements to parliamentary scrutiny. [55752]

Peter Hain: Mr. Bruton's paper is an interesting and wide-ranging contribution to the future of Europe debate.

The Government believe that, with the new scrutiny arrangements introduced to Parliament on 17 November 1998, UK scrutiny arrangements compare favourably with arrangements in many other EU member states. The Government are committed to effective scrutiny and welcome suggestions for further improvement.

New Delhi Declaration

26. **Mr. Doran:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of the Delhi Declaration. [54394]

Mr. Bradshaw: The New Delhi Declaration, signed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Indian Prime Minister on 6 January 2002, represents a new high-water mark in the strong and vibrant relationship between the UK and India. It identifies many areas of common interest and sets out a road map for future co-operation, both bilaterally and on the world stage. The Declaration is already having an impact.

Elements of it were discussed by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and myself in our meetings with our Indian counterparts in the last three months.

Channel Tunnel Freight Services

28. **Andy Burnham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his French counterpart about the importance of keeping the channel tunnel open to freight services. [54396]

Peter Hain: We have been meeting intensively with the French at ministerial and senior official level in recent months with the aim of resolving these issues and are continuing these discussions with the new French Government. I spoke to the French Ambassador on 8 May to reinforce our concerns.

Gujarat

30. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent disturbances in the Indian state of Gujarat. [54399]

Mr. Bradshaw: We remain very concerned by the communal violence in Gujarat, and especially by recent reports that the scale of the violence was much worse than originally thought. We have been in close and regular contact on this issue with the Government of India, who have strongly condemned the violence in Gujarat, and have given assurances, which we welcome, that they will take action to bring to justice the perpetrators of the attacks.

33. **Ms Dari Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on assistance provided to UK citizens affected by the Gujarat riots. [54402]

Mr. Bradshaw: We remained in close contact with the Indian authorities, who were responsible for the safety of British nationals, during the riots.

We immediately impressed upon the Indian authorities the need to protect British nationals, both in the cities and outlying areas. A number of requests made for assistance by British nationals were answered by the authorities, who offered escorts for those stranded.

A 24 hour emergency number was made available at our deputy high commission in Mumbai offering advice and assistance.

Our travel advice was also amended to report on the crisis as it developed.

The deputy high commission maintained and added to their list of all British nationals who had registered with them. This was added to by names supplied from communities in the UK. Our staff in Mumbai did all they could to assist those in difficulty, and to seek information on those reported as missing.

Euro

31. **Mr. Bryant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with Sweden regarding entry into the euro. [54400]

Peter Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had no recent discussions with Sweden regarding entry to the euro.

Sudan

35. **Andrew Selous:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Sudan. [54404]

Mr. MacShane: We remain deeply concerned about the situation in Sudan but believe that 2002 offers a real window of opportunity for peace and that the UK has a major role to play in ensuring that this opportunity is seized. There has been some recent progress, for example in the Nuba mountains where a ceasefire appears to be holding.

India

37. **Mr. Davidson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the United Kingdom's trade relationship with India. [54406]

Mr. MacShane: The UK's trade relationship with India is a high priority for this Government. It is highlighted by a key element of the New Delhi Declaration, which was signed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Indian Prime Minister during his visit to India in January.

An important part of this relationship is the Indo British Partnership (IBP), which was created in 1993. Since it's inception, total bilateral trade in goods and services has grown by almost 70 per cent. and now stands at close to £5 billion per annum. Over 1,600 joint ventures have been signed.

The UK is India's largest trading partner in Europe and its second largest trading partner in the world (after the US). In 2000 (the last year for which complete figures are available) the UK accounted for over 6 per cent. of India's total foreign trade.

Trade Partners UK has a detailed business plan for further developing the trade relations with India.

Lockerbie

38. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the report commissioned by the UN Secretary General on the appeal proceedings at the Scottish Court in the Netherlands (Lockerbie Court) in the case of Abdelbaset Ali Mohammed al-Megrahi *v.* HM Advocate by Professor Hans Koechler, on the basis of Security Council resolution 1192/1998. [54407]

Mr. Bradshaw: The UN Secretary-General did not commission the report from Professor Koechler. Professor Koechler's report was written on behalf of the International Progress Organisation. His assertion that the Lockerbie appeal verdict was "not a victory for justice" impugns the Scottish legal system which gave al-Megrahi a trial that met the highest standards of fairness. The Lockerbie trial demonstrated the crucial role of the criminal justice system in responding to terrorism.

Jenin

Mr. Dhanda: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what role the United Kingdom is playing in seeking to investigate the deaths at Jenin. [54401]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was one of the first to call for an independent inquiry into what happened in Jenin. The UK played a leading role in the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1405, which asked the Secretary-General to deploy a Fact-Finding Mission into Jenin. We deplore the failure of the Israeli Government to co-operate with the UN to allow the deployment of the fact-finding team.

The UK supported the paragraph in a UN General Assembly Resolution which requested that the Secretary-General present a report, drawing on the available resources and information, on the recent events that took place in Jenin and in other Palestinian cities.

Civil Service (Recruitment)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what percentage of his staff on the senior management system grade were educated at *(a)* public school, *(b)* Oxford university and *(c)* Cambridge university in each year since 1997; [50567]

(2) what percentage of *(a)* ambassadors and *(b)* high commissioners were educated at (i) public school, (ii) Oxford university and (iii) Cambridge university in each year since 1997. [50570]

Mr. Bradshaw *[holding answer 22 April 2002]:* The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's manpower system does hold some data on education details, but they are currently incomplete. We are about to survey staff on education details and I will write to my hon. Friend with the information he has requested as soon as possible. We hope to complete this exercise in about three months.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the reasons for the removal from office of Mr. Jose Bustani, formerly Director General of the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons. [53023]

Mr. Bradshaw: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones) on 8 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 240–41W.

Dr. Khalil Suleiman

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Israeli Government concerning the death of Dr. Khalil Suleiman in Jenin on 4 March; what assessment he has made of the cause of death of Dr. Khalil Suleiman; and if he will make a statement. [55158]

Mr. Bradshaw: We greatly regret the death of Dr. Suleiman who was the well-respected Director of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society's ambulance service.

We have repeatedly raised our concerns with the Israeli authorities about the need to allow ambulance workers to go about their business unimpeded and to allow humanitarian access to those in need. We have called on Israel to take all necessary precautions to spare civilians and civilian property.

We do not have confirmation of the exact circumstances surrounding Dr. Suleiman's death and we look to the relevant authorities to investigate them.

Advisory Committee Mandates

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the mandate of the Committee on the Arrangements for Implementing Europe Agreements with the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Free-trade Agreements with the Baltic states is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55388]

Peter Hain: The free trade agreements and Europe Agreements between the EU and 10 candidates for accession from central and eastern Europe (including the Baltics) are discussed at the Central European Working Group and monitored at the relevant Association Councils, Committees and specialist ad hoc sub-committee meetings.

The Central European Working Group's mandate is to monitor the implementation of the Europe Agreements and free trade agreements. UK officials participate at the Central European Working Group and regularly attend the Association Councils and Committees to support UK policy interests. EU common positions in the group are reached by member states through consensus. Substantive issues, such as proposed regulations to reduce trade barriers, are submitted to both Houses for parliamentary scrutiny.

Since May 2001, our records show that there have been 44 meetings of the group, 10 Association Councils and 10 Association Committees.

Further detail on this matter could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Moluccas

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what actions Her Majesty's Government are taking to support the peace deal agreed in the Molucca Islands of Indonesia in February; [55704]

(2) if he will make a statement on the situation in the Molucca Islands of Indonesia. [55705]

Mr. Bradshaw: We welcome the agreement brokered by the Indonesian Government between the warring factions in Maluku to end the fighting. However, this is only the first small step to reconcile the warring communities and start the process of reconstruction and repatriation. The British Government have consistently made clear their view that long-term solutions to regional conflicts in Indonesia can be achieved only through negotiation and consultation, and that extremists who break the law should be dealt with firmly to allow space for reconciliation efforts to take root. The arrest of Laskar Jihad leader, Ja'far Umar Thalib, for inciting the violence against the Christian village of Soya on 28 April was a positive step.

The UK, with our EU partners, has urged the Indonesian Government to build on this early, fragile, peace and implement in full their security and law enforcement obligations under the terms of the peace agreements. The Department for International Development (DFID) has pledged more than £4 million to help establish the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Conflict Prevention and Recovery Unit in Jakarta.

Middle East

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the incidents in which British citizens have been *(a)* killed and *(b)* wounded in (i) Israel and (ii) the territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority since 1 September 2000; and if he will make a statement. [55996]

Mr. Bradshaw: We have been made aware of four fatalities and seven injuries since September 2000 involving British nationals. One death and two injuries were as a result of suicide bombs, and three fatalities and four injuries from shooting incidents in the west bank and Israeli/Lebanese border region. The majority of incidents involved dual UK/Israeli nationals resident in the area.

Recently, three British peace protesters were also injured in the west bank following the Israeli invasion of the area.

Our travel advice strongly advises against travel to the west bank and Gaza.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement as to whether the allegations of a massacre in Jenin were accurate. [56217]

Mr. Bradshaw: Human Rights Watch in their report on the IDF military operations into Jenin have confirmed that at least 52 Palestinians were killed. The Israeli Government estimate is similar.

The UN General Assembly has passed a resolution requesting that the Secretary-General present a report, drawing on the available resources and information, on the recent events that took place in Jenin and in other Palestinian cities. We shall support the Secretary-General in this and look forward to his report.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of evidence produced by the Israeli Government supporting their allegation of support by Chairman Arafat for terrorists. [56218]

Mr. Bradshaw: We have seen the dossier, but cannot verify its authenticity. The EU Commissioner for External Affairs, Chris Patten, has made it clear that he has seen no hard evidence corroborating claims about the misuse of EU funds. The Palestinian Authority has denied its allegations.

Eurostat (Polling Questions)

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to Eurostat for the inclusion of polling questions on repatriation of powers. [55696]

Peter Hain: The British Government have not made representations to Eurostat to include questions on this issue and has no plans to do so in the future.

Turkey

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the requirement for Turkey to reform the National Security Council prior to accession to the European Union. [55698]

Peter Hain: Reform of the National Security Council is one of the medium-term priorities in the EU's Turkey Accession Partnership, which sets out key elements of Turkey's pre-accession strategy. The Government continue to support the Accession Partnership as a cornerstone of the EU's policy towards Turkey. The Turkish National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis, agreed in March 2001 as a response to the Accession Partnership, commits Turkey to reviewing the relevant articles of the constitution and other legislation in the medium-term to define more clearly the structure and functions of this council.

Council of Ministers (Definitions)

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his definition is of the Federation of Nation States as discussed at Council meetings; and if he will make a statement. [55693]

Peter Hain: The term "Federation of Nation States" has been used by several European leaders to describe the unique political entity that is the European Union. But it has no formal definitions, accepted by all, whether in Council meetings or elsewhere.

COREPER

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many A points were agreed in each year since 1997 at COREPER; and what proportion of overall items of legislation passed this represents. [55699]

Peter Hain: The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The list of A points requiring clearance from London over the past five years amounts to over 8,000 items. These have not been stored in categories that fit easily into the strictures of the above question. The sifting of such a large amount of data would, therefore, amount to man-hours beyond the cost limit.

Li Jing-Feng

Mr. MacKay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to the Chinese Government about the arrest and disappearance of Catholic Bishop Lucas Li Jing-Feng and his assistant; and if he will make a statement. [47643]

Mr. MacShane: The fate and whereabouts of Bishop Lucas Li Jing-Feng and his assistant will be raised at the next session of the UK-China human rights dialogue to be held on 15 May.

We raise our concerns about the treatmen: of Christians in general, as well as some specific cases, with the Chinese both at our biannual human rights dialogue and at other ministerial and official level meetings with the Chinese.

Occupied Territories

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the damage caused, and likely costs of repair, to the Palestinian *(a)* Ministry of Information, *(b)* Ministry of Culture, *(c)* Ministry of Industry, *(d)* Ministry of Higher Education, *(e)* PLC, *(f)* Ministry of Local Government, *(g)* Presidential Compound, *(h)* Al-Bireh Municipality, *(i)* Beitunia Municipality, *(j)* Ministry of Economy and Trade, *(k)* Ministry of Social Affairs, *(l)* Ministry of Health, *(m)* Ministry of Interior, *(n)* Ministry of Finance, *(o)* Ministry of Agriculture, *(p)* Ministry of Environmental Affairs, *(q)* Ministry of Education, *(r)* General Personnel Council, *(s)* Ministry of Transportation, *(t)* Ministry of Supply, *(u)* Ministry of Public Works, *(v)* Ministry of Civil Affairs, *(w)* Ramallah Municipality and *(x)* Vegetable Market building during Israel's military incursion into the west bank during April. [54612]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

A detailed damage assessment is being conducted by the international agencies. A joint World bank/UNSCO (UN Special Coordinator's Office) is due to be circulated by 13 May, and follow up action discussed at a Local Aid Coordination Committee meeting later next week. EU contribution to reconstruction efforts will be considered there (from the Commission and from member states).

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Garden Compost

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions she has had with the Environment Agency regarding the safety of garden compost; and if she will make a statement. [54906]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* As the hon. Member will know, the Government strongly support composting as a way of getting value from biodegradable waste by improving soil quality and replacing non-renewable products such as peat.

Composting is covered on frequent occasions in discussions between my Department and the Environment Agency. However, the specific issue regarding the safety of garden compost rarely surfaces as householders who compost their garden waste are exempt from the requirement to have a licence or a permit under waste management or pollution control legislation enforced by the Environment Agency.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what clinical tests for foot and mouth disease were carried out by departmental vets in England to establish the existence of foot and mouth prior to 20 February 2001. [52313]

Margaret Beckett: Any person who suspects the presence of foot and mouth disease (FMD) in an animal or its carcase is legally obliged to notify MAFF/DEFRA without delay. In England and Wales in the period 1 January 1999 to 20 February 2001, there were four occasions on which a private veterinary surgeon sought a second opinion from a departmental veterinary officer in order to rule out foot and mouth disease or consider whether to treat the case as a suspect. Three were in 1999 and one in January 2001. In all four cases, clinical examination by a departmental VO ruled out the possibility of FMD without the need for laboratory tests. The last of these cases was on 1 January 2001 in Lostwithiel, Cornwall. It resulted from a post mortem inspection from a private veterinary surgeon of two sheep. The veterinary surgeon did not suspect FMD but requested confirmation from a veterinary officer from Truro Animal Health Office. A visit to inspect the carcases took place the same day. Both the veterinary surgeon and the veterinary officer were confident that FMD was not present. This list excludes the discovery of suspect FMD at Cheale's abattoir by an Official Veterinary Surgeon of the Meat Hygiene Service on 19 February 2001, which was confirmed as FMD the following day.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many animals have been slaughtered as a precautionary measure against foot and mouth in the last three months, broken down by *(a)* species, *(b)* location and *(c)* date. [41685]

Mr. Morley: Since the last case of foot and mouth disease on 30 September 2001 all animals that have been slaughtered have been either dangerous contacts as a result of sero-positive blood samples or slaughter on suspicion cases. All have been thoroughly investigated and in no case has evidence of foot and mouth virus been found.

The following table provides a breakdown by location and date of the animals slaughtered since 1 January 2002. All of these have been sheep.

Location	*Date*	*Number of sheep*
Northumberland	1 January 2002	2,067
Northumberland	9 January 2002	2
Lancashire	24 January 2002	1
Cumbria	22 February 2002	1
North Yorkshire	26 February 2002	2
North Yorkshire	11 March 2002	1

BSE

Mr. Lyons: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much compensation has been paid to farmers as a result of culling for BSE. [55017]

Mr. Morley: Compensation has been paid to farmers as a result of BSE since August 1988. A total of £277,988,250.45 was paid to 31 March 2002 inclusive. This comprised:

Compensation for slaughter of animals suspected of having BSE the basis of clinical symptoms: £147,872,499.00

Compensation for 'offspring cull' (slaughter of healthy animals with a theoretical risk of exposure to BSE through maternal transmission): £8,987,115.00

Compensation of 'selective cull' (slaughter of animals coming from the same 'cohort' as BSE cases born between July 1989 and June 1993, ie animals reared with BSE cases which are likely to have been exposed to the same risk of infection by the BSE agent in animal feed): £121,128,636.45

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the recent European Commission's Food and Veterinary Office report on the implementation by the French authorities of European rules on protective measures against BSE in France; what discussions she has had with *(a)* her French Government counterpart and *(b)* the European Commission about the report's findings; and if she will make a statement on the continuing French ban on imports of British beef. [51455]

Mr. Morley: It is the European Commission's responsibility to ensure that member states take adequate steps to follow up findings from the reports of Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) missions, to make certain that appropriate and timely corrective actions are taken and necessary improvements achieved. In the past, the Commission has prepared infringement proceedings as a result of the FVO's findings against member states which were considered to have taken inadequate steps to implement EU rules relating to BSE. It should be noted, however, that the initial response of the French authorities to the FVO's recent inspection suggests that serious attention is being paid to following-up the mission's findings, so as to rectify the deficiencies that the visit identified.

The Secretary of State continues to make it clear to both French Ministers and Commissioner Byrné that France should respect the 13 December 2001 judgment of the ECJ, which judged that the French ban was illegal. France should lift its ban on imports of British beef as soon as possible.

Flood Defences

Mr. Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what proportion of flood defences damaged in autumn 2000 have been *(a)* reinstated, *(b)* returned to their original level and *(c)* enhanced. [54233]

Mr. Morley: Operational responsibility for flood defences rests with the Environment Agency, local authorities and internal drainage boards. I understand that the Environment Agency has reinstated and returned to their original level all of their flood defences that were damaged in autumn 2000. The agency has also investigated to a pre-feasibility stage all those defences that were identified as requiring enhancement and, where

appropriate, they have been included in capital investment programmes. Information is not readily available on this basis for local authorities and internal drainage boards.

This Department provided contributions of £16.35 million to the Environment Agency and £1.0 million to internal drainage boards in respect of emergency costs and repairs following the autumn 2000 floods.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on measures she has taken to improve protection against flooding and to assist those affected in recent floods. [55175]

Mr. Morley: I plan to reduce the risk of flooding by investing in effective flood warning arrangements and in flood and coastal defences in the highest risk areas. This Department provides grants for flood and coastal defence capital works, and associated studies, which meet essential technical, economic and environmental criteria and achieve an appropriate priority score. However as the bulk of expenditure is ultimately met by taxpayers, both DEFRA and the operating authorities have a responsibility to ensure that value for money is obtained when funding works. Further to increases in the last two Spending Reviews, additional funding of £51 million over the four years from 2001–01 was announced in November 2000 following the severe flooding. In all DEFRA flood and coastal defence funding is set to increase from £66 million in 2000–01 to £114 million in 2003–04. Funding for future years will be considered in the Spending Review process. Responsibility for deciding which projects to promote and their timing rests with the operating authorities. The operating authority for each area draws on its local knowledge to decide what needs to be done.

Local authorities take the lead in providing emergency support to those affected by flooding and the costs so incurred may be eligible for refund under through Bellwin Schemes that are administered by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. The Government do not, however, provide direct financial support to those affected by flooding as it is generally an insurable risk. We are working with the insurance industry to help ensure the continued widespread availability of affordable flood cover.

Farm Assurance Schemes

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many farm assurance schemes are open to farmers in the United Kingdom; and if her Department's regional offices are equipped to advise farmers on these farm assurance schemes. [54812]

Mr. Morley: Assurance schemes are private initiatives. The Department does not maintain a comprehensive record of the schemes operating in the United Kingdom, nor does it have responsibility for advising farmers on their relative merits.

Veterinary Service

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to the answer of 18 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1058W, for what reasons she does not intend to recruit additional veterinary surgeons in 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [54220]

Mr. Morley: There are no plans to recruit State Veterinary Service (SVS) veterinarians during 2002–03. The Government are determined to ensure that the SVS has the ability to operate with maximum efficiency and be able to respond rapidly to any emergency. For this reason, plans are being put in place to recruit additional staff should the need arise. We have recently finalised a recruitment exercise and the number of permanent veterinary officers is broadly similar to 1997.

SVS veterinarians are supported by approximately 7,832 Local Veterinary Inspectors who act as agents of the SVS. Temporary Veterinary Inspectors (TVIs) are also appointed throughout Great Britain, there are approximately 280, over half of whom are currently working on foot and mouth clear up.

Veterinary Products

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will provide the declaration of interests for the members of the Veterinary Products Committee. [55471]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* The declaration of interests for members of the Veterinary Products Committee (VPC) is published in the Medicines Act 1968 Advisory Bodies Annual Report, a copy of which is available in the Library. A regularly updated version is also available on the VPC website (www.vpc.gov.uk).

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will provide the declaration of interests for the members of the Veterinary Residues Committee. [55472]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* The Veterinary Residues Committee (VRC) discussed declaration of interests at their meeting on 7 March 2002. The minutes of the meeting are available on the VRC website at vet-residues-committee.gov.uk. Officials at the Veterinary Medicines Directorate subsequently wrote to all members of the Committee asking them to update their declarations. These are being placed on the VRC's website.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what data she has collated relating to the statutory programme on multiple veterinary medicines residues for *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1999 and *(e)* 2000; and if she will make it available. [55470]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* The Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) published annual reports on surveillance for veterinary residues for the years 1996 to 2000. Copies are in the Library. Statutory surveillance is undertaken to comply with Council Directive 96/23/EC. Analysing samples for more than one substance is not required by the directive, but in practice the nature of the analytical techniques used may reveal the presence of more than one substance. Each of these would then be individually identified. Multiple

residues are very rarely found. They would be referred to in the results reported by the VMD but they are not collated.

Organic Farming

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what recent research her Department has undertaken to investigate whether organic and conventional farms differ in total factor productivity growth and its composition; and if she will place copies in the Library; [54591]

(2) what *(a)* measures and *(b)* methodology she uses to assess the relative (i) efficiency and (ii) productivity of (A) organic and (B) conventional dairy and livestock farms; and if she will make a statement; [54593]

(3) what assessment she has made of the *(a)* efficiency and *(b)* productivity of (i) organic and (ii) conventional dairy and livestock farms; and if she will make a statement; [54592]

(4) what assessment she has made of the relationship between a farmer's yield and their decision to switch to organic production; and if she will make a statement. [54594]

Mr. Morley: One of the key objectives of the DEFRA organic R & D programme is to obtain and evaluate data on the agronomic performance as well as profitability and costs of the main types of organic farm system during and after conversion. Studies are in place on stockless arable, pigs and poultry, upland sheep and beef, specialist dairy and field vegetables enterprises in which data from conventional systems is taken into account. In addition, the programme has funded the development of organic conversion planning software; a prototype is shortly to be tested with organic advisers. A summary of the Department's organic farming research programme can be found on the DEFRA website: http://www.defra.gov.uk/research/Publications/OFR_Research_Project_Summaries.zip

The Department has also funded a study of farmers' attitudes to organic conversion. The report on this study, which was carried out by the Welsh Institute of Rural Studies, can be found on the website of the University of Aberystwyth: http://www.organic.aber.ac.uk/library/Attitude%20survey.pdf

Farmers (Retirement Schemes)

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to introduce a retirement scheme for tenant farmers; and if she will make a statement; [55914]

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what progress is being made on the introduction of an early retirement scheme for farmers. [56010]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* We have no plans at present to introduce such a scheme. We consulted on the early retirement provisions of the EU Rural Development Regulation when drawing up plans for implementation of the regulation, but in the light of responses to that consultation we decided that the limited funds available for implementation would be better directed towards other measures to assist the industry. This is because the type of early retirement scheme available under the regulation could not be targeted effectively towards those who should benefit, such as tenant farmers.

The general question of policy on helping farmers to leave the industry will, however, be considered further in the light of the feedback we receive on the issues we have asked stakeholders to consider following publication of the Policy Commission report.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what pecuniary incentives offered to those companies volunteering to place an absolute cap on their emissions under the UK Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme *(a)* since its inception and *(b)* for its duration. [48978]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 15 April 2002]:* At the inception of the UK Emissions Trading Scheme, the Government offered £215 million to encourage organisations to take on voluntary binding emissions reductions targets for their greenhouse gas emissions. This incentive money was allocated to organisations through an auction in March. 34 organisations bid into the final round, taking on binding emission reduction targets totalling 4,028,176 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO_2e) by the end of the five years of the scheme. The auction cleared after nine rounds at a price of £53.37 per tonne of CO_2 equivalent emission reduction. After tax, and when related to the reduction from the baseline for each year, this equates to about £12.50 per tonne. Firms will receive their annual incentive payments only after they have achieved their annual emission reduction targets.

Entertainment Costs

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much was spent by departmental special advisers on food, alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks for entertainment purposes in each of the last five years. [46831]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* The information requested is not held centrally and could not be provided without incurring disproportionate costs.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much has been spent by Ministers in her Department since its creation on food, alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks for official entertainment purposes. [47214]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* The information requested is not held centrally and could not be provided without incurring disproportionate costs.

Village Halls

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations concerning the future funding of village halls she has received from Action with Communities in Rural England; and if she will make a statement. [55031]

Alun Michael: Action with Communities in Rural England has sent me its report, "The Status of Funding for Village Halls", which I have read with interest. My officials will meet representatives of Action with Communities in Rural England on 17 May. We shall consider what further action may be needed after that meeting.

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much money has been spent on the New Home Energy Efficiency Scheme since its introduction, broken down by the different measures. [51977]

Mr. Meacher: The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, now marketed as the Warm Front Team, was launched on 1 June 2000. The following table identifies the amount of grant spent on insulation and heating measures from June 2000 to March 2002.

£ million

	Insulation	*Heating*
HEES installed measures	58	13
HEES plus installed measures[1]	29	83

[1] HEES Plus measures includes central heating systems for the over 60s in receipt of an income-related benefit

Pesticides

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment has been made of the voluntary package of measures to reduce the environmental damage of pesticide use implemented by the industry and other stakeholders in April 2001; if she will place copies of related documentation in the Library; and if she will make a statement. [53712]

Mr. Meacher: The first progress report from the Steering Group of the Pesticides Voluntary Initiative was received in February and assessed by the Government to inform the 2002 Budget (Budget Report 2002—Chapter 7).

I am placing a copy in the Library of the House.

Farming/Tourism

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her estimate is of the changes in revenues received by the *(a)* farming and *(b)* tourism industries as a result of foot and mouth disease and the events of 11 September 2001. [54840]

Mr. Morley: It is difficult to separate out the effects of either of these events and estimates will depend on a range of assumptions. The best estimates that we have made, in conjunction with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is that foot and mouth imposed economic costs of some £3.1 billion on UK agriculture and the food industry (of which some £2.6 billion was met by the Exchequer). In the case of businesses dependent on tourism the economic losses were estimated at between £2.7 billion and £3.2 billion as a result of estimated loss of revenue of £4.5 billion to £5.3 billion. The overall losses to the economy will have been much smaller than these estimates as expenditure on trips to the countryside (by UK visitors) which were foregone because of foot and Mouth appear to have largely been replaced by spending elsewhere in the economy, either in alternative tourist locations or on goods and services unrelated to tourism.

There are no comprehensive estimates of the effects of the events of 11 September on tourism or farming. However the International Passenger Survey reports that overseas residents' total expenditure on visits to the UK was down by 19 per cent. for the three months September to November 2001 and 13 per cent. for December to February 2002 compared to the same periods in 2000.

Refrigerators and Freezers

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what studies her Department has made into the preparation by other EU states to meet the latest EU regulations on the disposal of old refrigerators and freezers, with special reference to the equipment obtained. [34837]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 11 February 2002]:* The Department has made inquiries via the British embassies. Five member states appear to have sufficient treatment facilities to deal with all their fridges. It appears that four, like the UK, are complying with the regulations as they have plant operating which can partly meet their requirements and are exporting the remaining fridges. Five member states do not appear to have plants currently which can remove CFCs from insulation foam and are either storing or exporting them, or do not meet the regulation.

Dairy Produce

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much milk produce was imported into the United Kingdom *(a)* in total, *(b)* as liquid, *(c)* as powder, *(d)* as cheese and *(e)* as yoghurt in (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2001–02. [55194]

Mr. Morley: The table shows the UK imports of milk and milk produce between 1999 and 2002.

PQ 5942—UK imports of milk and milk produce (1999—2002)

	1999		*2000*		*2001*		*2002 (Jan-Feb)*	
Product type	*Tonnes*	*£000*	*Tonnes*	*£000*	*Tonnes*	*£000*	*Tonnes*	*£000*
Liquid milk and milk product								
Buttermilk	22,537	22,148	26,120	26,623	28,859	25,654	2,498	2,280
Condensed milk	14,046	12,087	14,937	16,611	14,002	15,449	1,834	1,932
Skimmed milk	54,051	13,890	21,813	5,572	12,604	5,085	1,984	640
Whole milk	84,378	19,999	104,199	23,141	80,007	19,479	4,442	1,434
Total	175,012	68,124	167,068	71,946	135,471	65,667	10,759	6,287

PQ 5942—UK imports of milk and milk produce (1999—2002)

Product type	1999		2000		2001		2002 (Jan-Feb)	
	Tonnes	£000	Tonnes	£000	Tonnes	£000	Tonnes	£000
Powdered milk and milk product								
Skimmed milk powder	17,839	25,144	13,824	21,973	22,665	25,974	2,454	3,216
Whole milk powder	9,561	13,076	10,986	15,662	8,314	13,400	2,260	2,710
Total	27,400	38,220	24,809	37,634	30,980	39,374	4,715	5,926
Cheese	277,359	630,131	254,753	601,037	273,148	652,872	37,857	86,152
Yoghurt	68,479	55,975	131,858	67,901	144,192	72,590	6,856	5,950
Other (mainly butter and ice cream)	203,777	363,324	214,753	367,441	224,659	389,771	24,334	39,968
Grand total	752,026	1,155,774	793,241	1,145,960	808,450	1,220,273	84,521	144,283

Travellers (Horses)

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent representations she has received from travellers groups regarding *(a)* horse management and *(b)* the tethering of horses. [55878]

Mr. Morley: Friends, families and travellers advice and information unit have responded to the consultation on an Animal Welfare Bill. Their letter deals with equine tethering.

Intensive Farming (Ducks)

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on intensive farming of ducks, with particular reference to *(a)* the number of ducks intensively farmed, *(b)* the size of cages used, *(c)* the type of food that is available to them, *(d)* the availability of fresh water and *(e)* the use of antibiotics to counter disease. [54980]

Mr. Morley: DEFRA does not currently collect data on the rearing methods employed by individual duck producers or on the use of medicinal antibiotics in intensive systems. Antibiotics for ducks are licensed under the Medicines Act 1968 and are only available to counter disease on prescription from a veterinary surgeon.

Ducks are not kept in cages in the UK. Ducks must be kept in accordance with the Code of Practice on the Welfare of Ducks. The detailed recommendations for feed and water are: the birds should have easy access to adequate fresh feed each day, and have fresh water at all times; consideration should be given to the provision of water troughs which are deep enough to allow the ducks to get their heads completely under water; whatever feeding and drinking system is used sufficient trough space for feeding and drinking should be provided to prevent undue competition for feed or water; stale or contaminated feed or water should not be allowed to accumulate and should be replaced immediately; and efforts should be made to minimise the risk of drinking water freezing. The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2000 also requires that all animals must be fed a wholesome diet that is appropriate to their age and species.

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will place in the Library copies of each version of the internal guidance which have been drawn up by her Department since 1 January 1999 to assist staff in her Department to answer subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 1998. [53361]

Mr. Morley: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills), gave to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) on 25 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 446W.

Farmgate and Supermarket Prices

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to the answer of 21 March 2002, *Official Report*, columns 506–07W, what the value is of 100.0 in sterling for *(a)* agricultural producer prices and *(b)* retail prices. [48191]

Mr. Morley: The indices shown in the previous reply were three-month moving averages of the Agricultural Price Index and the Retail Price Index. The estimated prices for the period December 1999 to February 2000 which were used to compile the base value of 100.0 for both indices are given in the following table. Also given are the equivalent prices for the period October 2001 to December 2001 to aid comparison in sterling terms.

Estimated average producer prices for Great Britain and retail prices for the United Kingdom based on the API and RPI series

£ per kilogram

	December 1999 to February 2000	October 2001 to December 2001
Producer prices of finished sheep and lambs—GB[1]	1.96	1.82
Retail price of home killed lamb—UK[2]		
Loin chops (with bone)	8.14	8.49
Shoulder (with bone)	3.34	3.31

[1] Basic source: Meat and Livestock Commission. Estimated deadweight prices of Standard Quality Quotation sheep.
[2] Basic source: UK RPI, Office for National Statistics. Cut or diced lamb is also included in the RPI information quoted in the previous reply but separate prices are not published due to the variability of the individual items priced.

Oilseed Rape

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps her Department is taking to increase production of oilseed rape; what is the 2001–02 value of oilseed rape production to UK farmers; what percentage of agriculturally productive land is under oilseed rape in the last year for which figures are available; and what discussions she has

had with *(a)* the Food Standards Agency and *(b)* the Department of Health about the promotion of oilseed rape oil as a healthy dietary oil. [54493]

Mr. Morley: The Department's approach to agriculture is set out in our aims and objectives and in the recently published document "Working for the Essentials of Life". This includes increasing agriculture's responsiveness to market demands and working with the Food Standards Agency and Department of Health to encourage healthy eating.

We are currently taking this forward by seeking to reduce production subsidies through CAP reform and by consulting on improving dietary and nutritional advice. Oilseed rape is one of a number of crops that can meet farmers or consumers choices in these circumstances. Available figures indicate that the value of oilseed rape production to UK farmers is around £275 million (including arable area aid payments) and that it accounts for about 2.6 per cent. of all agriculturally productive land or approximately 8.5 per cent. of the area of land on which arable area payments are claimed).

Bovine TB

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much she has spent on bovine TB research and control in each of the past five years; how much compensation has been paid to farmers following enforced slaughtering of cattle due to bovine TB infection in each of the past five years; and if she will make a statement. [53203]

Mr. Morley: The costs of bovine TB research and control over the last five years are set out in the table. The figures for 2001–02 are not yet available. The collation method has changed during the period and the financial year figures for 1997–98 can be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

Year	*Amount (£)*
1997	16,100,000
1998–99[1]	24,833,000
1999–2000[1]	38,244,000
2000–01[1]	35,904,000

[1] Financial years

The compensation paid for cattle slaughtered to control bovine TB in each of the last five years is set out in the table. (These figures are collated on a calendar year basis for international returns.) The compensation rate was changed on 26 August 1998 from 75 per cent. of the market value of the animals (up to a ceiling based on average market price) to the full market value of the animals.

Year	*Amount (£)*
1997	2,386,029
1998	3,605,242
1999	5,770,983
2000	7,307,797
2001	7,074,125

Bushmeat

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Government have taken since 1997 to prevent the killing of highly endangered species for bushmeat. [53652]

Mr. Meacher: Most endangered species are protected by national law in all the countries they inhabit; they are also protected internationally under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). While this Government cannot intervene directly in the protection of wildlife abroad we can and do make every effort to help other countries develop and implement their own wildlife protection measures and those required under CITES.

For instance, since 1997, concern about the increasingly unsustainable nature of the bushmeat trade and its effects on endangered species led to my Department raising the issue within CITES, which resulted in the establishment of a bushmeat working group to help central and west African range states develop and implement their own solutions. We have contributed £55,000 to the working group to help the range states participate and to support the recruitment of consultants to revise and harmonise their own wildlife policies and legislation. UK work also takes place through the Convention on Biological Diversity, particularly through the forestry work programme recently adopted by parties.

We have also funded research. The results of one project, analysing existing knowledge and expertise on the bushmeat trade, highlighting gaps in data and understanding, and making recommendations on further action, have now been published and we hope that they will be of particular benefit to the CITES bushmeat working group. We have also provided £248,000, through the Darwin Initiative, to the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust and Wildlife Conservation Research Unit to provide a model of the bushmeat problem in general and develop an integrated solution to the over-exploitation of wildlife in lowland forest areas in Africa.

Endangered species particularly at risk from the bushmeat trade include gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos (pygmy chimpanzees), and unsustainable trade in bushmeat will be one of the issues addressed by the United Nations Environment Programme's new Great Ape Survival Programme (GrASP). My Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have contributed £175,000 to GrASP, some 10 per cent. of the total amount sought by UNEP. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office plans to make a further donation and our embassies and high commissions overseas have been providing logistical and political support to GrASP.

The Department for International Development (DfID), while primarily concerned with helping to eradicate world poverty, also recognises the need to address concerns about the pressures on endangered species of the bushmeat trade. DfID's concern about bushmeat is focused on the impact of the hunting, selling and consumption of bushmeat on the food security and livelihoods of poor people. For instance, DfID has supported the implementation of forestry laws in Cameroon giving communities the rights to manage their forest and wildlife resources. DfID feels the best way to encourage a sustainable bushmeat trade in Cameroon is to include it as part of a package of reforms strengthening the governance of natural resource management generally.

Nitrate Vulnerable Zones Directive

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) if she will make a statement on the results of consultation on the implementation of the nitrate vulnerable zones directive; [46782]

(2) what level of designation of nitrate vulnerable zones is *(a)* required by European directive and *(b)* proposed to be implemented in the UK; [46783]

(3) what assessment she has made of the ways in which other EU countries are implementing the nitrate vulnerable zones directive. [46781]

Mr. Meacher: The nitrates directive requires that measures to control nitrate pollution are either applied throughout England or in areas draining into polluted waters and waters at risk of pollution. Details of these options were published on 20 December 2000 in a consultation document "How should England implement the 1991 Nitrates Directive."

We are currently considering the responses to the consultation before deciding whether to implement either option 1 (the whole of England approach) or option 2 (discrete NVZ approach). We will publish an analysis of the consultation responses when we announce our decision on how we intend to implement the directive.

Six other member states have implemented the directive by applying control measures throughout their territory. A seventh, the Republic of Ireland, is also considering this option. A number of other member states are reviewing the extent of the areas that they have designated under the directive, with a view to designating additional areas.

Combined Heat and Power

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the Government's draft strategy for combined heat and power will be published. [57135]

Margaret Beckett: I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment will be launching the Government's draft "Strategy for Combined Heat and Power to 2010" for public consultation tomorrow, Wednesday 15 May. The consultation document will be available on the DEFRA website at www.defra.gov.uk and copies will be made available in the Libraries of the House.

The closing date for comments on the strategy will be Wednesday 7 August 2002.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Equality

Jean Corston: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what initial conclusions the Government have reached on the long-term arrangements for offering advice, guidance and support on equality matters. [57084]

Mrs. Roche: I am today formally announcing the start of a project considering the long-term options for the UK's equality machinery. I intend that this project will report its initial findings in the autumn.

Our first step will be to look at the feasibility of a single equality body.

The project will consider the work of the existing commissions (the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and the Disability Rights Commission (DRC)), existing discrimination legislation, and put that in the context of new legislation for equal treatment in employment and training on grounds of age, sexual orientation and religion.

We are keen to work closely with the other experts in the equalities filed on this project. The Government want to be sure that the long-term structures for equality in the UK are carefully thought out and designed to meet the needs of all, individuals and businesses alike.

The existing commissions have over different time scales made an admirable and significant contribution to equality in this country. We need to ensure that the expertise and reputation of the commissions are preserved whatever the outcome of the review—and we shall be involving and consulting them at every stage to ensure this happens.

If the outcome of the project and consultation does lead to recommendations for significant change, I would not expect any new structures to be operative in the lifetime of this Parliament.

The terms of reference for the project have been placed in the Library.

Regional Assemblies

Mr. Luff: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make it his policy that, in any referendum to establish a regional assembly in England, each unitary authority and county council area within that region will be required to approve the establishment of an assembly in addition to that referendum producing a positive result across the whole region. [56255]

Dr. Whitehead: I have been asked to reply.

No. We do not believe that individual local authorities should be able to veto the establishment of an elected regional assembly where people in a region have voted for one at a referendum.

Ministerial Training

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much has been spent by his Department on training by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52745]

Mr. Leslie: The Cabinet Office has not incurred any expenditure on training by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much has been spent by his Department on voice coaching for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52705]

Mr. Leslie: To the best of my knowledge the Cabinet Office has not incurred any expenditure on voice coaching for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years.

Government and Crown Interests

Ms Walley: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 19 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1251W, on refurbishment and the answer to the hon. Member for Gordon of 24 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 272W, if he will make a further statement in respect of progress on the chain of supply, procurement policy and the contract relating to the Cabinet Office and other continuing refurbishment and construction projects on the Government estate. [55913]

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: I have received an initial report into the issues of timber procurement for the 22 Whitehall project. I have asked for further investigation to be done on some aspects of these issues and I will report to the House when the report is finalised.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Public Access and Information

Mrs. Roe: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement on progress in improving public access to the House and information about its work. [56901]

Mr. Kirkwood: Providing information and access to the public is one of the four core tasks in the House of Commons Commission's strategic plan. Some improvements have already been made, some are under way, and others are at the planning stage.

The Office of the Clerk operates as a central point of contact for media inquiries, and, where necessary, all Departments now use the services available from the specialist communications and media advisers.

Education and schools

The Parliamentary Education Unit, which operates on behalf of both Houses, continues to develop its services for schools and teachers including a new programme of visits, Citizenship in the 21st Century, aimed at pupils aged 8–14, begun last year.

A new 60 minute video, "Parliament Uncovered", explains the work of Parliament to students aged 14–18. Until December 2002 the video is being made available to UK schools at cost price. "Parliament Uncovered" won silver in the education category of the March 2002 International Visual Communication Association Awards. Work on a new video aimed at students aged 8–13 began in April 2002.

In May 2002 the Unit's series of six education sheets was re-issued as "Parliament Explained" booklets with an improved format and rewritten contents.

The Unit's website, explore Parliament www.explore.parliament.uk, has been further developed with new material and features added.

Visitor access

Following two years of successful pilot schemes, both Houses decided earlier this year that the Summer Opening should become a permanent feature. This year, the Summer Opening of Parliament will run six days a week from 3 August to 26 September. The Commission attaches great importance to high quality public tours the year round, emphasising the role of Parliament as a working legislature. We are working towards a single official tours operation supporting both the Summer Opening and tours at other times.

The new Jubilee Visitor Cafeteria off Westminster Hall was officially opened by Mr. Speaker this morning, Tuesday 14 May. It seats 100, serves modestly priced light refreshments, and is fully wheelchair accessible.

A feasibility study for an information and visitor centre for Parliament has started and is due to be completed in July. This will review current ways in which visitors are received and will look at the options for both location and functions of a centre, together with likely usage levels. Architectural and security considerations will be taken into account.

Select committees

From the start of this year, select committee reports have had a redesigned cover, larger print and standard numbering of pages. A redesign project is under way, intended to produce reports which are more attractive and accessible to a general reader.

The Modernisation Committee recommended that notes for visitors should be available to describe how a committee works, and who the witnesses are. This arrangement has now been initiated by over a dozen committees. The House authorities are also shortly to install electronic screens at St. Stephen's entrance: these will list the day's public meetings, and I hope that this will encourage more people to attend Select committee evidence sessions.

Parliament online

A one year pilot webcasting scheme began in January 2002, with www.parliamentlive.tv providing fully comprehensive live coverage of both Chambers and debates in Westminster Hall and a range of Select and Standing Committees. The pilot will be evaluated towards the end of the year.

A redesign of the website www.parliament.uk is in progress, with the aim of improving navigation, and making it more attractive and usable for the casual inquirer as well as the specialist. The new design will go live later this year, and further improvements will be made in the future.

Public information materials

A new design for public information materials has been developed, to provide a more modern 'look and feel' without any increase in annual production budgets. This will be available in autumn 2002, following the upgrade of computer software. An editorial group has been established to ensure that the House's range of public information materials is up-to-date, comprehensive, and meets the needs of a range of external audiences.

Research

Finally, customer research completed in March 2002 has illustrated the need to continue improving the services provided to the public. Areas singled out for particular emphasis include: further improvements to the website; consolidation of the currently fragmented approach to visitors and tours; and exploring the scope for partnership with other organisations working in related fields.

TREASURY

Abu Hamza

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer further to his answer of 8 May 2002, ref 54509, what steps he is taking to freeze the assets of Abu Hamza; and if he will make a statement. [55830]

Ruth Kelly *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* The Government instructed the Bank of England on 19 April to issue a Notice to all UK banks and financial institutions requiring them to freeze any accounts found belonging to Abu Hamza, together with those of nine other individuals and organisations. Banks have taken appropriate action.

In each case the Government had reasonable grounds to suspect involvement in committing or facilitating acts of terrorism with links to al-Qaeda and Taliban. The names were subsequently announced at the meeting of G7 Finance Ministers and listed under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1390 which imposes sanctions against the Taliban, Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda and their associates. The Government remain fully committed to disrupting and closing down the sources of terrorist finances wherever they are found.

Pension Schemes

James Purnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what savings public sector pension schemes are predicted to make from the projected growth in single pension households on a like for like basis; and what the estimated costs are of introducing unmarried partner pensions across the public services. [55474]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government set out their policy regarding the provision of unmarried partner pensions in their Green Paper "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions" (Cmnd 4179, December 1998): if the membership of a public service scheme wanted to extend eligibility for survivors' pensions to unmarried partners and were prepared to meet the additional costs, the Government would be prepared to consider how practicable arrangements could be devised for providing this within a statutory scheme.

An important factor underlying this policy is cost. Estimates by the Government Actuary's department show that the additional cash cost for introducing unmarried partner pensions across the public services could range from £350 to £1,600 million a year for the future service of current members, depending on the definition of dependent partner adopted and any restrictions imposed on the availability of benefit. There would be significant additional capitalised costs associated with any wider extension of unmarried partner benefits, for example, to cover past service.

Estimates of any potential savings public service schemes might gain from the projected growth in single pension households could be derived separately only at disproportionate cost. The expected change in family structures, however, is just one of a number of factors which influence the long-term costs of the public service schemes. Many of these factors are expected to result in an increase in long-term costs, with increased life expectancy of pensioners being highly significant.

Joint Ministerial Group on Poverty

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the membership is of the Joint Ministerial Group on Poverty; and when *(a)* the group has met and *(b)* its next meeting will be. [43491]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The Joint Ministerial Committee on Poverty has met on 9 December 1999 and 26 May 2000, and will meet in July. At its last meeting the committee had the following membership:

Chancellor of the Exchequer

Secretary of State for Social Security

Chief Secretary to the Treasury

Secretary of State for Scotland

Secretary of State for Wales

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

Minister of State, Environment, Transport and the Regions (Minister for Local Government and the Regions)

First Minister, Scottish Executive

Minister for Communities, Scottish Executive

First Minister, Northern Ireland Executive Committee

Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland Executive Committee

First Secretary, National Assembly for Wales

Finance Secretary, National Assembly for Wales.

Others are invited to attend as necessary.

Parliamentary Questions

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what criteria he uses in determining what information relating to the companies from which Ministers have received hospitality he provides in answer to written parliamentary questions. [46446]

Ruth Kelly: All parliamentary questions are considered on their merits by Treasury Ministers in accordance with the provisions of the Ministerial Code. Whether or not Ministers or officials have given or received hospitality from companies or individuals does not influence in any way the answers which are given to parliamentary questions.

Employment

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the change in the number of people employed in the *(a)* public sector and *(b)* private sector since January 2000. [55013]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Philip Hammond dated 14 May 2002:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the number of people employed in the (a) public sector (b) the private sector since January 2000. I am replying in his absence. (55013)

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) provides estimates of people employed in each sector. The annual estimates for those in employment in the United Kingdom for each year from 2000–01 and 20001–02 are given in the table. These estimates are not seasonally adjusted.

Number of people employed in public and private industry—average (spring to winter), 2000 and 2001, United Kingdom (not seasonally adjusted)

	Public	*Private*
March 2000 to February 2001 (Thousand)	6,422	21,596
March 2001 to February 2002 (Thousand)	6,479	21,767
Percentage change on year percentage	0.9	0.8

Source:
Labour Force Survey

Criminal Offences

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many criminal offences have been *(a)* created and *(b)* abolished by his Department since 1997. [55429]

Ruth Kelly: Comprehensive information is not held in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The principal item of legislation for which the Treasury has been responsible since 1997 is the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. This created in the order of 35 criminal offences. However, in consequence of that Act much previous legislation was repealed, including the Insurance Companies Act 1982, the Financial Services Act 1986 and the Banking Act 1987, involving the abolition of at least 80 criminal offences.

In addition the Bank of England Act 1998 created four criminal offences.

Tax Revenue

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much it would cost each year in lost tax revenue *(a)* to remove the cap on contributions to company pension schemes and *(b)* to increase the gap by the rise in the index of average earnings since it was introduced. [55457]

Ruth Kelly: Due to the uncertainty of the behavioural effects resulting from such a change on both past and future contributions, estimates are not available.

VAT

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will estimate the cost to HM Treasury of reducing the liability for VAT to 5 per cent. for small museums; and if he will make a statement; [55585]

(2) if he will make it his policy to reduce the liability for VAT to 5 per cent. for small museums; and if he will make a statement; [55587]

(3) if he will make a statement on the impact of VAT on small museums. [55586]

Mr. Boateng: The impact of VAT on museums and other bodies depends upon their individual circumstances. No detailed assessment has been made either of the impact of VAT on small museums or of the cost of introducing a reduced VAT rate for them. The Government have no plans to introduce such a reduced rate.

Liquefied Petroleum Gas

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what support has been given to LPG conversion in terms of *(a)* the cost of conversion, *(b)* fuel tax and *(c)* vehicle excise duty (i) prior to and (ii) in the Budget; and if he will make a statement. [55851]

Mr. Boateng: In 2001–02 the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions paid nearly £5 million in grants through the Powershift programme to help to meet the costs of converting vehicles to run on liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). Duty on LPG was cut in Budget 2001 from 15p to 9p per kilogramme and a commitment was made not to increase duty in real terms until 2004 at the earliest. Budget 2002 froze duty on LPG in cash terms. The graduated VED scheme for cars first registered after 1 March 2001 offers a reduction of up to £10 a year for cars using LPG.

Pool Betting Duty

Mr. Evans: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what he estimates to be the net effect to the Treasury of the abolition of the pool betting duty and replacement with the tax on pools companies' gross profits in each of the next four years. [56183]

Mr. Boateng: An estimate of the cost of reforming pools betting duty for each of the three years to 2004–05 was published in Table B4 of the pre-Budget report November 2001.

Fraud

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption was in *(a)* his Department's Vote 1 budget and *(b)* his Department's Vote 2 budget for (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [54707]

Dawn Primarolo: There were no losses to fraud or corruption from the Treasury's resources in the period mentioned.

National Insurance Contributions

Mr. Evans: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people he estimates will pay national insurance contributions in each of the next four years. [55262]

Dawn Primarolo: Available estimates of the number of people estimated to be liable to pay national insurance contributions on an average weekly basis are given in the table.

Estimated number of UK contributors, 2000–01 to 2003–04

Million

	2000–01	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*
Class 1	21.6	21.4	21.5	21.8
Class 2	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.8
Class 3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2

These estimates were provided by the Government Actuary's Department.

Tax Credits

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what publici[illegible] he plans to give to the increase in the child component of the working families

tax credit in June; and how many extra families will become entitled to the working families' tax credit as a result of the increase. [55792]

Dawn Primarolo: The basic tax credit within working families' tax credit (WFTC) will be increased by £2.50 for awards starting from 4 June 2002. This is in addition to the increase to WFTC made in April. Publicity of WFTC continues via posters and leaflets in post offices and doctors' surgeries across the country, and via Bounty Packs issued to new mothers.

SCOTLAND

Public Expenditure

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, (1) pursuant to the Scotland Office Press Release SS0067, issued on 17 April, which elements of the additional spending allocated to Scotland *(a)* result from the application of the Barnett Formula and *(b)* are external to the formula; [52691]

(2) pursuant to the Scotland Office Press Release SS0067, issued on 17 April, if she will place in the Library the calculations behind the announcement of an extra £8.2 billion of spending as a result of the Budget 2002. [52692]

Mrs. Liddell: All of the additional spending allocated to the Scottish Executive as a result of the health measures announced in the Budget were determined by application of the Barnett formula. The annual additions to the Scottish Executive Budget resulting from the Chancellor's Budget announcement on 17 April 2002 are reproduced as follows:

£ million

	Additional amount
2003–04	224
2004–05	858
2005–06	1,576
2006–07	2,341
2007–08	3,201
Total	8,200

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on what subjects and on which dates her Department has recently consulted organisations representing young people; and if she will list such organisations. [52494]

Mrs. Liddell: The responsibilities of the Department require very few consultations. Our consultation on 18 December 2001 on the size of the Scottish Parliament included Youthlink Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament. My Department, along with others, carried out a wide-ranging consultation on the SEN and disability Rights in Education Bill on 17 March 2000. This involved consulting a wide variety of young people's representative bodies.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which the competent authority is to which members of the public should refer questions relating to *(a)* the classification of statutory instruments and *(b)* whether statutory instruments should have been laid before Parliament, with reference to statutory instruments with solely Scottish applicability and which pre-date the establishment of the Scottish Parliament but relate to matters that have been devolved. [53076]

Mrs. Liddell: The relevant authorities are *a)* the Statutory Instruments Reference Committee, and *b)* the Scottish Courts.

Solar Panels

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what buildings owned by her Department have solar panels installed. [53496]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department does not own any buildings with solar panels.

Joint Ministerial Committees

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which joint ministerial committees have met since 1999; what subjects each has discussed; and on what dates each has met. [55601]

Mrs. Liddell: The Joint Ministerial Committees that have met since 1999 are shown in the table. The subjects discussed at each Joint Ministerial Committee are confidential. Where appropriate, news releases have been issued after a Joint Ministerial Committee meeting and can be viewed on the Cabinet Office website www.cabinet-office.gov.uk.

JMC type	*Date*
Plenary	1 September 2000
Plenary	30 October 2001
Europe	1 March 2001
Europe	8 November 2001
Europe	7 March 2002
Health	7 April 2000
Health	5 June 2000
Health	16 June 2000
Health	26 October 2000
Health	22 October 2001
Poverty	9 December 1999
Poverty	26 May 2000
Knowledge economy	11 February 2000
Knowledge economy	26 May 2000

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what publicly owned accommodation is made available to her in her official role; how many nights she has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost was of maintaining each of these properties in the last 12 months. [55097]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* I do not have an official residence.

Sick Leave

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many days of sick leave were taken in her Department last year; how many related to employees suffering *(a)* stress and *(b)* other mental health problems; and what the cost was to her Department. [56474]

Mrs. Liddell: In the year to 31 March 2002, 627 days of sick leave were taken in my Department. Details of the causes of absence are not available.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Advocate-General on what subjects and on which dates her Department has recently consulted organisations representing young people; and if she will list such organisations. [52507]

The Advocate-General: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, at column 573W.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Communications Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the annual budget for communications activities, including press, public relations, marketing and internal communications, was for his Department for each financial year from 1997–98 to 2001–02. [39922]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The information is not held in the format requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Ministerial Private Offices

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the running costs were of *(a)* his Ministers' private offices, separately identifying expenditure on staff and *(b)* his Department in each year from May 1997 to the nearest date for which the information is available. [40989]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Running cost information for The Department for Work and Pensions, created in June 2001 from the merging of the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Social Security, is not yet available.

Departmental running costs, prior to the creation of the Department for Work and Pensions, is accessible in published Department of Social Security annual Appropriation Accounts and, where appropriate, Resource Accounts.

With regard to information on the Department for Education and Employment, I refer the hon. Member to the reply my Right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills gave on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 114W.

Ministerial Training

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much has been spent by his Department on voice coaching for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52719]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* No departmental costs have been incurred on voice coaching for Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions. Information on voice coaching for officials is not collected centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much has been spent by his Department on training in leadership skills for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52724]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* No departmental costs have been incurred on training Ministers in leadership skills in the Department for Work and Pensions. As might be expected in an organisation 130,000 strong, numerous civil servants have received leadership training as part of equipping them for the responsibilities of management. Information on leadership training for officials is not collected centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much has been spent by his Department on training by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52717]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* No departmental costs have been incurred on training, for ministers, provided by the royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in the Department for Work and Pensions. Information on training for officials by particular providers is not collected centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Volunteers

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what loss of benefit is applied by the Benefits Agency on service users who voluntarily assist NHS trusts as a result of being in receipt of out-of-pocket expenses; what plans he has to instruct the Benefits Agency to disregard out-of-pocket expenses received by volunteers assisting NHS trusts from calculations for means-tested benefits; what assessment he has made of the Benefit Agency's rules for eligibility for means-tested benefits on the willingness of service users voluntarily to assist NHS trusts; and if he will make a statement. [53305]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The rules for volunteers already ensure that people do not lose benefit where they are undertaking genuine voluntary work.

There are no specific instructions to Jobcentre Plus or The Pension Service staff about volunteers who help NHS trusts. However, the treatment of volunteers in the benefit system is clearly set out in benefit legislation and in guidance to staff.

People of working age can do unlimited voluntary work without it affecting their benefit, as long as the usual entitlement conditions are met. Cases are decided on an

individual basis according to the regulations, and people are required to report their participation in voluntary work.

Payments made to people for expenses incurred while undertaking voluntary work are disregarded in full. However, any payment made on top of that may bring into question the person's status as a volunteer. If the Decision Maker finds that the person is not a volunteer, then they are subject to the normal rules regarding work and earnings.

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on what subjects and on which dates his Department has consulted organisations representing young people; and if he will list such organisations. [52489]

Malcolm Wicks: The Department is committed to the new core principles for the involvement of children and young people published by the Minister for Children and Young People in November 2001.

The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Overseas Pensioners

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what discussions he has had with the Australian Department of Family and Community Services since the termination of the UK-Australia Pension Agreement on 1 March 2001 about the indexation of pensions in Australia; and if he will make a statement; [46894]

(2) what discussions he *(a)* has had recently and *(b)* plans to have with the Governments of those countries with which the UK does not have a reciprocal agreement to uprate pensions annually in line with inflation; and if he will make a statement. [46896]

Mr. McCartney: We have had no recent substantive discussions with any Government on the issue of indexation of pensions.

Access to Work Scheme

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many applications have been received for Access to Work money in *(a)* the Edinburgh, East and Borders district, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* England and Wales. [53038]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The information available is in the table. Before 2001, Access to Work was delivered through a network of Disability Service Teams in Scotland and information on the number of Access to Work applications in Edinburgh, East and Borders district could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Access to Work applications

	Edinburgh, East and Borders	*Scotland*	*England and Wales*
2000–01	172	892	11,426
1999–2000	—	703	9,083
1998–99	—	485	5,841
1997–98	—	362	4,800
1996–97	—	287	3,352
1995–96	—	792	8,787

Source:
DWP Access to Work Management Information

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much money Access to Work has granted to applicants in *(a)* East Edinburgh and Borders, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* England and Wales. [53039]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The information available is in the table.

Access to Work grants made

	Edinburgh East and Borders (£)	*Scotland (£ million)*	*England and Wales (£ million)*
2000–01	1.2 million	2.5	29.9
1999–2000	620,847	1.9	22.5
1998–99	379,975	1.4	18.1
1997–98	320,123	1.1	13.5
1996–97	[1]—	0.9	11.6
1995–96	[1]—	1.5	18.4
1994–95	[1]—	1.1	14.6

[1] Not available. Figures on actual spend for Edinburgh East and Borders can be provided only as far back as the 1997–98 financial year.

Source:
DWP Access to Work Management Information

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how long the Access to Work scheme has been funded for; if he plans to end the scheme; and if he will make a statement. [53044]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* Access to Work has been funded since June 1994, when the programme began.

There are no plans to end the Access to Work programme. On the contrary, Jobcentre Plus is investing in improvements to the delivery of Access to Work and is implementing changes to improve speed of delivery, consistency of decision-making and aftercare.

Benefit Decision Reviews

David Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions under what circumstances decisions taken on benefits by decision makers are reviewed; and by whom. [55580]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* Decisions taken on benefits can be changed by revision, supersession and appeal. Although there are very limited circumstances when a decision can be revised at any time, the main rule is that a decision would be revised where it is successfully disputed in the month after it has been notified (a period extendable for 12 months where special circumstances apply). The dispute can be made on any ground. A decision would be superseded where there has been a change in the customer's circumstances since the decision was made, or where the decision was successfully challenged outside the one month dispute period on a prescribed ground eg it was made in ignorance

of or mistake as to a material fact. A decision can also be changed on appeal by an independent appeal tribunal and by the Social Security and Child Support Commissioners.

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what publicly owned accommodation is made available to him in his official role; how many nights he has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost is of maintaining each of these properties. [55100]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* None.

Departmental Policies

James Purnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what impact his Department's policies have had on the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency since 1997. [54331]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The Department for Work and Pensions was formed in June 2001 from the former Department of Social Security and parts of the Department for Education and Employment. We are currently undertaking a fundamental overhaul of the welfare system, transforming it from a passive organisation paying out benefits to an active system that fights poverty, creates opportunity and helps people become self-sufficient and independent. This is making a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and

combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and future pensioners.

Child benefit is now worth £15.75 a week for the eldest child and £10.55 a week for other children: nationally about 7 million families receive child benefit, and in Stalybridge and Hyde 11,565 families benefit.

The number of people in work is at historically high levels of over 28.2 million. Nearly three quarters of working age people are in employment and in Stalybridge and Hyde the proportion in employment currently stands at 75.5 per cent. Unemployment is at levels last seen in the early 1970s. Our new deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, disabled people, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. Nationally well over 600,000 people have been helped into work by the new deals and in Stalybridge and Hyde over 1,300 have been helped into work.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. This winter (2001–02) we have made available a winter fuel payment of £200 for each eligible household to help with their heaviest fuel bill. We estimate that around 15,700 older people in Stalybridge and Hyde have received a payment this winter.

We want all pensioners to have a decent and secure income in retirement and to share fairly in the rising prosperity of the country. Our first priority has been to help the poorest pensioners.

From April 2002 we will be spending an extra £6 billion a year in real terms on pensioners as a result of our policies. This includes £2.5 billion more on the poorest third of pensioners.

3,500 pensioner families in Stalybridge and Hyde are receiving the minimum income guarantee which helps our poorest pensioners. Some 14,600 pensioners in Stalybridge and Hyde will benefit from this year's increases in the basic state pension of £3 a week for single pensioners and £4.80 for couples. Those over 75, of whom we estimate there are about 6,300 in Stalybridge and Hyde, may qualify for free TV licences.

Other reforms include the new pension credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings and the introduction of the state second pension from this April. Both of these initiatives will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners. We have also announced that from October 2003 benefits currently reduced after a hospital stay of six weeks will not be reduced until 13 weeks. This will benefit both pensioners and people of working age.

Social Fund

Paul Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many social fund budgeting loans were made in 2000–01. [56991]

Malcolm Wicks: In 2000–01, there were 1,145,000 initial Budgeting Loan awards, an increase of 128,000 compared with 1999–2000. While Budgeting Loan applications increased by only 3 per cent, successful applications at the initial stage rose by 13 per cent.

This corrects figures given in paragraph 17 of the Government's response (Cm 5237) to the third report of the Social Security Select Committee on the social fund, Session 2000–01 (HC232).

Red Cross

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what financial support his Department has given since 1 April 2000 to projects run by the British Red Cross. [52948]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle) on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 609–10W.

Hard-to-help Client Groups

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to involve the private sector in Jobcentre Plus and other emerging departmental programmes as a means for the social inclusion of hard-to-help client groups. [53098]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Jobcentre Plus and its predecessor the Employment Service has always involved the private sector in delivering its programmes for unemployed people.

Its contracted provision including programme centres, worked based learning for adults, basic employability training, short intensive basic skills courses and basic skills independent assessments is largely delivered by contracts with the private sector.

Under the New Deals, elements of the Gateway, Options and intensive activity period are also delivered by the private sector. In addition, the private sector lead in the delivery of the New Deals in ten areas of the country and there is currently a competition under way for future private sector led New Deal contracts in these areas together with two new areas. In all Jobcentre Plus has several thousand contracts with over 1,000 providers to deliver programmes for individual jobless people. These providers are drawn from the private, voluntary and public sectors; we know that the majority, probably about three quarters of the total are private sector organisations.

Cross cutting initiatives such as action teams and new programmes such as Progress2Work, Outreach and StepUP will also involve the private sector as do employment zones which are entirely private sector led.

Carers

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the cost of each of his Department's initiatives to encourage carer take-up of the state second pension. [54518]

Maria Eagle: Most people will automatically benefit from the state second pension without having to do anything new or different. Our publicity activity therefore focuses on the groups who may not automatically start building up state second pension and may need to take appropriate action. This includes parents as well as carers.

We have produced information both on our website and as a leaflet to inform these two groups about the state second pension and to outline any action they may need to take to build up entitlement. We are also currently conducting promotional activity for carers and parents about state second pension, which includes press advertising in national and local press and relevant magazines, and direct mail to relevant advisory organisations. The costs for the current phase of the activity (from March to May 2002) are estimated at £750,000, but will be subject to some revisions as the publicity activity is still ongoing. These costs do not include the leaflet or website costs—these items will be available on an ongoing basis.

We anticipate carrying out further promotional activity in the future to continue to ensure that people are aware of the action they need to take to benefit from the availability of the state second pension.

British Sign Language

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to recognise British Sign Language as a language in its own right. [55337]

Maria Eagle: There have been calls for the Government to recognise British Sign Language by specifying it under the Council of Europe's Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Advice is that the charter was not intended to cover indigenous sign languages. However, the Council's Parliamentary Assembly has called on the Council to give sign languages used in Europe a protection similar to that afforded by the charter. The Council is currently considering how that might be done and the Government will respond to any proposals in due course.

Age Positive Campaign

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the impact of the Age Positive publicity campaign, with particular reference to supportive and participating companies based in the Teesside area. [48586]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The Age Positive campaign seeks to promote the message that is makes good business sense to encourage age diverse practices in the work place. It is aimed at all employers and individuals across Great Britain.

The campaign has used a wide variety of promotional methods to ensure that access to information and guidance is available as widely as possible. A range of media including advertising, PR, website, direct mail and key exhibitions has been used to promote the business benefits of an age diverse work force.

Findings from the Evaluation of the Code of Practice indicate that between March 1999 and October 2000 the incidence of the use of age in selection halved from 27 per cent. to 13 per cent. In addition companies having a policy against employing older workers dropped from 14 per cent. to 7 per cent.

Thirty-two Age Positive champions have submitted evidence on their commitment to Age Positive practices and have given active support to the campaign.

Currently there are no companies in the Teesside area that have offered particular support but we are continually seeking to increase the number and range of Age Positive champions and positive case studies.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he expects to respond to the questions from the hon. Member for Havant, refs *(a)* 24239, *(b)* 28580, *(c)* 33624 and *(d)* 33628. [47756]

Malcolm Wicks: Replies were given to the hon. Member on 10 April, 22 April, 10 April and 11 April.

Unemployment

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the impact of the measures designed by his Department to reduce youth and long-term unemployment in the Greater London area. [53868]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Since 1997 in London, youth unemployment has fallen by 44 per cent. and long-term unemployment has been cut by three quarters.

The Department's policies have played an important part in this success. Up to January 2002, the New Deal for Young People had helped 43,765 young Londoners off benefit and into work and New Deal 25 plus had helped 16,612 long-term unemployed people into jobs across the capital.

In addition, nearly 13,000 people from some of London's most deprived areas have been helped into work through Employment Zones and Action Teams for Jobs.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what impact his policies have had on the unemployment level in the Tooting constituency since May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [53874]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Since 1997 the overall level of unemployment in Tooting has fallen by half and long-term unemployment has been cut by three-quarters. The Department's policies have played an important role in this success. Up to January 2002, the New Deals had helped over 1,000 people into work in Tooting.

Polygamy

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the payment of benefit to polygamous wives resident abroad. [51206]

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what rules apply for the issuing of benefits to people and their spouses who are given residency in this country and come from cultures where polygamy is culturally acceptable. [48212]

Malcolm Wicks *[holding answer 19 April 2002]:* Income-related benefits are not generally payable to, or in respect of, people who are resident abroad, regardless of whether they are in a monogamous or polygamous relationship.

However, when a person or their partner goes abroad temporarily, Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance already in payment may continue to be paid for the first four weeks of absence. This may be extended to eight weeks if the reason for the absence is to accompany a child for medical treatment abroad.

In Housing Benefit (HB), entitlement may continue in respect of each member of the household if there is a temporary absence from home of up to 13 weeks: this rule would include, for example, trips abroad to visit relatives or friends. But if the temporary absence is for more pressing reasons, for example medical treatment, HB can continue for up to 52 weeks. This more generous provision recognises the importance of HB in keeping roofs over people's heads.

These temporary absence rules apply in all HB cases, including those involving polygamous marriages. To make an exception for the latter would be discriminatory.

The amount of benefit payable includes personal allowances for the benefit recipient and one partner at the appropriate couple rate and, for each other partner, the difference between the higher rate for a couple and the higher rate for a single person. In general there is no financial advantage to claiming for those in polygamous marriages. Having separate claims for a couple and for other members of the marriage would normally result in more benefit being paid. Benefit entitlement for any additional partners is restricted to an allowance which is less than the rate for single people.

People in polygamous marriages are not entitled to contributory Social Security benefits in respect of their marital partners.

Housing Benefit

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many instances there were of housing benefit fraud, broken down by local authority in England, in each year since 1997. [42236]

Malcolm Wicks: The information available is based on local authorities' reported Weekly Benefit Savings (WBS) where fraud has been established. This information has been placed in the Library.

Tightening of the WBS criteria in 1998 was followed by a large reduction in the WBS achieved by local authorities in 1998–99 and 1999–2000. To address this, increased rates of additional subsidy were made payable to Local Authorities and a reduced level of penalty was introduced in April 1999.

In January 2000 the Department announced that it would replace WBS over 2 years from April 2001 with a new anti-fraud incentive scheme that gives greater financial rewards to local authorities for preventing and detecting overpayments and for punishing fraud. Since April this year all local authorities have been operating the new scheme.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many residents of each constituency are known to the CSA as *(a)* parents with care and *(b)* parents without care. [52124]

Malcolm Wicks: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Doug Smith to Mr. Andrew Turner dated 13 May 2002:

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in replying to your recent Parliamentary Question about the Child Support Agency promised a substantive reply by me.

You ask, how many residents of each constituency are known to the CSA as (a) parents with care and (b) parents without care.

We don't hold information on our systems in that format. I have obtained some information on the constituencies within which the address of parents with care falls by sampling our computer database. I have arranged for a document listed as: Number of Parents with Care held on the Child Support Computer System by Parliamentary Constituency at November 2001, to be placed within the Library. There will be a small degree of error because this is a 5 per cent. sample and the error will be more likely when the figures are less than 500.

Unfortunately the information for non-resident parents is less reliable because for more of them we do not hold a full post code. I believe that broadly the national distribution of non-resident parents will be the same as that for parents with care.

I hope this is helpful.

Jobcentre Plus

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what systems are in place within the Jobcentre Plus network for pensioners to receive advice and assistance. [52579]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) on 25 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 652W.

Industrial Action (Jobcentre Plus)

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions why he has declined to meet officials of the Public and Commercial Services Union to discuss the health and safety implications for staff of the Jobcentre Plus arrangements. [32304]

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what consultations he has had with leaders of the Public and Commercial Services Union regarding recent industrial action taken by their members; and if he plans to meet them following the latest 48-hour strike. [32647]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answers 1 and 5 February 2002]:* It is for the Chief Executive of Jobcentre Plus, as the head of the organisation, to conduct discussions on this issue with the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

I am pleased to say that, following the most recent round of discussions, the PCS has, after a ballot of its members, accepted an agreement based on the proposals which Jobcentre Plus management originally put forward last October. These proposals will ensure that Jobcentre Plus operates in a predominantly unscreened environment in line with Government policy.

Crisis Loan Expenditure

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what was the crisis loan expenditure on living expenses (alignment) in each year since 1996; and what such expenditure was expressed as a proportion of crisis loan expenditure. [51043]

Malcolm Wicks *[pursuant to the reply, 18 April 2002, c. 1119W]:* The information is in the table.

Social Fund Crisis Loan expenditure—alignment payments

Year	*Total crisis loan expenditure £ million*	*Alignment payment expenditure £ million*	*Alignment payments as a percentage of crisis loan expenditure*
1996–97	52	14	27
1997–98	54	17	32
1998–99	59	20	33
1999–2000	62	23	37
2000–01	65	24	38

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest £ million.
2. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source:

Annual Reports by the Secretary of State on the Social Fund 1996–97 to 2000–01.

WALES

Caernarfon for Healthcare Audit and Inspection

Hywel Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what arrangements are intended for the organisation, operation and accountability of the Caernarfon for Healthcare Audit and Inspection in Wales. [55448]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Commission for Health and Improvement (CHI) and the Audit Commission are England and Wales bodies. The First Minister and the Assembly Cabinet are content with the proposals in principle. It will be necessary to make sure that this works properly and effectively for Wales, and these detailed issues will be addressed during the framing of the necessary legislation.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Digital Equipment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many digital radios are owned by her Department for use in departmental buildings from which Ministers work; and what the *(a)* cost and *(b)* date of purchase of each radio was. [52851]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* There is no record of any digital radios being purchased by the Department.

Press Subscriptions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will list the magazines and periodicals subscribed to by her Department, stating for each subscription the *(a)* number of copies taken and *(b)* annual cost. [52816]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* The total annual cost of magazine and periodical subscriptions currently taken by the DCMS Information Centre is £28,275. A list specifying each title taken, the cost per copy and the total annual cost per title has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Film Tax Relief

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which films have been certified by her Department since 1997 as a qualifying film for the film tax relief introduced in the *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 2001 Budgets; and if she will make a statement. [54982]

Dr. Howells: I am arranging for a list of films qualifying as British under the terms of the Films Act 1985 to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Tourism (Advisory Committee)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the mandate of the Advisory Committee for Co-operation in the Field of Tourism is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55355]

Dr. Howells: The Tourism Advisory Committee is mandated to facilitate exchange of information, consultation and cooperation on tourism by a Council Decision of 22 December 1986 (86/664/EEC).

Since May 2001, the committee has met three times and the UK has been represented by officials from my Department. The costs incurred by my Department in travelling to these committee meetings is in the region of £1,300. To disaggregate the costs of the committee from the UK's total contribution to the EU budget would involve disproportionate costs.

Currently under discussion is a Commission communication and a draft Council resolution on the future of European tourism.

Accountability and transparency to Parliament is ensured by the submission of Commission and Council documents to parliamentary scrutiny. Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission. As an obligation to this decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Commission Document 5685/02). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Works of Art (Indemnities)

Sir Patrick Cormack: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the total sum paid to claimants under the Government Indemnity Scheme covering loans of works of art to museums, galleries and other such public institutions has been since the inception of the scheme in 1988. [55026]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* Since 1993–94, the first year after the formation of the Department of National Heritage, a total of £579,161.06 has been paid out to claimants under the Government Indemnity Scheme. Figures for the period 1988–89 to 1992–93 can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

All Saints' Church, Kingston

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations she has received on English Heritage's decision not to support the restoration of All Saints' Church, Kingston-upon-Thames; and if she will make a statement. [55415]

Dr. Howells: I am aware of the strength of local support for the restoration of All Saints' Church. It is for English Heritage or the Heritage Lottery Fund to make a decision on the funding of the grant application. English Heritage are keen to see that the repairs needed to All Saints' Church are carried out and have recently met the vicar and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) to discuss how to take the matter forward.

Environmental Sustainability

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if she will list those bids for funding which have been turned down by her Department because they have failed to include a sustainability component in the last five years; [55174]

(2) if she will list projects which have been funded by her Department in the last five years which have had an environmentally sustainable component, indicating what it is in each case; [55177]

(3) what steps she has taken to promote environmental sustainability in the last five years; [55172]

(4) what measures she has taken to encourage public involvement in sustainable initiatives; [55176]

(5) what indicators her Department uses when assessing the sustainability component of funding bids to her Department. [55173]

Dr. Howells: The Department for Culture Media and Sport is fully committed to sustainable development and promotes environmental sustainability through many of the public bodies it sponsors. These range from Royal Parks, which provide many examples of good practice, to the Science and Natural History museums which are increasingly instrumental in promoting public understanding of, and engagement with, sustainable development. On 30 April 2002, DCMS held a major conference at the Science Museum for representatives of all its sectors to create greater understanding of sustainable development issues and raise awareness of how each can respond to the challenges involved.

The Department does not directly operate funding schemes; applications for awards, mainly for lottery generated funds, are made to its non-departmental public bodies. Since 1998, DCMS has recommended to lottery distributors that the grants they award further the objectives of sustainable development, covering environmental, economic and social aspects. Bids are judged against the 15 quality of life indicators of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy (1999). As records of unsuccessful bids are not kept by distributors, there is no means of listing which bids were turned down.

Criminal Offences

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many criminal offences have been *(a)* created and *(b)* abolished by her Department since 1997. [55438]

Dr. Howells: Since 1997, four offences have been created and one abolished in the areas for which the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has responsibility.

The offences created are:

(a) the failure to post a Special Occasions restriction order notice—article 8(3) of the Regulatory Reform (Special Occasions Licensing) Order 2001 (SI 2001/3937)

(b) failure to comply with a park trading regulation—s.1 of the Royal Parks (Trading) Act 2000

(c) two offences of disclosure of information—section 3 of the Television Licences (Disclosure of Information) Act 2000.

The offence repealed was that of failing to post a Millennium restriction order notice under paragraph 6(3) of Schedule 8B to the Licensing Act 1964, which was repealed by paragraph 2(6) of the Regulatory Reform (Special Occasions Licensing) Order 2001 (SI 2001/3937).

Maladministration

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many findings there have been of maladministration by ombudsmen with responsibility for agencies under the remit of her Department since 1997. [56319]

Dr. Howells: Information on the handling of complaints is set out in tabular form by the parliamentary ombudsman each year as an attachment to his annual report. For those complaints where there was evidence of maladministration which warranted a full investigation, the table sets out how many complaints were upheld as being fully or partially justified. Copies of the parliamentary ombudsman's annual reports for the period 1997–98 to 2000–01 inclusive can be viewed in the House Library, or on the parliamentary ombudsman's website at: www.ombudsman.org.uk/publications.

Golden Jubilee

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what policy guidance her Department has issued relating to the flying of the Union flag over public buildings on the occasion of the Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen. [55473]

Tessa Jowell *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* My Department has issued guidance that the Union flag should be flown from central Government buildings from 8am on Saturday, 1 June 2002 to sunset on Tuesday, 4 June 2002 inclusive. Local authorities are not bound by these instructions. Many however, do chose to follow the Government's line and fly the flag on the specified days from their buildings.

Television Subtitling

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what regulations govern *(a)* the proportion of television programmes that have subtitling and *(b)* the provision of television services for deaf people. [55582]

Dr. Howells: Statutory requirements for the provision of subtitling on Channel 3 and Channel 5, and for the provision of subtitling and sign language translation on digital terrestrial television services are included in the 1990 and 1996 Broadcasting Acts respectively. The recently published draft Communications Bill proposes the extension of these services to digital cable and satellite services.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Sunset Clauses

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which Bills introduced by his Department in the last five years have contained sunset clauses; and what plans he has for the future use of such clauses. [49623]

Mr. Wills: No Bills introduced by this Department in the last five years have contained sunset clauses and I have no plans for the future use of such clauses.

Overtime Payments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what her policy is on overtime payments for staff in her Department. [49118]

Ms Rosie Winterton: This answer covers the Headquarters of the Lord Chancellor's Department and Associated Offices (LCDHQ), the Court Service (CS), and Public Guardianship Office (PGO). The standard working week across the Lord Chancellor's Department is 41 hours for offices in London and 42 hours for staff working outside London. Both these figures incorporate a daily lunch break of one hour. Part time and flexible working arrangements are agreed locally.

Overtime may be worked with prior management authority to carry out specific work that cannot be done within normal working hours. Part time staff and staff with flexible working hours are entitled to claim overtime for hours worked over and above their own personal contracted working week. Staff are entitled to claim time off in lieu as an alternative to claiming overtime.

Overtime is paid at the rates described as follows:

LCDHQ Pay Bands A to D/CS Spans 1 to 5/PGO Ranges 1 to 4:

Monday to Friday—at the hourly rate of time and a half.

Saturday—at the hourly rate of time and a half plus Saturday premium (equivalent to double time).

Sunday—double time.

LCDHQ Pay Band E/CS Spans 6 and 7/PGO Ranges 5 and 6:

Monday to Friday—at the hourly rate of plain time.

Saturday—at the hourly rate of plain time plus Saturday premium (equivalent to time and a half).

Sunday—double time.

LCDHQ Pay Band F/CS Span 8:

Staff in these grades qualify for excess hours payments. Additional hours worked by members of staff in this band can be recognised by excess hours payments if 25 or more extra hours are worked over a continuous three week period. The excess hours payment is the recipient's plain time rate.

PGO Range 7:

Minimum qualifying period is 25 excess hours over a continuous three week period at plain time rate. Pay Range 7 staff are eligible for weekend premium payments. Staff who have to work excess hours are given the opportunity to take time of in lieu as an alternative to claiming excess hours payment.

Subscriptions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the newspapers subscribed to *(a)* Monday to Saturday and *(b)* on Sunday by his Department, stating for each subscription (i) the number of copies taken and (ii) the annual cost. [54075]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The information that the hon. Member has requested is set out in the table. The first figure after each title is the number of copies taken and the second is the total annual cost:

£

Newspapers	*Number of copies taken*	*Total annual cost*
Monday to Saturday		
Daily Express	2	185.95
Daily Mail	3	301.90
Daily Mirror	1	103.16

Newspapers	Number of copies taken	Total annual cost (£)
Daily Telegraph	2	260.15
Evening Standard	2	347.20
Financial Times	4	994.70
Glasgow Herald	1	57.60
Guardian	3	442.50
Independent	7	1,086.35
Scotsman	1	142.55
Sheffield Star	1	76.80
Star	1	95.90
Sun	2	170.05
Times	20	2,692.40
Sunday		
Independent on Sunday	1	60.40
Mail on Sunday	1	55.70
News of the World	1	33.10
Observer	1	60.90
Scotland on Sunday	1	31.80
Sunday Business	1	47.00
Sunday Express	1	53.00
Sunday Mirror	1	34.45
Sunday Telegraph	1	53.00
Sunday Times	1	61.10

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the magazines and periodicals subscribed to by his Department, stating for each subscription (i) the number of copies taken and (ii) the annual cost. [54074]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The information that the hon. Member has requested is set out in the table. The first figure after each title is the number of copies taken and the second is the total annual cost:

Magazines/periodicals	Number of copies taken	Total annual cost (£)
Architect's Journal	1	82.69
Aslib Current Awareness Abstracts	2	402.86
Australian Law Journal	1	234
Bookseller	2	320
British Journal of Criminology	2	282
British Printer	1	75
British Tax Review	2	432
Building	1	110
Bulletin of Legal Developments	1	85.50
Butterworths Family Law Journal (NZ)	1	495
Cambridge Law Journal	5	275
Caterer and Hotel Keeper	1	102
Childright	2	90
Civil Justice Quarterly	6	864
Columbia Law Review	1	66
Common Market Law Review	2	798
Commonwealth Law Bulletin	2	208.54
Commonwealth Lawyer	1	85
Company Lawyer	3	1,035
Computanews	1	25
Computer Weekly	1	110
Computers and Law	4	376.64
Construction News	1	72.50
Consumer Law Today	1	257
Consumer Policy Review	1	150
Conveyancer and Property Lawyer	2	288
Corporate Briefing	1	20
Counsel	20	486
Credit Today	1	60
Criminal Law Week	30	4,350
Design Week	1	138
Digit	2	50
Economist	4	537.60
Edinburgh Law Review	1	80
Equal Opportunities Review	1	236.50
Estates Gazette	7	952
European Human Rights Law Review	8	1,692
European Law Review	1	333
Family Law Quarterly	1	39.20
Financial Regulatory Briefing	4	460
Government Opportunities	1	260
Harvard Law Review	1	49
Health Law for Healthcare Professionals	1	135
House of Commons Weekly Information Bulletin	1	48.15
IDS Brief	1	25
Index to Periodical Articles Related to Law	2	325
Insolvency Intelligence	1	245
Insurance Day	1	391
Insurance Law Monthly	1	270
International & Comparative Law Quarterly	1	95
International Family Law	1	121.60
International Journal of Insurance Law	1	79
International Journal of Law & Information Technology	1	99
International Journal of Law & the Family	1	106
International Review of Law, Computers & Technology	1	325
Internet Newsletter for Lawyers	4	160
IRS Employment Review	1	630
Journal of Business Law	1	202.50
Journal of Contract Law	1	29
Journal of Criminal Law	1	139
Journal of International Banking Law	1	595
Journal of Law and Society	1	226
Journal of Legal History	2	480
Journal of Personal Injury Litigation	2	330
Journal of Planning & Environment Law	2	414
JSB Journal	2	80
Juridical Review	1	145
Justice of the Peace	53	9,275
Labour Market Trends	2	19
Law Notes	5	145
Law Quarterly Review	6	675
Law Society's Gazette	7	672
Law Teacher	2	90
Lawyer	20	1,600
Legal Action	27	1,405
Legal Business	2	330
Legal Executive	1	45
Legal Studies	1	65
Litigation Letter	6	1,488
Lloyd's Maritime and Commercial Law Quarterly	1	150
London Gazette	1	351
The Magistrate	5	150
Magnet	1	85
Managing Information	2	165
Medical Law Review	1	110
Modern Law Review	5	585
New Law Journal	155	25,528.50
New Scientist	2	264
New Statesman	5	481.60
Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly	1	75
Oxford Journal of Legal Studies	1	129
Paper Market Digest	1	250
Personal & Medical Injuries Law Letter	1	294
Police Review	1	70
Population Trends	2	135
Practitioner's Child Law Bulletin	1	120
Private Eye	4	96
Professional Negligence	3	345
Project Manager Today	1	32.50
Property Law Bulletin	1	215
Property Week	1	120
Public Administration	1	29.50
Public Law	2	135
Radio Times	1	44.70
RICS Abstracts & Reviews	1	125
RICS Weekly Briefing	1	10
Scots Law Times	3	1,347.30
Social Trends	3	118.50
Socio-Legal Newsletter	2	30
Solicitors Journal	87	6,525

£

Magazines/periodicals	Number of copies taken	Total annual cost
Spectator	4	383.20
Stakeholder	2	78
Statute Law Review	1	115
Taxation	4	187.20
Trading Law	1	290
Trust Law International	1	128.25

Mrs. L Odedra

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on the reasons why the appeal papers in respect of Mrs. L. Odedra of ECR/419/00 104792, have not been processed. [51508]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I understand that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will be writing to my hon. Friend about this matter shortly.

Immigration Cases

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on the backlog of immigration cases in the IAA; what the backlog is of cases waiting for decision by an immigration adjudicator; and what the average length of time was for a case to be dealt with from receipt from the Home Office to the hearing in the last 12 months. [54500]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The IAA, as of the end of March 2002, was dealing with 4,114 adjudicator appeals, 36 leave to appeal applications and 39 substantive tribunal appeals in relation to immigration cases (not including family visit visas). In each instance, this level of work in progress is within or in line with expectation and hence does not amount to a backlog.

The average waiting time from receipt of an immigration case to its first substantive hearing for the period 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 is 13.75 weeks.

Public Records

Norman Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will arrange for the release to the Public Record Office of pre-1945 records relating to the Royal Family. [54671]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Open Government White Paper (Cm2290, July 1993) states that "Records relating to the Royal Family will be treated in the same way as all other records and only closed for longer than 30 years if they fall into one or more of the three criteria governing closure" (9.22). That practice still applies and the closure criteria used for public records relating to the Royal Family are therefore the same as for all other records. Any public record dating from before 1945 should now be open unless it is subject to one of the closure criteria, requiring a longer period of closure, in which case it will be re-reviewed when the closure period is due to come to an end.

Consultation Document (Making Decision)

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will place a copy of the consultation document, "Making Decisions: Helping People who have Difficulty Deciding for Themselves" (Cm. 05/2002), published in April, available in the Library. [55288]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The consultation document 'Making Decisions: Helping People who have Difficulty Deciding for Themselves' was published on 10 April. Copies of the document were placed in the libraries of both Houses shortly thereafter.

King Edward VIII

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which departments will be consulted and what criteria will be used to assess the release of the records concerning King Edward VIII. [55481]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to her previous question on the 1 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 862W. It is the responsibility for each department which has closed records relating to King Edward VIII to review them for release, in accordance with the standard criteria set out in the Open Government Code.

1901 Census Website

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans she has to resume public access to the Public Record Office's 1901 census website; if she will make it her policy to produce the name index to the 1901 census on CD-ROM; what plans she has to digitise census records prior to 1901; and if she will make a statement. [54367]

Ms Rosie Winterton: QinetiQ Ltd. are the contractors who are responsible for the technical aspects of the 1901 census online. Since the closure of the site QinetiQ have been carrying out technical enhancements and, once this work is completed, rigorous testing will be undertaken on all aspects of the system. The enhancements are intended to make the site sufficiently robust to permit general Internet access and are being carried out with a sense of urgency. However, the most important consideration is to ensure that the service is re-launched successfully. The service will again be made available at designated service centres as part of the general re-introduction of the site. General on-line searches will be available as soon as practicable following testing and availability at the service centres.

The commercial aspects of the census website are also the responsibility of QinetiQ Ltd., who are currently evaluating the financial viability of producing the 1901 census on CD-Rom, in consultation with the PRO.

The PRO is planning to make the 1881 and 1891 census returns available on line as part of its wider strategy to digitise its major sources relating to family history by 2005. It is intended that, once the 1901 online census service is working satisfactorily, these plans will be taken forward in the current financial year.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Probation Board

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will publish the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's Business Plan for 2002–03. [56245]

Mr. Browne: The Probation Board's Business Plan for 2002–03 was published on 14 May 2002. The plan sets out the board's key objectives and performance targets for the year. Copies of the plan have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will publish the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's Corporate Plan for 2002–05. [56904]

Mr. Browne: The Probation Board's Corporate Plan for 2002–05 was published on 14 May 2002. The plan sets out the long-term strategic goals for the life of the plan. Copies of the plan have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Victims of Violence

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much has been spent on Northern Ireland since Good Friday 1998; how much has been spent on victims of violence; and how this money is being used to help such victims in Northern Ireland. [53691]

Mr. Browne: The amount of money spent on Northern Ireland since 1 April 1998 (figures available for full financial years only) by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and Northern Ireland Block:

£ million

	NIO	*DEL*[1]	*NI block AME*[2]	*WW*[3]
1998–99	975	4,687	3,534	16
1999–2000[4]	1,026	4,914	3,631	37
2000–01[4]	1,138	5,249	4,965	39
2001–02[5]	1,177	6,002	5,670	[6]0

[1] Departmental Expenditure Limit

[2] Annually Managed Expenditure

[3] Welfare to Work

[4] Devolution began in December 1999 and was suspended between February and May 2000, with the result that in 1999–2000 £4,221,000 for the Northern Ireland Assembly was included in the NIO totals and 2000–01 £1,733,000 for NI Assembly was included in the NIO totals.

[5] Please note that final figures are not yet available for NIO—therefore, those given are provisional only. Provisional outturn figures are not yet available for the NI block, however the information shown is the "Final Plan Figurework" as at February monitoring.

[6] Now contained within DEL

The amount spent on victims of violence generally is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However since 1998, Government have committed over £18.25 million to support victims of the troubles, funding a number of initiatives including:

£700,000 for a family trauma centre in Belfast which provides therapeutic service addressing the psychological needs of families and young people.

£300,000 for an educational bursary pilot scheme—for individuals whose education was directly affected by the troubles. 350 people received awards.

£4 million to the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund with a commitment of a further £1 million for 2003–04.

The fund has put in place a number of schemes including:

The small grants scheme

The chronic pain management scheme

The respite break scheme

The wheelchair assessment scheme

The amputee assessment scheme

The education and training scheme.

£225,000 initially for a victim support grants scheme to assist community groups and voluntary organisations to take forward recommendations in the Bloomfield report; and more recently a further £750,000 to extend this small grants scheme.

£6.1 million core funding for groups who support victims of the troubles.

£500,000 for initiatives in Great Britain including £250,000 for The Legacy Project. This project aims to identify and meet the needs of victims of the troubles living in Great Britain.

£1.5 million over the next three years for the development of the Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation.

£1.5 million over the next two years to the devolved Administration's Strategy Implementation Fund to help NI Departments fulfil their commitment to addressing victims' needs.

Other initiatives for victims—EU money

The Northern Ireland Office was responsible for the management of funding to (among other projects) victims groups under measure 4.6 of the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (Peace I). Victims groups received £2.8 million under this measure. In the main funding has been used to provide training and development officers and counselling services to victims and their families.

Peace II moneys are administered by the devolved Administration. It contains a specific measure for victims with funding of approximately £6.67 million, targeted mainly at retraining and re-employment.

Criminal compensation for victims

Since April 1998 to end of March 2002, £87.65 million has been spent in compensation for criminal damage and £193.50 million on criminal injuries. It is not possible to break these figures down into troubles-related and other crime.

Separate support for security force victims

Government have established a Police Fund which aims to bring additional assistance to police officers and their families directly affected as a result of terrorism. From this fund £4.2 million was paid in a tax free, lump sum payment to police widows, widowed prior to November 1983, as a direct result of terrorism.

The Government have funded the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) to a total of £8.1 million (£4.5 million allocated for three-year-period in March 1999 and £3.6 million allocated for further two years, 2002–04). The PRRT was conceived to provide assistance

aimed at the rehabilitation of ex-officers who were injured on duty and retraining for those leaving or expected to leave the force.

Government have made available more than £1 million to the George Cross Foundation to mark the sacrifices and honour the achievement of the RUC. (The George Cross Foundation has taken on responsibility for the establishment of a Garden of Remembrance and a new RUC museum.)

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Sick Leave

Mr. Heald: To ask the President of the Council how many days of sick leave were taken in his Department last year; how many related to employees suffering from *(a)* stress and *(b)* other mental health problems; and what the cost was to his Department. [56475]

Mr. Robin Cook: Information for the year 2001 is not yet available. The latest available figures are for the calendar year 2000. During this period 363 days were lost owing to sickness absence.

The Privy Council Office is not included in the published annual report 'Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service' but we are fully committed to working to the overall target to reduce the level of sick absence to five days per person by 2003; and reducing the number of working days lost from work-related injury and ill health by 30 per cent. by 2010. The Privy Council Office service delivery agreement confirms this commitment and our requirement to monitor sickness levels quarterly.

Information on stress and other mental health problems in the form requested is being withheld under Exemption 12 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information as the number involved are less than five out of a Department of 40 and could result in an individual being identified.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will announce the sites on which he will seek planning permission for accommodation centres. [56903]

Angela Eagle: We will be submitting planning notifications in respect of DSDC Bicester, RAF Newton and QinetiQ Pershore as soon as possible. The notifications will be submitted using the ordinary procedure of Circular 18/84. Consultation with the relevant local authorities will continue, including public meetings.

Further work is required on the sites at AirWest Edinburgh, Sully Hospital (Glamorgan) and Hemswell Cliff (Lincolnshire) before a decision can be taken on whether to proceed to planning notifications.

The sites at Hooton Park (Ellesmere Port) and Killingholme (North Lincolnshire) are considered to be unsuitable for the siting of accommodation centres. No planning notifications will be submitted in respect of those sites.

Site searching has continued since we made our initial announcement, as we said it would. In addition to the sites we have identified ourselves, a number have been put forward by potential bidders. We shall not be putting into the public domain details of such sites unless and until they are considered to be serious prospect for the siting of an accommodation centre.

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will provide milk tokens to asylum seekers with young children; [45473]

(2) what representations he has received regarding the provision of milk tokens to asylum seekers with young children. [45474]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* Asylum seekers in receipt of support from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) who have a baby are eligible to apply for a one-off maternity payment of £300 to meet the costs associated with the arrival of a baby. In addition the family's level of subsistence is re-calculated. For each child under the age of 16 the family receives £33.50 per week. Children of asylum seekers receive the same level of financial support as those of parents on job seeker's allowance or income support.

I am aware that the issue of milk tokens to asylum seeking mothers is a concern to many members of this House. In addition, Ministers and officials in NASS have received representations from various groups including Milk for Schools, Save the Children, the Child Poverty Action Group and Bill Morris of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). We have also received petitions from voluntary agencies such as Refugee Council and Migrant Helpline. We will continue to monitor the level of support provided to asylum seekers and their families.

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether children and their families will be accommodated in separate units within accommodation centres. [51745]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 23 April 2002]:* Children and their families will be accommodated within family units in accommodation centres, separate from those units accommodating single asylum seekers.

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the factors which led to the decision to grant asylum seekers 70 per cent. of the basic income support to meet their living costs. [55330]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* The levels of asylum support for adults are set at 70 per cent. of income support levels because, unlike those in receipt of income support, National Asylum Support Service (NASS)-supported asylum seekers receive free, furnished accommodation, equipped with all necessary utensils, bedding, towels, etc. and with all their utility bills paid by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) on top of their cash subsistence payments. In addition, after six months in receipt of NASS support, asylum seekers are

eligible for an additional single payment of £50. Taken as a package, the value of NASS support is broadly equal to the support that was provided to asylum seekers under the previous, cash-based system. The asylum support levels for children are 100 per cent. of the income support levels.

Mohammed Umer

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make inquiries into the passport of Mr. Mohammed Umer of Southend, which is with the IND office in Croydon. [55312]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* Mr. Umer's documents were sent to his home address by recorded delivery on 9 May 2002.

Dungavel Prison (Visitors)

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether it is practice to fingerprint *(a)* charity workers, *(b)* teachers and *(c)* official visitors who may be visiting Dungavel prison. [28806]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 21 January 2002]:* Charity workers, teachers and official visitors who visit Dungavel removal centre on official business are not fingerprinted. They are instead required to sign in and out.

Visitors to individual detainees are fingerprinted on arrival as part of Dungavel's standard security procedures. The record is checked on the departure of the visitor and is then automatically deleted.

Belmarsh Prison

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the *(a)* national origin and *(b)* first language is of each (i) convicted and (ii) remand prisoner held in the special secure unit at HMP Belmarsh; what translation facilities are available for prisoners for (A) routine prison administrative and matters connected with good order in the prison, (B) medical examinations, (C) legal visits and (D) family visits; and how many non-English language books (1) are held by HMP Belmarsh and (2) have been borrowed in the past six months by prisoners held in the special secure unit. [52463]

Beverley Hughes: The facility at Belmarsh prison is designated as a high secure unit. The number of prisoners currently held in the high secure unit is 34. The national origin of those convicted is Colombian (one); United Kingdom (seven). The national origin of those unconvicted is Algerian (two); Belgium (one): Spanish (one); Egyptian (two); Irish (six); Jamaican (one); Turkish (two); United Kingdom (10). One person has declined to declare a national origin.

All prisoners in the high secure unit are able to speak English. Translation facilities are currently available in Arabic, Spanish and Turkish to enable prisoners to communicate via the telephone or, where security issues arise, during visits. Belmarsh has continuous translation facilities for attendance at the prison to carry out simultaneous translation of visits and telephone calls. These facilities are also available where there is a need for staff to communicate with a prisoner on a medical or induction interview.

Belmarsh also has the use of telephone translation facilities. Where circumstances arise, Belmarsh would also use other prisoners speaking the same language to assist in translation, or use staff who are able to speak foreign languages. There is also a contract translation service for use with mail and other written material. No translation service is provided for legal visits, on the grounds that the visiting legal representative would make such arrangements. Induction packs for newly arrived prisoners are available in a limited number of foreign languages.

Belmarsh has approximately 700 non-English books in the library. Records are not kept to show the number of such books that have been borrowed by prisoners held in the high secure unit. All prisoners have access to the library and may borrow books.

Prisons (Fire Precautions)

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the fire precautions that will be required in the contract to build the new women's prison at Ashford, Middlesex. [54323]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The draft contract for the new prison at Ashford, Middlesex states that:

> "Generally the risk of accidental fire outbreak in prison buildings is low, due to the constant level of supervision and control. However, the serious consequences of such events, however rare, must be anticipated and controlled. Individual buildings and the site as a whole will be assessed for risk".

The construction work at Ashford will be in line with existing Prison Service protocols and standards for fire precautions. The contractor is subject to the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1997 (as amended in 1999). In addition, a review into fire safety in prisons is almost complete. As the construction of the prison has not yet started it would be possible to change the specification to incorporate any changes required by the review, including the fitting of sprinklers.

Prisoner Location

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many young people were moved from local authority secure accommodation to Prison Service establishments in each month since January 2001, broken down by *(a)* age and *(b)* gender. [55040]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales commission and purchase secure accommodation for remanded and sentenced young people. They have provided the information in the table: the number of young people transferred from local authority accommodation to Prison Service establishments in each month since January 2001, broken down by age and gender.

	Age 15		Age 16		Age 17		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
2001							
January	2	0	2	0	0	0	4
February	1	0	1	1	0	0	3
March	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
April	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
May	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
June	2	1	0	0	0	0	3
July	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
August	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
September	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
October	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
November	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
December	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2002							
January	3	0	1	0	0	0	4
February	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
March	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
April	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
May[1]	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	11	1	6	2	0	1	21

[1] First week

Special Constables

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the role of special constables. [53112]

Mr. Denham: The proposals in the White Paper "Policing a New Century: A blueprint for Reform" set out a radical and ambitious programme of reform, with the overall aim of reducing crime and the fear of crime and tackling anti-social behaviour. The Government believe that the special constabulary has a key role to play in the fight against crime and the fear of crime. We are accordingly introducing a range of measures to improve the recruitment and retention of specials. These include improvements to the recruitment, training, conditions, management and deployment of specials—focusing their role on intelligence-led patrolling and local crime reduction initiatives.

EU Border Police Force

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy towards the creation of a common EU border police force. [39656]

Angela Eagle: The United Kingdom is supportive of closer co-operation between national border authorities of European Union member states, which we believe is one of the ways to tackle the criminal networks responsible for human trafficking and illegal immigration. We are also keen to discuss practical ways of strengthening the European Union's external borders.

The United Kingdom has given its support to the conducting of a feasibility study, led by the Italian authorities regarding the concept of a European border police. We are awaiting the results of this study. Our Frontiers Protocol entitles us to maintain our frontiers with other member states and the Government have no plans to change their policy.

Police

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what funding is available for targeted policing initiatives. [48660]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 17 April 2002]:* We have targeted significant levels of resources at forces through the Crime Fighting Fund (CFF) to recruit 9,000 officers over and above forces previous recruitment plans in the three years to March 2003. We made available £58.9 million in 2000–01, £151.7 million in 2001–02 with provision of £244.0 million in 2002–03 and £272 million for 2003–04 to meet the estimated continuing cost of officers recruited through the CFF.

We have made £75 million available since 2000–01 to enhance the policing service in rural areas, including £30 million for 2002–03. Spending Review (SR) 2000 provided a further £30 million for next year. Police authorities receiving the grant must demonstrate in their annual policing plans each year how the resources are used to enhance rural policing and crime reduction and community safety in rural areas.

The Government are committed to investment in technological support for the police, and to reducing the burden of unnecessary bureaucracy and increasing efficiency. £703 million has been made available since 1999–2000. Key projects funded are AIRWAVE—the new national police communications system; the National Strategy for Police Information Systems—a suite of software applications to improve the recording and delivery of information across the police service and the wider criminal justice system; the National Automated Fingerprint Identification Systems and Police Direct—telephone and email facilities for the reporting of non-urgent crime.

The estimated amount of central funding for the DNA Expansion Programme from April 2000 to March 2004 is £187 million.

£30 million has been committed to 60 targeted policing projects under the Crime Reduction Programme since 1999.

In addition, £4 million has been made available in 2002–03 to the Police Standards Unit to drive up police performance.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the percentage increase in funding of *(a)* Staffordshire police and *(b)* all police forces in each of the past seven years. [32242]

Mr. Denham: The information is set out in the table.

Percentage increase

Increase	*Staffordshire*	*All England and Wales*
1995–96 to 1996–97	8.3	3.7
1996–97 to 1997–98	2.0	2.2
1997–98 to 1998–99	−1.1	3.2
1998–99 to 1999–2000	1.3	2.3
1999–2000 to 2000–01	4.0	3.4
2000–01 to 2001–02	5.1	6.4
2001–02 to 2002–03	[1]3.6	[1]3.5

[1] Figures for 2001–02 are not directly comparable with 2002–03 owing to the changes in funding arrangements for the National Crime Squad/National Criminal Intelligence Service. The figures have been adjusted accordingly.

Notes:

1. Total Grant includes Police Principal Grant, Rural Policing Grant, Crime Fighting Fund and the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) Revenue Support Grant (RSG), National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), Standard Spending Assessment reduction grant and Central Support Protection Grant.
2. Figures for the City of London included within the overall percentage increases for England and Wales include Police Principal Grant only. NNDR and RSG are paid to the City of London Corporation for all services, including the police.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much of the additional £180 million being allocated in 2002–03 to address street crime policing and counter-terrorism, referred to on 17 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 589, will be spent in 2002–03. [52866]

Mr. Denham: It is intended that all the additional funding will be spent in 2002–03.

Commonwealth Games (Policing Costs)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary to report on its assessment of the bid from Greater Manchester Police for funding of the policing costs of the Commonwealth games. [41412]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 8 March 2002]:* My right hon. Friend The Home Secretary (Mr. Blunkett) announced in January 2002 a special grant payment of £3 million to Greater Manchester Police Authority towards the additional costs of policing the Commonwealth games.

Taking account of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary's appraisal of the Police Authority's request for additional support, we have now decided to increase the special grant to a maximum of £5 million, 63 per cent. of the estimated additional costs of policing the games.

£1.7 million has already been paid to Greater Manchester Police Authority. The balance will be paid after the Commonwealth games, in the light of additional costs incurred.

Correspondence

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling on behalf of Mr. P. J. Wright of Edenbridge, dated 3 December 2001, 7 February 2002 and 15 March 2002. [54095]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* A reply to the right hon. Member was despatched on 7 May 2002.

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letters of the hon. Member for Broxbourne of *(a)* 6 February, *(b)* 5 March, *(c)* 4 April and *(d)* 1 May relating to her constituent Mrs. Kim Cannon of Wormley. [54734]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* A reply to the hon. Member was despatched on 7 May 2002.

Appeals

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases with the Appeals Section have not been despatched to the IAT. [50703]

Angela Eagle: Appeals to the Immigration Appeals Tribunal (IAT) are lodged directly with the IAT and not with the Appeals Support Section of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND).

There are, however, an estimated 48,000 appeals lodged with IND that have not yet been sent to the Immigration Appellate Authority. The majority of these are asylum appeals.

Voluntary Organisations (Disclosure)

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) whether the Criminal Records Bureau has carried out a mapping exercise to identify whether the system of disclosures for voluntary organisations and volunteers has full national coverage; [51798]

(2) whether an open umbrella group which is registered with the Criminal Records Bureau is open to anyone who wants to use it; and what restrictions apply; [51789]

(3) what estimate he has made of the likely costs that will be incurred by voluntary organisations using the disclosure system of the Criminal Records Bureau as a result of charging by umbrella bodies; and if he will make a statement; [51799]

(4) if he will make a statement on the position of funding for voluntary organisations to enable them to access the disclosure system of the Criminal Records Bureau; [51788]

(5) what steps he is taking to ensure that voluntary organisations who need to obtain a disclosure in respect of staff or volunteers from the Criminal Records Bureau, but cannot *(a)* find a suitable umbrella body and *(b)* afford the fee, will be able to do so. [51797]

Mr. Denham: Since we announced in February last year that Standard and Enhanced Disclosures would be issued free by the Criminal Records Bureau in the case of volunteers, we have received some representations in favour of the provision of funding, principally to meet start-up expenses, and overhead costs of processing individual applications. Estimates by a number of organisations as to what such costs might be—whether the organisation would be acting on its own behalf or, as an umbrella body, countersigning applications at the request of others—have varied very considerably, depending upon a range of factors including the size of the organisation and the number of applications to be processed.

We have considered the representations very carefully but are not persuaded that it would be appropriate for Government funding to be made available for this purpose. In guidance for umbrella bodies, the bureau has urged that any charges made for providing the service should be kept to a minimum. Organisations wishing to use an umbrella body are advised to inquire about, and to compare, any such charges.

We have been determined that all those wishing to access the Criminal Records Bureau's service should have ready means of access. To assist bodies for whom registration in their own right is not appropriate, the bureau has encouraged others to register as umbrella bodies. Up to 23 April 2002, a total of 713 bodies had so registered, including 422 who are prepared to act as "open" umbrella bodies—i.e., countersign applications at the request of others outside their own circle or sector (but possibly subject to a geographical restriction stated by the umbrella body on registration). The Bureau maintains a record of umbrella bodies by geographical area, which shows that there are good numbers of such bodies in each, with the exception of mid-Wales and north Wales where numbers are lower. But organisations seeking the services of an umbrella body are not confined to their own area. Voluntary organisations needing to find an umbrella body should access the Criminal Record Bureau's website www.disclosure.gov.uk, which has an umbrella body search facility, or contact the Criminal Records Bureau direct on 0870 90 90 811. Organisations are continuing to apply for registration, and the number of umbrella bodies will increase. Officials are exploring means of developing the network further.

Retail Crime

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to provide funding to local retail crime prevention initiatives in *(a)* town and *(b)* secondary shopping centres. [53500]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on 27 June last year the provision of £15 million over three years from the capital modernisation fund to assist small retailers in deprived areas to improve the security of their businesses. £3 million was available in 2001–02 financial year, with a further £6 million in both 2002–03 and 2003–04.

This money, which is being spent on schemes identified by regional crime reduction directors, in conjunction with Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, will be used to help small retailers to improve security. This will be achieved by employing a variety of interventions, including enhancing the security of individual premises and improving the environment of shopping centres. Nearly 3,000 shops in 114 retail schemes in some of the most deprived areas in England and Wales benefited from first year funds. More shops will be assisted in the next two years.

The Home Office has also supported work undertaken to establish retail crime partnerships by funding a consultant post for the past two years. The consultant has worked closely with the British Retail Consortium to produce a definitive guide on how to establish and run a retail crime partnership and encouraged retailers and other stakeholders in main shopping centre areas to establish partnerships to tackle retail and related crime.

Funding totalling £223,000 was also given to aid retail crime reduction initiatives under various programmes administered by regional crime reduction directors in the financial year ending 31 March 2002 and a further £86,500 of funding is expected to be disbursed via regional crime reduction directors specifically for retail crime reduction initiatives in the current financial year.

Other funding under the Crime Reduction Programme, such as the £170 million for schemes for the installation of closed circuit television, particularly in town centres will help to reduce shop theft as well as other types of crime in the locations where it is installed. Other initiatives such as the street wardens schemes will also be of benefit to retailers in the areas where they operate.

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of the annual cost of retail crime to *(a)* business, *(b)* local authorities and *(c)* the police in each of the past three years; [54469]

(2) what estimate he has made of the total cost of *(a)* retail crime and *(b)* street crime in each of the last three years. [54467]

Mr. Denham: The Home Office does not collect information about the cost of retail crime. The British Retail Consortium conducts an annual retail crime survey and the most recent one, published in June 2001, estimated the total retail crime losses in the United Kingdom at £1,481 million in 2000, compared to £1,461 million in 1999. The same survey also indicated that retailers spent £626 million on crime prevention measures in 2000 compared with £554 million in 1999.

The survey of crime affecting retailers and manufacturers announced by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 23 April 2002, the results of which should be available next spring, will also provide up to date information about crimes against retailers.

The best estimates for the total cost of robberies (as a proxy for street crime) for the years 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 are shown in the table and are based on information extrapolated from the British Crime Survey.

	£ million
1999–2000	2,600
2000–01	2,200

Information is not yet available for 2001–02.

Behaviour Orders

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* child curfew orders, *(b)* parenting orders and *(c)* antisocial behaviour orders have been made; and how many breaches of each have taken place resulting in further proceedings in each year since their introduction. [53707]

Mr. Denham: No applications have been received to impose child curfew schemes under section 14 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Sections 48 and 49 of the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001, which took effect on 1 August 2001, extended the upper age limit to 15 and allowed the police, as well as local authorities, to initiate schemes. Local areas are assessing the implications of these changes and we know that local consultation is taking place.

The numbers of Parenting Orders imposed in England and Wales between April 2000 and December 2001, are set out in the table. This information comes from the Youth Justice Board. 40 of the parenting orders imposed following a crime by the child have resulted in breach action.

England and Wales

Type of order	*Parenting Order*
Crime	1,268
Education	274
Other	236
Total	1,778

The available information on antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs) is given in the table.

From 1 April 1999 to 31 December 2001—England and Wales

Period	*Antisocial behaviour orders (ASBO)*[1]	*Number of finalised criminal court proceedings within period for breach of an antisocial behaviour order (ASBO)*[2]
1 April 1999 to 31 December 2000	235	[3]81
1 January 2001 to 30 September 2001	231	[4]192
1 October 2001 to 31 December 2001	52	[5]—
Total	518	

[1] Issued within period.
[2] The number of occasions identified on the Home Office court appearance database that an individual has appeared in court for breaching an antisocial behaviour order (ASBO) where an outcome resulted.
[3] Staffordshire police force were only able to submit sample data for persons proceeded against in a magistrates court for the year 2000. Only those occasions within the sample are included.
[4] Provisional.
[5] Not available.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people, in respect of the most recent year for which figures are available, were convicted of a breach of an antisocial behaviour order *(a)* in Nottingham and *(b)* in England and Wales; and what penalties they received, distinguishing in each case between offenders (i) over and (ii) under 18. [54067]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is contained in the table. The period covered is 1 October 2000 to 30 September 2001. The figures are provisional.

Persons[1] convicted of breaches of antisocial orders in Nottingham and England and Wales, 1 October 2000 to 30 September 2001 (provisional figures)

	Nottinghamshire		*England and Wales*	
	Persons aged 10 to 17	*Persons aged 18 and over*	*Persons aged 10 to 17*	*Persons aged 18 and over*
Total found guilty	2	4	83	107
Total for sentence	2	4	83	[2]101
Absolute discharge	—	—	1	1
Conditional discharge	—	—	3	1
Fine	—	—	14	18
Community rehabilitation order	—	—	2	9
Supervision order	—	—	10	—
Community punishment order	—	—	2	6
Attendance centre order	—	—	8	1
Community punishment and rehabilitation order	—	—	2	1
Curfew order	—	—	1	—
Reparation order	—	—	1	—
Action plan order	—	—	2	—
Total community sentences	—	—	28	17
Fully suspended sentence	—	—	—	1
Detention and training order	1	—	35	—
Young offender institution	—	—	—	11
Unsuspended sentence of imprisonment	—	—	—	44
Total immediate custody	—	—	35	55
Police cells (one day)	—	4	—	5
Not separately dealt with	1	—	2	3

[1] A person is counted once for each separate court appearance on which he is found guilty of a breach.
[2] In six cases the sentences imposed at the Crown court following summary conviction were not yet to hand.

Criminal Cases Review Commission

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department by what means the Criminal Case Review Commission prioritises its cases; if the Commission distinguishes between persons in prison and those who have been released; and if it distinguishes between those serving short and those serving long-term sentences. [53752]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Applications from those in custody or at liberty begin their review in date order of receipt dependent on the availability of case information. At stages two and three applications from those in custody begin their review before those at liberty. The Commission considers applications for priority on the following grounds:

Grave ill health of the applicant, witnesses or family members

The interests of the Criminal Justice System

Age of applicants

Operational effectiveness of the Commission.

Applicants receiving a Life sentence who are released on licence are treated as if they were in custody. Once a review has begun it continues even if the custodial status of the applicant changes. Applicants released before the review begins move to At Liberty status.

Sentencing

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he next expects to meet representatives of the magistracy to discuss the sentencing of young offenders. [51320]

Mr. Keith Bradley *[holding answer 30 April 2002]:* I have no meetings currently planned to meet representatives of the magistracy about this. However, I would be happy to meet with them in the future, diary commitments permitting. I will meet members of the Magistrates' Association on 11 June 2002.

Theft

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what studies he has made of whether there is a relationship between the number of burglaries and street robberies in the past five years; and if he will make a statement. [54021]

Mr. Denham: The Home Office has not undertaken any research in the past five years that looks specifically at the relationship between the number of burglaries and the number of street robberies.

Racially Motivated Crime

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review policing arrangements with regard to racially motivated crime in *(a)* Burnley, *(b)* Oldham and *(c)* Bradford. [54058]

Mr. Denham: The policing arrangements are as follows:

In Burnley the police have established a Racist Incident Unit with a team of investigators and intelligence officers, tasked with monitoring racist crime and incidents, and providing an in depth level of investigation. In Oldham, a Hate Crime Unit performs the same role, with the ability to pick up on trends of racist crime.

In Bradford, the policing of racially motivated crime is supported by Community Safety Units. They have community based reporting arrangements: there are currently 29 reporting centres with a further 10 in the pipeline. They are also piloting a system of Lay Panels sitting with the Divisional Commander, who audit all racist crimes and incidents, with the power to request an investigation be re-opened. Although operational policing matters in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford, are the responsibility of the Chief Constables of Lancashire, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire respectively, I recognise the importance of the police to providing an effective response to racially motivated crime.

Personal Safety

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to promote policies for instruction of the general public on personal safety from crime. [54190]

Mr. Denham: The Home Office produces a wide range of public information about personal safety and crime prevention. Police crime prevention officers and other crime reduction agencies distribute this material. Information and advice is also available on the Crime Reduction Website www.crimereduction.gov.uk

In response to rising concern about mobile phone theft the Department has produced a leaflet which is distributed by the police and commercial organisations including Dixons, Virgin and the Carphone Warehouse.

We have distributed leaflets, doorstickers, videos and posters about distraction burglary directly to the elderly and the professional bodies and carers who work with them.

Advice about making homes and property secure from burglars, property marking, and specific advice about home security when moving home or going on holiday are also available and distributed by people engaged in crime prevention activity.

Our very successful vehicle crime campaign, featuring television and radio advertising, provides security advice for motorists. It also involves developing partnerships with appropriate commercial partners to help spread vehicle crime prevention advice. Our research suggests that the campaign is having an impact on motorist behaviour.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of domestic violence were reported to the Metropolitan Police in each of the last three years. [54189]

Mr. Denham: Details of the numbers of domestic violence incidents in the Metropolitan Police force area, obtained from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary Annual Statistical Return from the force, are given in the following. The definition of domestic violence incidents used for the figures for 1998–99 is as follows:

"Any form of physical, sexual or emotional abuse which takes place within the context of a close relationship. In most cases, the relationship will be between partners, married, cohabiting or otherwise; or ex-partners".

The figures for 1999–2000 and 2000–01 used the following definition:

Any violence between current or former partners in an intimate relationship, wherever and whenever the violence occurs. The violence may include physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse.

The figures for 1998–99 are therefore not directly comparable with those for 1999–2000 and 2000–01.

Domestic violence incidents—Metropolitan Police force area

Year	*Number of incidents*
1998–99	41,531
1999–2000	77,099
2000–01	91,154

Volunteer Bureaux

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the £1–2 million he has awarded in special grant to voluntary bureaux; and how it will be distributed to each individual office. [55032]

Angela Eagle: I agreed an Emergency Fund of £500,000 to support local volunteer bureaux and Councils for Voluntary Service facing imminent closure or the substantial loss of core services due to funding cuts. The crisis situation was identified by the National Association of Volunteer Bureaux (NAVB) and the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (NACVS) on behalf of their members. The Fund is administered by NAVB and NACVS. Applications were invited from NAVB and NACVS member organisations and assessed by an independent panel using criteria agreed by Government. An announcement detailing which agencies have been awarded grants will be made before the end of May 2002.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average delay for the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority in relation to *(a)* deciding claims, *(b)* the review of such decisions and *(c)* hearings challenging such decisions in the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [55188]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority advise that, using as the start and finish points the date of receipt of the application for the relevant stage and the date that the decision was issued, the average elapsed times for the period 1 May 2001 to 30 April 2002 were:

	Days
	Elapsed time
Claims assessment	305
Review	274
Appeal	408

Electronic Tagging

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women are electronically tagged in England and Wales. [55201]

Beverley Hughes: On 30 April 2002, a total of 362 women were subject to electronic tagging in England and Wales.

Secure Accommodation

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many 12-year-old children have been remanded to local authority secure accommodation in the last month. [55041]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* One 12-year-old child was remanded to local authority secure accommodation in April 2002.

Physical Restraint

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his Department's policy is on the use of *(a)* handcuffs and *(b)* other implements of physical restraint on pregnant women under-18 when visiting hospitals from prison establishments. [55039]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The current policy on the use of restraints on pregnant female prisoners is contained within Chapter 37 of the Security Manual (Prison Service Order 1000). All pregnant female prisoners (regardless of age) are subject to a thorough risk assessment before attending hospital for ante-natal checks and giving birth. This is done to assess any escape risks.

This process allows the Governor the discretion not to use restraints where it is considered that they are unnecessary. In the exceptional circumstances that a female prisoner going to hospital to give birth does require restraints, they will be removed on her arrival at the hospital and not re-applied until her journey back to the prison. A copy of the Security Manual is retained in the Library.

Police Numbers (Spelthorne)

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were serving in the Spelthorne Division on 1 January in each of the past five years. [55036]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* Spelthorne was affected by the boundary changes on 1 April 2000 between the Metropolitan police and Surrey police when the policing of Spelthorne was transferred to Surrey police. The information before April 2000 has therefore been provided by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis (Sir John Stevens) and the data for subsequent years provide by the Chief Constable of Surrey police (Mr. Denis O'Connor). The divisional boundaries of the old MPS area for Spelthorne are not coterminous with those of Surrey, consequently like with like comparisons cannot be made.

Spelthorne—police numbers

	Police strength	
	Spelthorne	*North Surrey Division*[1]
31 December 1997	178.4	n/a
31 December 1998	180.8	n/a
31 December 1999	155	n/a
31 March 2001	164.5	256.9
31 December 2001	130.9	186.5
31 March 2002	n/a	[2]376.1

[1] On 27 January 2002 the borough of Spelthorne was combined with the boroughs of Elmbridge and Epsom and Ewell to form the new A Division (North Surrey). The borough of Runneymede was transferred from the old North Surrey Division to West Surrey Division on 27 January 2002. Officers were moved in anticipation of these changes and this accounts for the fall in North Surrey numbers between March and December 2001.
[2] New North Surrey Division including Spelthorne.

Women's Prison (Ashford)

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in the negotiations with the private sector to build and operate a women's prison at Ashford, Middlesex. [55038]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The negotiations are continuing in respect of the contract for designing, constructing, managing and financing the new prison at Ashford, Middlesex.

Prisoners (Former Service Personnel)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people in prison have served in the armed forces, not including national service; and if he will make a statement. [55315]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* We do not hold this information and it could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Anti-semitism

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes the Metropolitan police have recorded as being anti-semitic *(a)* in the last four weeks, *(b)* in the previous three months and *(c)* in the last year; and if he will make a statement. [54223]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* Numbers of anti-semitic crimes are not collected separately by the Home Office.

The Government condemns all acts of anti-semitism in this country. The Government and the police are aware of the concerns of the Jewish community and we have received reports from both the police and community organisations such as the Community Security Trust. We will continue to monitor the situation carefully in co-operation with community organisations.

HEALTH

Orthodontics

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the waiting times in Essex for orthodontist operations. [41948]

Ms Blears: Patients waiting for orthodontic operations will normally be listed under general surgery or plastic surgery. Waiting times for these specialities are shown in the table.

Inpatient waiting data mid-Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust for general surgery and plastic surgery—Data for quarter ended 31 December 2000 and 31 December 2001

Year (December)	*Surgery speciality*	*Total number of patients on waiting list*	*Number waiting over 15 months*	*Average (median) waiting time in months*
2000	General	915	12	3.6
2001	General	1,360	0	3.9
2000	Plastic	2,950	82	3.3
2001	Plastic	3,413	25	2.9

Source:
DH Form KH07

NHS Inspections

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many, and which, NHS organisations were inspected by *(a)* the Commission for Health Improvement and *(b)* the Audit Commission in 2001; and if he will make a statement. [46286]

Ms Blears: During 2001, the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) began 104 reviews of national health service organisations in England and Wales as part of its routine reviews of local clinical governance arrangements. A list of organisations will be placed in the Library. Further details are also available from the CHI website via www.chi.nhs.uk/eng/cgr/current—rev.shtml

CHI also commenced or was concluding four investigations during 2001, two of which are still ongoing. Further details are available via www.chi.nhs.uk/eng/inv/current.shtml

All NHS bodies are also subject to an annual audit by auditors appointed by the Audit Commission. This currently includes an audit of performance as well as the traditional financial audit.

Collaboratively, CHI and the Audit Commission published a joint review of the implementation of the Calman-Hine report on cancer services in December 2001. During the course of the review 11 networks, comprising 93 organisations, were visited as study sites. These will be placed in the Library.

We recently announced our intention to introduce legislation to establish a new independent healthcare inspectorate covering both the NHS and the private sector. The Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection will bring together the health value for money work of the Audit Commission, the work of CHI and the private healthcare role of the National Care Standards Commission. Legislation to establish this new body will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Waiting Times

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what percentage of patients waited less than four hours in accident and emergency from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge in the last year; [47836]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 25 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 966W, if he will publish the waiting times in A and E since August 2001. [48286]

Ms Blears: Management information shows about 77 per cent. of all patients in England spent less than four hours in accident and emergency from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge between September 2001 and March 2002. This information is unvalidated. September is the first month for which full information is available.

Hearing Aids

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will widen the availability of digital hearing aids by making it possible for private individuals to purchase these from the NHS at the price the NHS has paid for them. [47764]

Jacqui Smith: National health service services are provided free at the point of delivery. It is not possible for the NHS to sell digital hearing aids that are provided as part of an NHS service.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on the Government's plans regarding the treatment and care of myalgic encephalomyelitis; [48629]

(2) if he will make a statement on the appointment and work of the Medical Research Council's independent scientific advisory group established to further research in the field of CFS/ME; [48630]

(3) what resources the Government *(a)* have already made and *(b)* plan to make available to implement the recommendations of the CFS/ME independent working group's report published on 11 January. [48631]

Ms Blears: The Medical Research Council are in the process of appointing an independent scientific advisory group which will include scientists with expertise in areas such as epidemiology, physiology, immunology, infections, clinical trials and psychological medicine. The advisory group will draw on the working party report and recent expert reviews of the field. It will also take into account the concerns of patients and carers and the interests of consumers generally.

There are no plans to make extra resources available to implement the chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME) independent working group report. It is for primary care trusts in partnership within the local health economy and other local stakeholders to determine how best to use their funds to provide services for their local populations, including those patients with CFS/ME.

The Government response to the working group's report welcomed the publication of the report. We see it as the start of a process of improving awareness and understanding that we hope will lead to improved diagnosis, management and treatment.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Lancaster Moor Hospital for the Bay Community NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative. [49517]

Jacqui Smith: The information concerning the former Lancaster Priority Services NHS Trust in relation to the development of the Lancaster Moor Hospital is shown in the table:

	£000
PFI	11,702
Public	12,602
Savings in net present value terms	900
Difference (percentage)	7.1

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the Mancunian Community Trust—Primary Care for the Mancunian NHS Trust by comparison with a non-Private Finance Initiative alternative. [49528]

Jacqui Smith: The information concerning the former Mancunian Community NHS Trust in relation to the development of the Primary Care Resource Centre is shown in the table:

	£000
PFI	3,724
Public	3,968
Savings in net present value terms	244
Difference (percentage)	6.15

Smallpox

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what scientific assessments he has carried out of the differences between the Lister and New York strains of the smallpox vaccine. [50896]

Mr. Hutton: The choice of smallpox vaccine strain took into account expert advice, under the auspices of a specially convened sub-group of the joint committee on vaccination and immunisation (JCVI).

The advice of the JCVI sub-group was that there was no difference between the two strains on scientific grounds. Vaccines based on both strains were considered to have been effective in the past.

However, the JCVI sub-group concluded that there is a greater body of evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of the Lister strain rather than for the New York City Board of Health strain, and that the smallpox vaccine has been challenged in the field more often by the more severe form of smallpox "variola major" with the strain chosen by the UK Government. The JCVI sub-group also recommended that using a different strain of vaccine from that used in the United States offered the greatest safeguard if difficulties arose with the production of either strain ensuring that the alternative strain could act as a fall-back.

Haemophilia

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will set out the process by which the Government will determine whether to make recombinant available to all people with haemophilia; if he will outline the considerations being taken into account in coming to this decision; and if he will indicate when he expects this process to be complete. [50849]

Yvette Cooper: The Government is considering whether to make recombinant clotting factors available to all haemophiliacs in England taking full account of representations made by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Haemophilia, the Haemophilia Society, the United Kingdom Haemophilia Centre Doctors Organisation and others. A decision will be taken later this year.

Nursing Care Standards

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of the standard of *(a)* medical and *(b)* nursing care in (i) NHS and (ii) private hospitals. [51754]

Ms Blears: The Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) plays a central role in our plans to drive up the quality of care in the national health service. CHI assess systems and processes through clinical governance reviews and comment on where and when they think the potential to deliver good care is compromised.

CHI has published 102 clinical governance reports on NHS trust.

Under the Registered Homes Act 1984, which was in force until 31 March 2002, health authorities carried out biannual inspections of the facilities, equipment and staffing levels in private hospitals, but had no powers to assess standards of medical or nursing care.

On 1 April this year, under the Care Standards Act 2000, the National Care Standards Commission took over the role of registering and inspecting independent health care providers, who for the first time are required to meet national minimum standards, including those for medical and nursing care. The commission is required to provide

information about independent health care services to the Secretary of State for Health and to the public, but as it has been operating only since 1 April, it has not yet had time to gather this information.

We have announced our intention to establish a new tough independent healthcare regulator/inspectorate, the Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection which will have responsibility for inspecting both public and private health care sectors.

Occupational Therapists

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to increase the availability of occupational therapists to health authorities in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [52875]

Mr. Hutton: The NHS plan sets out our intention to increase numbers of staff across the healthcare professions. The targets for increasing the size of the workforce include 6,500 more therapists and other health professionals by 2004 over the 1999 baseline. Occupational therapists are included in this target and there are 1,250 more working in the national health service now than there were in 1999. "Delivering the NHS Plan", published in April 2002, sets out the expected increase in the workforce. It is expected that there will be 30,000 more therapists and scientists (including occupational therapists) between now and 2008.

The NHS plan also sets a target for 4,450 more therapists and other key professional staff entering training each year by 2004. Overall since 1996–97 the number of places available to train as an occupational therapist has increased by 427 (44 per cent.) This will continue to rise as we make further progress towards achieving the NHS plan target.

Lembit Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many residents per occupational therapist there are in each health authority in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement; [52873]

(2) how many occupational therapists are employed by each health authority in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [52872]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is in the table.

NHS hospital and community health services (HCHS): Scientific, therapeutic and technical staff employed in the occupational therapy area of work and the ratio per population by health authority area as at 30 September 2001

Health authority	*Whole-time equivalents*	*2000 population figures*	*Residents per occupational therapist*	*Headcount*
England total	11,820	50,187,000	4,250	13,910
QA2 Hillingdon	40	260,700	6,520	40
QA3 Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	200	415,200	2,030	220
QA5 Redbridge and Waltham Forest	110	459,800	4,230	120
QA6 Bedfordshire	120	570,300	4,630	150
QA7 Berkshire	140	826,500	5,840	180
QA8 Buckinghamshire	180	702,700	3,910	230
QAD Croydon	30	348,400	10,260	40
QAE East Kent	160	607,100	3,710	206
QAF West Kent	160	984,100	6,340	180
QAG Kingston and Richmond	30	349,600	12,760	30
QAH Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	210	757,000	3,620	240
QAJ Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	260	641,300	2,510	290
QAK East Surrey	150	427,400	2,880	180
QAL West Surrey	190	651,200	3,410	240
QAM East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	180	765,000	4,150	220
QAN West Sussex	140	771,600	5,490	170
QAP Barking and Havering	60	381,200	5,900	70
QAR Brent and Harrow	70	480,300	7,030	80
QAT Camden and Islington	150	379,000	2,460	170
QAV Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	140	700,400	5,050	160
QAW East London and the City	170	642,400	3,740	180
QAX North Essex	240	911,500	3,760	290
QAY South Essex	160	718,400	4,590	180
QC1 South Lancashire	50	312,900	6,480	60
QC2 Liverpool	80	454,200	5,910	90
QC3 Manchester	140	426,500	3,090	160
QC4 Morecambe Bay	90	313,700	3,660	100
QC5 St. Helen's and Knowsley	50	328,100	6,020	60
QC6 Salford and Trafford	150	445,200	2,900	170
QC7 Sefton	90	284,100	3,070	110
QC8 Stockport	60	294,200	4,840	80
QC9 West Pennine	100	471,300	4,830	110
QCC Northamptonshire	120	628,300	5,400	140
QCE Oxfordshire	150	633,400	4,130	190
QCF Suffolk	130	684,300	5,220	160
QCG Barnsley	40	228,600	5,110	50
QCH North Derbyshire	100	372,300	3,900	120
QCJ Southern Derbyshire	160	574,300	3,620	200

NHS hospital and community health services (HCHS): Scientific, therapeutic and technical staff employed in the occupational therapy area of work and the ratio per population by health authority area as at 30 September 2001

Health authority	Whole-time equivalents	2000 population figures	Residents per occupational therapist	Headcount
QCK Doncaster	90	288,900	3,290	100
QCL Leicestershire	230	947,600	4,120	260
QCM Lincolnshire	90	640,600	7,380	100
QCN North Nottinghamshire	230	388,200	1,720	250
QCP Nottingham	150	647,600	4,200	170
QCQ Rotherham	100	253,100	2,480	120
QCR Sheffield	160	530,100	3,340	190
QCT Bury and Rochdale	60	392,800	6,090	70
QCV North Cheshire	90	314,400	3,560	110
QCW South Cheshire	100	680,400	6,790	140
QCX East Lancashire	100	512,300	4,890	120
QCY North West Lancashire	140	469,800	3,310	170
QD1 North and Mid Hampshire	50	574,000	10,910	70
QD3 Southampton and South West Hampshire	160	552,800	3,480	200
QD5 Somerset	120	498,900	4,150	150
QD6 South and West Devon	170	598,700	3,620	200
QD7 Wiltshire	60	621,200	9,820	80
QD8 Avon	350	1,012,600	2,890	440
QD9 Birmingham	280	1,012,800	3,670	310
QDA Wigan and Bolton	150	577,700	3,780	170
QDC Wirral	100	322,900	3,170	120
QDD Bradford	110	487,500	4,270	130
QDE County Durham and Darlington	90	607,800	7,110	100
QDF East Riding and Hull	110	581,700	5,180	130
QDG Gateshead and South Tyneside	80	350,500	4,150	100
QDH Leeds	180	731,100	3,960	210
QDJ Newcastle and North Tyneside	140	468,100	3,380	160
QDK North Cumbria	70	321,200	4,570	80
QDL South Humber	30	304,900	9,860	40
QDM Northumberland	70	310,400	4,540	80
QDN Sunderland	40	289,300	7,050	40
QDP Tees	150	552,500	3,790	160
QDQ Wakefield	140	317,200	2,270	150
QDR North Yorkshire	170	756,700	4,590	210
QDT Calderdale and Kirklees	160	587,700	3,580	190
QDV Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	110	499,000	4,520	130
QDW Dorset	230	708,200	3,120	280
QDX North and East Devon	160	489,200	3,080	200
QDY Gloucestershire	160	565,600	3,430	200
QEA Coventry	70	304,600	4,570	80
QEC Dudley	60	311,300	5,040	70
QED Herefordshire	50	171,900	3,690	60
QEE Sandwell	50	288,400	6,410	50
QEF Shropshire	110	437,100	4,160	120
QEG Solihull	[1]—	206,500	[1]—	[1]—
QEH North Staffordshire	140	464,800	3,380	150
QEJ South Staffordshire	90	599,500	6,460	120
QEK Walsall	30	259,400	8,320	30
QEL Warwickshire	90	513,000	5,450	110
QEM Wolverhampton	70	240,200	3,320	90
QEN Worcestershire	120	548,100	4,750	150
QER Cambridgeshire	170	743,600	4,420	200
QET Norfolk	230	806,000	3,550	270
QEV Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	120	681,600	5,480	150
QEW Barnet, Enfield and Haringey	200	854,300	4,220	230
QEX Hertfordshire	120	1,052,300	8,510	160
QEY Bexley, Bromley and Greenwich	100	736,500	7,380	120

[1] There were no occupational therapists employed in the organisation within Solihull health authority as at 30 September 2001.

Notes:

1. Figures are round to the nearest 10.
2. Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts.
3. Residents per occupational therapist is based on wte data.
4. Occupational therapists are also employed by local authorities.

Sources:

1. Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census
2. Office for National Statistics (ONS)

Opioid Prescriptions

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many opioid prescriptions were issued in the UK in each of the past ten years. [53197]

Ms Blears: Information for England is shown in the table. Information for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is a matter for the devolved Administrations.

Number of prescription items dispensed in the community for opioid analgesics and opioid drugs used in substance dependence, 1991 to 2001

Thousand

	Number of prescription items
1991	3,444
1992	3,705
1993	3,946
1994	4,384
1995	4,918
1996	5,495
1997	6,096
1998	6,722
1999	7,336
2000	8,014
2001	8,766

Notes:

1. The prescription information was obtained from the Prescription Cost Analysis (PCA) system and is based on a full analysis of all prescriptions dispensed in the community, i.e. by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors, and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered in England. Total prescriptions include not only prescriptions originating from general medical practitioners in England but also from hospital doctors, nurses, and dentists, provided they were dispensed in the community. Also included are prescriptions written in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man but dispensed in England. The data do not cover drugs dispensed in hospital or private prescriptions.

2. Opioid analgesics are those drugs defined in the British National Formulary (BNF) paragraph 4.7.2, "Opioid analgesics". The opioid drugs used in substance dependence are contained within the BNF section 4.10, and are methadone, buprenorphine and naltrexone.

Photodynamic Therapy

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 19 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1240W, on photodynamic therapy, under what circumstances the NHS will charge patients for photodynamic therapy. [53649]

Ms Blears: Patients should not be charged for photodynamic therapy where it is being provided as an integral part of their national health service treatment.

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence is currently conducting an appraisal of photodynamic therapy. In the meantime, we have asked NHS bodies to continue with local arrangements for the managed introduction of new technologies where guidance from NICE is not available at the time the technology first became available. These arrangements should involve an assessment of all relevant factors including the available evidence on effect.

We are expecting NICE to issue guidance to the NHS in July 2002, providing there are no appeals.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of people who will go blind in each of the next four years whose sight could be saved by photodynamic therapy. [50058]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 16 April 2002]:* A study sponsored by the Macular Disease Society in 2001 estimated that there were 182,000 people with age-related macular degeneration with a best eye visual acuity below that judged appropriate for certification as blind or partially sighted. Around 10 to 15 per cent. of those will have the 'wet' type of the condition, for which photodynamic therapy is intended as a treatment. However, it is not possible to say in how many cases the treatment would be effective. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) is currently appraising the effectiveness of the treatment. We are expecting the NICE guidance to be issued to the national health service in July, providing there are no appeals.

Mixed Sex Wards

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many mixed sex wards of eight or more there were in England on 1 April. [53365]

Ms Blears: The information is not available in the format requested.

It is the responsibility of each national health service trust to manage patient admissions in such a manner as to ensure that patient privacy is protected. Guidance on maintaining patient privacy and dignity was issued to the service in 1997 and since then the NHS has been working towards a clear target of eliminating mixed sex accommodation in 95 per cent. of trusts by December 2002.

Repair and Maintenance

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer of 19 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 300W, what figures he collates on repair and maintenance of NHS estates, broken down by region, in each of the last five years. [53371]

Ms Blears: Figures for the repair and maintenance backlog costs for the national health service estate in England, broken down by region over the five years from 1996–97 to 2000–01, were reported in my response to the hon. Gentleman on 19 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 300W.

These are repeated in the following tables with figures for the year 2000–01 updated to reflect the outcome of recent data validation.

Total backlog maintenance—old region

£000

Old region	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Northern and Yorkshire	387,253	427,819
Trent	211,042	234,193
Anglia and Oxford	240,769	288,228
North Thames	768,942	652,985
South Thames	370,659	357,978
South West	227,901	254,959
West Midlands	350,055	391,575
North West	266,485	291,981
Total for England	2,823,106	2,899,717

Total backlog maintenance—new region

£000

New region	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Northern and Yorkshire	539,948	433,016	486,128
Trent	370,185	267,137	256,091
Eastern	262,662	267,398	177,968
London	832,901	796,949	708,697
South Eastern	383,660	409,228	401,196
South West	222,863	165,154	282,225
West Midlands	421,888	435,101	454,432
North West	336,944	334,241	387,131
Total for England	3,371,051	3,108,224	3,153,869

Drug Prescriptions

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much of each individual *(a)* benzodiazepine and *(b)* antidepressant was prescribed by doctors in England in 2001. [53516]

Ms Blears: The number of items for benzodiazepine and antidepressant drugs dispensed in the community by chemical entity is shown in the table.

Detailed information on individual preparations dispensed in the community is published in the publication "Prescription Cost Analysis: England 2001". The preparations are listed alphabetically within chemical entity by British National Formulary therapeutic class. A copy has been placed in the Library. The data are also available on the internet at www.doh.gov.uk/prescriptionstatistics/index.htm.

Number of prescription items dispensed in the community: England, 2001

Thousand

Chemical entity	Prescription item
Benzodiazepines	
Diazepam	4,502
Temazepam	4,449
Nitrazepam	1,963
Lorazepam	731
Chlordiazepoxide hydrochloride	368
Clonazepam	278
Oxazepam	262
Lormetazepam	194
Loprazolam mesylate	181
Clobazam	101
Total	13,028
Antidepressant drugs	
Amitriptyline hydrochloride	4,333
Fluoxetine hydrochloride	4,006
Paroxetine hydrochloride	3,787
Dothiepin hydrochloride	3,031
Citalopram	2,812
Venlafaxine	1,504
Sertraline hydrochloride	1,443
Lofepramine hydrochloride	661
Trazodone hydrochloride	462
Clomipramine hydrochloride	433
Mirtazapine	430
Imipramine hydrochloride	318
Flupenthixol hydrochloride	253
Trimipramine maleate	212
Doxepin	146
Nortriptyline	138
Nefazodone hydrochloride	105
Reboxetine	71

Number of prescription items dispensed in the community: England, 2001

Thousand

Chemical entity	Prescription item
Mianserin hydrochloride	45
Fluvoxamine maleate	37
Phenelzine sulphate	32
Moclobemide	32
Tranylcypromine sulphate	23
Maprotiline hydrochloride	14
Isocarboxazid	5
Tryptophan	5
Amoxapine	4
Total	24,343

Notes:

1. Data cover all prescriptions dispensed in the community, i.e. by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered. Information on items dispensed in hospitals is not available.
2. Benzodiazepines are contained within British National Formulary paragraphs 4.1.1, hypnotics and 4.1.2, anxiolitics. Benzodiazepines within 4.8.1, drugs used in the control of epilepsy, and 4.8.2, drugs used in status epilepticus, are also included as they too are used for anxiety relief. The therapeutic classifications are based on the British National Formulary No. 40, September 2000 version.
3. Antidepressant drugs are those defined in British National Formulary section 4.3, "antidepressant drugs". The therapeutic classifications are based on the British National Formulary No. 40, September 2000 version.

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library copies of each version of the internal guidance which have been drawn up by his Department since 1 January 1999 to assist staff in his Department to answer subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 1998. [53356]

Ms Blears: Guidance on data protection and how to handle subject access requests has been available to staff in the Department since January 2000 on the Department's intranet site. The guidance has been regularly updated to reflect changes in organisation or legislation. The three versions, dated 22 December 1999, 24 September 2001 and 6 March 2002 will be placed in the Library as requested.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will answer the question tabled by the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith on 11 January, regarding the potential risks to health caused by the chemical treatment of Christmas trees. [54869]

Ms Blears: My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Miss Melanie Johnson) replied to my hon. Friend on 13 May at column 499W.

Quality Protects

John Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the outcome is of the evaluation of the Quality Protects management action plans submitted to his Department by local authorities. [56777]

Jacqui Smith: All local authorities with social service responsibilities submitted their Quality Protects Management Action Plans (MAPs) to the Department of Health by the end of January. The Social Services Inspectorate has now completed its evaluation of the MAPs and I have considered their findings. The MAPs from all 150 local councils have reached an acceptable standard. Therefore, subject to Parliamentary approval of the special grant report, they will receive payment of their allocation of the children's services grant from 2001–02.

Pesticides

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the link between pesticide exposure and Parkinson's Disease. [56016]

Jacqui Smith: The advisory committee on pesticides has recently considered a review of the literature relating to epidemiological studies on Parkinson's Disease and pesticides, and also experiment studies in animals exploring the potential of pesticides to induce the disease. The committee agreed that a more detailed specialist assessment of the epidemiology should be carried out. The pesticides safety directorate is currently exploring ways to take this recommendation forward.

Expenditure (NHS Bodies)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what cash releasing efficiency savings NHS trusts and primary care trusts are required to achieve in 2002–03. [56288]

Mr. Hutton: The target for efficiency savings in the National Health Service in 2002–03 is 2 per cent.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the cash releasing efficiency savings achieved by *(a)* NHS trusts and *(b)* other NHS bodies, (i) in monetary terms and (ii) expressed as a percentage of the annual expenditure of those bodies on the basis of the information currently available to his Department in respect of 2001–01. [56289]

Mr. Hutton: Allocations to health authorities are based on an overall assessment of the resources required to cover inflationary pressures and deliver national targets. Allocations to health authorities 2001–02 were made net of 2 per cent. efficiency savings (equivalent to around £800 million). This means that health authorities needed to achieve the efficiency target to fully fund delivery of national targets and inflation. It is not possible to separately identify the savings made by national health service trusts.

Mental Health (Young People)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last met the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to discuss the promotion of mental health in schools; and if he will make a statement. [56321]

Jacqui Smith: Ministers in the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Skills have many regular meetings and child mental health services are raised at many of these meetings. Officials of both Departments meet frequently to discuss multi-agency mental health services for children.

The promotion of children's mental health and the prevention of mental health problems in childhood are central to many Government programmes. The Department for Education and Skills issued guidance last year specifically addressing mental health promotion in schools, to which this Department contributed. This guidance is designed to increase awareness about children's mental health among teachers and to provide examples of good practice.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the need to amend legislation on mental health in order to implement United Kingdom obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; and if he will make a statement. [56320]

Jacqui Smith: The Government published the White Paper "Reforming the Mental Health Act" in December 2000. The White Paper made clear our intention to reform mental health legislation and to bring it into line with the contemporary patterns of care and treatment including the changes and new investment set out in the NHS plan. This included commitment to introduce additional measures to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people with mental health problems where current safeguards are not considered to be sufficiently robust.

This is a high priority for the Government. New legislation will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Correspondence

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason the letter from the hon. Member for Twickenham regarding Mr. Peter Whitbread of 19 April 2001 has not received a reply. [44796]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 19 March 2002]:* I have now replied to the hon. Member and apologise for the unacceptable delay. His letter of 19 April 2001 was unfortunately misplaced.

Performance Targets

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what trend data are available to measure progress against the PSA target for a reduction in serious accidental injury relating to admission to hospital. [47300]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* The White Paper 'Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation' published in 1999 set a target of a 10 per cent. reduction by 2010 against a baseline of the age standardised hospital admission rate for the financial year 1995–96.

Data to monitor the Public Service Agreement target to reduce the rate of hospital admission for serious accidental injury[1] are obtained from information held in the Department's Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) system, which contains details of patients admitted to and treated in NHS hospitals in England. Data are for England.

The trend data are as follows.

Age standardised hospital admission rate for serious accidental injury

Financial year	*per 100,000 population*
1995–96	314.4
1996–97	315.6
1997–98	310.6
1998–99	315.2
1999–2000[2]	320.9

[1] Serious accidental injury is defined as an accidental injury resulting in a hospital inpatient stay exceeding three days.
[2] The 1999–2000 figure is provisional

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what trend data are available to measure progress against the PSA target for a reduction in the death rate from accidents. [47301]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* The White Paper 'Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation' set a target of a 20 per cent. reduction by 2010 against a baseline of the average age standardised mortality rate for the three years 1995–96–97.

Data to monitor the Public Service Agreement target to reduce the death rate from accidents and adverse effects are obtained from mortality data published by the Office for National Statistics. Data are for England.

The trend data are as follows:

Three-year average age standardised

Period	*mortality rate per 100,000 population*
1995–96 to 97	16.24
1996–97 to 98	16.36
1997–98 to 99	16.39
1998–99 to 2000	16.33

Intensive Care Baby Incubators

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many intensive care baby incubators are available for use in the NHS. [46689]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* Information on the total number of incubators in the national health service is not collected centrally. As at 31 March 2001, there was 1194 specialist neonatal intensive care cots available for use in the NHS.

NHS Direct

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average length of call to NHS Direct is over the last 12 months. [46700]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 10 April 2002]:* It is not currently possible to provide information on what the average length of call to NHS Direct is. NHS Direct measures the performance of its sites in progressing calls received in terms of the time taken for callers to be able to speak to a nurse. The target is that 90 per cent. of callers should speak to a nurse within five minutes.

Hepatitis C

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what analysis his Department has made of the most common ways of contracting hepatitis C. [53278]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that is transmitted mainly through direct blood to blood contact. Currently the greatest risk of acquiring hepatitis C infection in the UK is through the sharing of blood contaminated needles and injecting equipment among injecting drug users.

Previously transmission occurred through transfusion of contaminated blood or blood products before the introduction of donor screening and of viral inactivation of plasma products.

Health care and laboratory workers are at risk of infection by occupational exposure to the blood of infected patients. Infection may be passed from mother to baby and by sexual intercourse but these are generally considered to be less efficient modes of transmission. Tattooing and other forms of skin piercing also present a risk of infection if sterile equipment is not used.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what treatments are available for hepatitis C in the NHS; and how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women are receiving treatment for this condition; [53284]

(2) what percentage of the estimated population infected with hepatitis C have received treatment; [53285]

(3) what guidance has been provided to PCTs to make provision for the treatment and prevention of hepatitis C. [53287]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* The Department does not hold information centrally on the number of patients who have or who are receiving treatment for hepatitis C infection. In October 2000, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) issued guidance to the national health service on the use of Ribavirin and Interferon Alpha in the treatment of hepatitis C. Health authorities and primary care trusts are under a statutory obligation set out in directions, which came into force on 1 January 2002, to provide appropriate funding for treatments recommended by NICE.

The Department will be considering the need to issue guidance to primary care trusts on the prevention of hepatitis C following consultation on a strategy for hepatitis C later this year, and as part of the action plans set out in the strategy on infectious diseases, "Getting Ahead of the Curve".

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he expects the expert steering group on hepatitis C set up in 2001 to produce its findings; [53286]

(2) when he proposes to publish a strategy to combat hepatitis C. [53274]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* We set up a steering group last year to provide advice on a strategic approach to hepatitis C by bringing together issues relating to prevention, control and treatment. We expect to consult on a strategy for hepatitis C during the summer, which will take account of advice from the steering group.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness

of the Miscellaneous Food Additives (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001; and if he will make a statement. [53830]

Ms Blears: Costs associated with regulatory proposals are considered at the policy development stage. A regulatory impact assessment (RIA) is completed for regulatory proposals unless there are no or negligible costs, and sets out the impact, in terms of costs, benefits and risks of the proposed regulation which could affect businesses, charities or the voluntary sector. RIAs are available from the Library.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 15 May 2002

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Stadium

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what the cost will be of the athletics platform referred to in the Sport England report on athletics in Wembley stadium; and how long it will take to build and install; [55595]

(2) who produced the Sport England report on athletics in Wembley stadium; when it will be published; and if the members of the Sports Council athletics committee considered the report. [55594]

Tessa Jowell: Sport England published the study on Wembley stadium athletics prepared by Sports Concepts and Citex on 8 May. I placed a copy in the Library of the House on the same day. The full council of Sport England considered the conclusions of the report at its meeting on 7 May. The report concludes that the athletics platform will take a total of 11 weeks to build and install and a further six weeks to remove at a total cost of £12.2 million.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when *(a)* her Department's officials and *(b)* she received Sport England's report on the technical evaluation of athletics proposals for the national stadium project; and if she will make a statement. [55749]

Tessa Jowell: My officials received Sport England's athletics report on 3 May and briefed me on its contents on 7 May ahead of my statement to the House that day. I did not receive a copy of the report until 8 May, immediately prior to its publication. I placed copies in the House Libraries on the same day.

Ofcom

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for what reasons the proposed contents board was not included in the original Bill to set up the Office of Communications; what the composition of the contents board will be; and what the remit of the contents board will be in relation to radio. [56031]

Dr. Howells: The Government published a draft of the Communications Bill on 7 May for consultation. This draft Bill includes a proposal to require Ofcom to establish a 'Content Board' which will have the principal function of ensuring that the public interest in the nature and quality of television and radio programmes is sufficiently represented within Ofcom's overall structure.

The OFCOM Act 2002, which established Ofcom earlier this year, dealt with the basic framework of Ofcom at the main board level and was intended to allow the process of establishing Ofcom as a body to get under way while the substantive Communications Bill, which will give it regulatory responsibilities, is debated. The structure and remit of the content board are best seen in conjunction with Ofcom's functions, in particular the detailed broadcasting functions which are set out in the draft Communications Bill and particularly in relation to broadcast content including radio.

The structure of the content board is set out clearly in the draft Bill. It will consist of a chairman, who will be a non-executive member of Ofcom (but not the chairman of Ofcom), and as many other members appointed by Ofcom as Ofcom shall think fit. Ofcom is specifically required to ensure that there is a different member of the content board capable of representing the interests and opinions of persons living in each of the nations of the United Kingdom.

Queen's Jubilee Medal

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the Queen's Jubilee medal will be issued to the Royal Parks Constabulary in time for the Jubilee weekend; and if she will make a statement. [55800]

Tessa Jowell: In view of the number of medals required for the emergency services—an estimated 185,000—responsible Government Departments have agreed a phased delivery over 12 months in line with the Royal Mint's production capacity. Under current plans, medals for the Royal Parks Constabulary will be delivered in October 2002.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the Queen's Jubilee medal will be issued to the qualifying groups that will receive it. [55799]

Tessa Jowell: Distribution to the armed forces and to the holders of the Victoria Cross or the George Cross is due to be completed by the end of 2002. Under current plans, members of the emergency services will receive their medals by 2 June 2003.

Golden Jubilee

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will seek a financial contribution to public funds from Her Majesty the Queen towards the costs of Jubilee celebrations. [55827]

Tessa Jowell *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* No. The Golden Jubilee is an occasion for national celebration of 50 years' service by the Queen.

Landmark Projects

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to the answers of 25 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 576W, on landmark projects, when she will write to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South; and if she will make a statement. [56653]

Tessa Jowell: I wrote to the hon. Member on 10 April 2002 in my capacity as chair of the Millennium Commission and placed copies of my letter in the Libraries of both Houses. I am today sending the hon. Member another copy of my letter.

Digital Television (Audio Description)

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures the Government are undertaking to enable the reception of audio description digital terrestrial television programmes. [56641]

Dr. Howells: The Government's role is to set the legislative framework within which audio description and other services for people with sensory impairments can be provided and proposals were included in the recently published draft Communications Bill (Cm 5508–1). We are aware of the current difficulties with the production and distribution of the module necessary to receive audio description services on digital terrestrial television. On 30 April I chaired a constructive meeting with the interested parties which identified a number of ways to help them resolve these issues.

Piracy

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment her Department has made of the losses suffered in each of the past five years by the British film, music, retail and rental industries as a result of internet piracy and the production and distribution of illegal copies of film and music; and if she will make a statement. [53440]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

Accurate figures for losses due to internet piracy are difficult to gather and distinguish from other misuse of copyright material on the internet. However, a survey carried out by the industry body, the Alliance Against Counterfeiting and Piracy, which broadly represents British interests, estimated losses of £180 million to cinema and home entertainment and £20 million to the music industry in 2000 as a result of piracy generally. We are not aware of any music piracy figures yet for 2001, but industry figures show a 5 per cent. increase in legitimate recorded music sales in the UK in that year. The industry estimates for the years 1997 to 1999 are as follows:

£ million

Year	*Music*	*Film*
1997	18	100
1998	14	120
1999	15	170

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Prefabricated Buildings

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee when the prefabricated buildings to the north of the House of Commons adjacent to Bridge street will be removed; and if he will make a statement. [56639]

Derek Conway: The temporary buildings on Speaker's green were erected originally for use by the project teams responsible for the new Westminster station and Portcullis house and by the Refreshment Department while their accommodation was being refurbished. Subsequently they have been used by contractors engaged on major projects in the Palace during the summer recesses. They will be used in this way again this summer, after which they will be demolished and the green restored to its former condition.

DEFENCE

Gulf War Veterans (Illness)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Gulf War veterans *(a)* are suffering and *(b)* have suffered from renal cancers. [50538]

Dr. Moonie: Comprehensive data provided by the Office for National Statistics' NHS central register (NHSCR) on cancer registrations in England and Wales are only currently available up to 31 December 1998 and currently up to 31 December 2001 for registrations in Scotland. These data show that up to 31 December 1998 for England and Wales and up to 31 December 2001 for Scotland that seven Gulf veterans have been diagnosed as suffering from renal cancer or malignant neoplasm of the kidney as classified by International Classification of Disease (ICD) 9th Revision code 189.0 and ICD 10th Revision code C64. The Ministry of Defence's Gulf veterans' medical assessment programme had seen a further two veterans with renal cancer as at 13 May 2002. One veteran has, sadly, died. The current health status of the remaining eight veterans is not known to the MOD. The MOD is conducting an analysis of the incidence of all cancers in Gulf veterans with the aim of making the findings available later this year.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Gulf War veterans *(a)* are suffering and *(b)* have suffered from scarring to the (i) kidneys and (ii) liver. [50539]

Dr. Moonie: The total number of Gulf veterans who have kidney and or liver scarring could only be established if all Gulf veterans were to undergo medical examination. It is the practice of the Ministry of Defence to examine only those veterans who wish to be examined and are referred by their GP or service medical officer to the Ministry of Defence's Gulf veterans' medical assessment programme (GVMAP). All patients seen at the GVMAP receive abdominal ultrasound examination which can detect kidney and liver scarring. In the absence of other indicators of kidney or liver damage, such scarring is of no clinical significance. Neither is described either in standard medical textbooks or classified by the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases 9th and 10th Revisions. Kidney and liver scarring is therefore an incidental finding, does not cause any suffering and in itself is of no clinical significance in respect of suggestion of a link between ill health and the Gulf conflict. For these reasons, no centralised records are kept of such scarring. However, in a randomly selected anonymised sample of 1,000 patients examined at the GVMAP, one patient had a kidney scar and none had liver scarring. The GVMAP physicians do record kidney and livery damage where the damage is of clinical significance.

Private Gray

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when civilian authorities were advised of the death of Private Gray in Deep Cut camp on 17 September 2001; who was advised; by whom; and if he will make a statement. [51162]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave on 24 April 2002, *Official Report*, columns 260–61W and 8 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 179W.

Recruitment

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many net additional staff his Department has recruited in each month since June 2001 at *(a)* executive officer level and *(b)* administrative level. [52430]

Dr. Moonie: The information requested is given in the following table:

	Executive Officer level		*Administrative level*	
Month/ Type of staff	*Headcount*	*FTE*	*Headcount*	*FTE*
June 2001				
Permanent	8	7.8	39	40.7
Casual	–2	–2.0	85	80.3
Total	6	5.8	124	121.0
July 2001				
Permanent	–5	–4.4	86	82.9
Casual	–3	–1.6	277	274.8
Total	–8	–6.0	363	357.7
August 2001				
Permanent	–28	–25.7	41	40.9
Casual	0	0.0	70	71.7
Total	–28	–25.7	111	112.6
September 2001				
Permanent	6	5.6	39	34.3
Casual	5	5.0	–269	–272.0
Total	11	10.6	–230	–237.6
October 2001				
Permanent	25	25.8	124	119.0
Casual	9	7.5	20	18.8
Total	34	33.3	144	137.7
November 2001				
Permanent	21	20.3	78	70.9
Casual	8	7.5	45	42.0
Total	29	27.8	123	112.9
December 2001				
Permanent	–17	–15.7	–8	–10.7
Casual	2	2.1	12	10.0
Total	–15	–13.6	4	–0.7
January 2002				
Permanent	–11	–11.8	–215	–216.4
Casual	6	6.8	44	41.2
Total	–5	5.0	–171	–175.2
February 2002				
Permanent	4	5.0	–78	–80.4
Casual	3	2.9	19	13.9
Total	7	7.9	–59	–66.4

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what subjects and on which dates his Department has consulted organisations representing young people; and if he will list such organisations. [52505]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence is fully committed to consulting those children and young people to whom we provide services. For example, Cadet Force adult volunteer instructors initiate opportunities to obtain cadets views. The skill force initiative is structured so that participants are required to develop their own learning aims. Still within the MOD, the Service Children Education Agency has instigated in many of its schools "Circle Time". This gives young people the opportunity to express their feelings and concerns and to resolve relationship and behavioural issues.

The MOD also consults with organisations concerned with young people but the information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The MOD is committed to the new core principles for the involvement of children and young people published by the Minister for Young People in November 2001. The MOD will shortly be publishing an action plan setting out for the first time how it will implement these principles to extend the participation of children and young people in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them.

Ministerial Training

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how much has been spent by his Department on training in leadership skills for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years; [52723]

(2) how much has been spent by his Department on training by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years; [52716]

(3) how much has been spent by his Department on voice coaching for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52718]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* Training in leadership skills is an extremely important part of development activities in the Ministry of Defence, for both military and civilian staff. Its importance—emphasised within the "Modernising Government" initiative—was reflected in the recent defence training review. As a result the defence leadership centre has been established as part of the new defence academy to provide a nationally recognised centre of excellence. In addition, there are many other areas of the MOD where leadership features in both general management and more specific training. The Defence Procurement Agency, for instance, has provided leadership masterclasses and the important new area of smart acquisition has introduced a specific scheme designed to help develop integrated project team leaders.

I am not aware of any training undertaken by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts on behalf of Ministers or officials.

The MOD does provide some training in media interview skills, which includes factors such as voice tone and stance. This training is available to all staff and on occasions has been undertaken by Ministers.

In addition, Ministers are able to take advantage of the "Programmes for Ministers" organised by the centre for management and policy studies (CMPS) in the Cabinet Office.

Information on costs for leadership or media training is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Digital Equipment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many digital radios are owned by his Department for use in departmental buildings from which Ministers work; and what the *(a)* cost and *(b)* date of purchase of each radio was. [52864]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* The information is not held centrally in this format and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, I can confirm that no such equipment has been purchased for use in Ministers' offices.

Press Subscriptions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list the newspapers subscribed to *(a)* Monday to Saturday and *(b)* on Sunday by his Department, stating for each subscription the (i) number of copies taken and (ii) annual cost; [52825]

(2) if he will list the magazines and periodicals subscribed to by his Department, stating for each subscription the *(a)* number of copies taken and *(b)* annual cost. [52826]

Dr. Moonie *[holding reply 26 April 2002]:* The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Solar Panels

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what buildings owned by his Department have solar panels installed. [53490]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence fully supports the Government's commitment to reducing carbon dioxide emissions and promoting the use of renewable energy technologies by utilising "through life value for money" renewable energy supply opportunities. The current MOD policy on the development and siting of different kinds of renewable energy generation plant is to assess options on a case-by-case basis.

No central register is kept of the locations of solar panels installed in or on buildings on the defence estate. However, recently publicised examples include two active solar thermal systems at RM Norton Manor camp, Taunton, and a new "ambient energy" heat pump system at the Works Services office and stores at Royal Marines Condor, Tayside, Scotland. In addition, the Defence Procurement Agency building at Abbey Wood, Bristol, which has been in service for a number of years, makes use of a passive solar thermal system in order to minimise energy consumption.

Active solar thermal systems are also extensively used on the overseas estate where these are cost effective.

Territorial Army

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what financial provision has been made for the training of Territorial Army units in the Greater London area in 2002–03; and if he will list each financial provision. [54631]

Dr. Moonie: The total financial provision made for the training of Territorial Army units in the Greater London area in 2002–2003 is just over £14 million. To list each provision separately could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

C-17s

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was *(a)* the estimated purchase price, *(b)* the overall contract price to lease the aircraft for five years, *(c)* the number of original target flying hours in the lease contract, *(d)* the actual target flying hours used to date, *(e)* the estimated number of target flying hours for the full five years and *(f)* the estimated additional cost for exceeding the target flying hours for the C-17s of 99 Squadron; and if he will make a statement. [54646]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* The overall cost of the seven-year lease and all supporting arrangements for the four C-17 aircraft is in the order of £750 million. The detailed lease costs and the underlying aircraft price are commercially sensitive and I am withholding this information under Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government information.

The lease contract does not specify either a target number or a limit on flying hours. However, funding for support of the aircraft was modelled on a total of 3,000 flying hours per full year for the fleet of four aircraft. In the first part year of operations the C-17 fleet exceeded the modelled hours by about 60 per cent. The additional support costs arising from this level of flying were in the order of £4 million. There are no additional lease costs associated with increased levels of flying activity. Future support costs will vary in line with the operational demands made of the aircraft over the lease period.

Ministerial Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what publicly owned accommodation is made available to him in his official role; how many nights he has been in residence at each of these properties in the last 12 months; and what the total cost was of maintaining each of these properties in the last 12 months. [55104]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* None.

Service Accommodation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 22 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 9W, with reference to paragraph 5.14 of the Armed Forces' Pay Review Body 31st report 2002, what estimate has been made of *(a)* the number and *(b)* the cost of repeat repairs in (i) single living accommodation and (ii) service family accommodation in each year since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [55270]

Dr. Moonie: The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The Ministry of Defence is making substantial investment in service accommodation. In particular, we are now assessing industry's bids for the single living accommodation modernisation prime contract.

Remote Ammunition Facility, Tamar

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the estimated date is of completion of the remote ammunition facility in Tamar; [55806]

(2) what the estimated cost is of construction of the remote ammunition facility in Tamar. [55805]

Dr. Moonie: Work undertaken over the last few years has established that the effects a weapons explosion would have on a submarine and its surroundings is not as extensive as previously thought. This led to a revised safety assessment which has shown that the improvements to safety that RAFT would have provided for submarines can be met through the existing berthing facilities at Devonport naval base. The project has therefore been suspended.

Some £15 million has been spent over the 10-year life of the project. Further costs relating to the cancellation of planned work may be payable and will be subject to negotiations with the contractor.

RAF Landing Fees

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what average landing fees were paid by the RAF in respect of aircraft landing at *(a)* RAF airfields and *(b)* airfields operated under licence by third parties during the last complete year. [55817]

Dr. Moonie: No landing fees are charged for RAF aircraft landing at RAF airfields. In the financial year 2001–02, £2.08 million was authorised for payment for handling and landing in respect of RAF aircraft landing at commercial airports in the United Kingdom and £2.23 million for those services outside the United Kingdom. These costs exclude payments made direct by aircrew at airfields. Costs include handling, navigation, parking and overshoot charges in addition to landing fees. Information on the cost of landing fees alone and payments made by aircrew is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. In addition, landing fees of £0.345 million were charged for RAF aircraft landing at airfields operated by QinetiQ.

Aircraft Movements (West Freugh)

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many aircraft movements were handled by air traffic control at West Freugh airfield in each of the last 10 years. [55818]

Dr. Moonie: The following aircraft movements were handled by air traffic control at West Freugh airfield in each of the last 10 years.

	Number
1992	6,397
1993	9,038
1994	6,315
1995	7,140
1996	7,905
1997	11,644
1998	11,847
1999	8,384
2000	5,973
2001	3,861

These figures do not include overflights or range runs.

Royal Ordnance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of Royal Ordnance. [55786]

Dr. Moonie: Royal Ordnance Defence (ROD) is a private company that is wholly owned by BAE Systems. It has been operating against a background of sharp decline in the worldwide demand for defence equipment. The Ministry of Defence is aware that ROD is currently carrying out a manufacturing strategy review to optimise its business such that it will remain viable and competitive in the defence sector. Any decisions that emerge from this review are a commercial matter for the company. ROD has also indicated that it intends to invest substantially in a number of sites across the United Kingdom. The MOD remains confident that ROD will continue to be a major producer of munitions for the United Kingdom armed forces, particularly through the framework partnering agreement that has been established between ROD and the MOD.

BUTEC and Rona Ranges

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 31W, what his policy is on the inclusion in the arrangements, negotiated with QinetiQ, of guarantees that levels of current provision by the BUTEC and Rona range will be maintained for the full term of the arrangement and that levels of investment will be maintained; and if he will make a statement. [56002]

Dr. Moonie: In its negotiations with QinetiQ, the Ministry of Defence will seek to agree the provisions of levels of service which will meet the MOD's requirements for usage of the BUTEC and Rona ranges. The required level of service will be reviewed periodically throughout the life of the contract.

Armed Forces (Media Interviews)

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what guidance is issued governing the giving of media interviews by serving members of the armed forces; and if he will make a statement. [55754]

Dr. Moonie: Invitations for service personnel to take part in media interviews are usually made by broadcasting and press authorities through official departmental channels. If, however, members of the armed forces are invited directly to take part in radio or television broadcasts, or undertake press interviews, there is guidance in the Queen's Regulations that instructs personnel on how to report the approach, and if the interview is sanctioned, guidance about the handling of the interview and not being drawn on any policy issue which is, or may become, a matter of controversy between political parties.

Army Horses

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the Army's policy is on the tethering of horses; and if he will make a statement. [55877]

Dr. Moonie: The tethering or 'picketing' of horses is the military method of tying horses to a rope or peg in the open in order to prevent injury. The recommended method is to use a single long rope, stretched along the ground, or preferably suspended 3 to 4 ft high, to which each horse is separately tied with a head rope. Heel ropes tied to pegs may also be used in order to prevent a horse kicking the next horse. Details of the preferred methods to be used are laid out in the "Manual of Horsemanship, Equitation and Animal Transport" (WO Code 7193, 1937) and "Animal Management" (HMSO 1956).

Retirement Ages

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to make an announcement concerning flexible retirement dates for his Department's civilian personnel. [56409]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has completed its review of age retirement policy. The conclusions are being considered and we shall make an announcement about them in the coming weeks.

Wind Farms

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many wind farm proposals his Department has opposed in the last three years; and where those proposals were situated. [56413]

Dr. Moonie: Of the 506 proposals received during the last three years, the Ministry of Defence has objected to a total of 238. There have been a greater number of objections within the three tactical training areas (in central Wales, north Scotland and the border region of northern England/southern Scotland), but out of these areas there is no set pattern as to where the objections lie.

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which areas are unsuitable for the building of wind farms because of the effect on radar and low-flying aircraft. [56415]

Dr. Moonie: All wind farm proposals are considered individually by the Ministry of Defence, on a case-by-case basis, which examines their potential effects on our ability to train pilots safely and on operational capabilities.

In some circumstances wind turbines have the potential adversely to affect radar and other communications depending on their position in relation to particular installations. Research is currently under way with the Department of Trade and Industry to address this issue.

The presence of wind turbines in most areas of the United Kingdom would present no difficulty to low flying aircraft because these and other naturally tall structures are taken into account as part of route planning.

The United Kingdom has three specially designated tactical training areas (TTA) that are available for authorised military operational low flying training.

The three TTAs are located in central Wales, north Scotland and the border region of northern England/ southern Scotland. Within these areas military fast jets may operate down to a height of 100 ft separation distance and a proliferation of obstacles could negate the value of the training. Units also make use of these areas for specialised night training. In these areas wind farm developments may compromise flight safety to an unacceptable level.

Sea Harriers

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Sea Harriers have been equipped with JTIDS; and at what cost. [56198]

Dr. Moonie: JTIDS has been fitted to three Sea Harrier aircraft. Two of these are development aircraft operated by BAE Systems. The costs are currently the subject of negotiation with contractors and I am therefore withholding this information in accordance with Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Bowman System

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when operational field trials of the Bowman system will commence. [56197]

Dr. Moonie: Operational field trials of the Bowman system are due to begin in November 2003 at battalion level. The battalion and additional elements of the first brigade to be converted will then conduct a further operational field trial in March 2004, which will determine whether the Bowman system can be accepted into service. A final field trial, at brigade level, is planned for August/September 2004.

Airborne Stand-off Radar

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress on the ASTOR programme; and when each of the five aircraft will be delivered to the RAF. [56199]

Dr. Moonie: The ASTOR programme is currently on course to meet its planned in-service date of September 2005. The first global express aircraft, which will be the platform for the airborne element of the ASTOR system, is now with the aircraft systems integrator. Following systems integration, aircraft deliveries to the RAF are scheduled to take place in 2004, 2005, 2006 (two aircraft) and 2007.

QinetiQ

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many bids have been received for the sale of an equity share in QinetiQ; and what proportion of the equity is proposed for sale. [56637]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 14W, to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key). Initial bids for the sale of an equity share in QinetiQ are due to be received on 20 May.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whom he has appointed as non-executive chair of QinetiQ; and what other interests the person has. [56625]

Dr. Moonie: As announced on 8 May in a QinetiQ press release about Sir John Egan's decision to step down, Dame Pauline Neville-Jones has been appointed as the chairman of QinetiQ, having previously been the senior non-Executive Director. Dame Pauline has worked extensively in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and

has been chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee. She is currently a BBC governor, with special responsibility for the World Service, and chairman of the Information Assurance Advisory Council. She also is a member of the Council of City University and hon. treasurer of the charity Refuge. The change of chairman will not affect the transaction timetable, which remains on track.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the bids for an equity share in QinetiQ will be judged against *(a)* commercial, *(b)* industrial and *(c)* strategic considerations; and if he will make a statement. [56638]

Dr. Moonie: Yes. As with all competitive bidding processes, the Ministry of Defence seeks to take into account all relevant factors, including commercial, industrial and strategic, when assessing competitive bids to ensure that the MOD meets its objectives and obtains the best value for money.

Pregnant Service Personnel

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the *(a)* Army, *(b)* Royal Navy and *(c)* RAF are pregnant; what rules and regulations govern the treatment and deployments of pregnant service personnel; and if he will make a statement. [56172]

Dr. Moonie: As at 1 May, 354 members of the Army, 93 of the Royal Navy and 223 of the Royal Air Force had notified pregnancy or were on maternity leave. The rules governing maternity arrangements for servicewomen in the regular Armed Forces are contained within Defence Council Instructions and other service publications. Upon notification of pregnancy, restrictions may be placed upon a servicewoman's employment to ensure that the services can fulfil their legal obligations and responsibilities for her health and safety and that of her unborn child and to preserve operational effectiveness. For example, aircrew will not be permitted to continue their flying duties once pregnancy is confirmed, servicewomen on operations will be withdrawn, and women serving in ships will be landed at the earliest convenient opportunity.

Army Landrovers

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence who manufactures the engines for the 200 series Army Landrovers; and where they are based. [55723]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* The 200 Series Landrover is not a recognised variant of the military fleet. However, all military Landrover engines are manufactured by Landrover at their manufacturing facility in Solihull. Landrover also has a military sales/service facility at Warwick.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Fraud

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the estimated level of losses to fraud and corruption was in *(a)* her Department's Vote 1 budget and *(b)* her Department's Vote 2 budget for (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [54702]

Estelle Morris: An estimate of the cost to my Department of cases involving fraud and corruption for the years in question is as follows:

£000

	Vote 1	*Vote 2*
1999–2000	4,548	52
2000–01	17,327	386
Total	21,875	438

The Vote 1 figure for 2000–01 includes one specific direct contractor fraud valued at £7.9 million. The figures represent 0.07 per cent. of the total Vote 1 spend and 0.006 per cent. of the total Vote 2 spend over the two years.

Education Act

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, pursuant to her answer of 7 May 2002, ref 53890, how many prosecutions have taken place for offences under the Education Act 1996 in each year since 1997; and what those offences were. [55602]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Under the Education Act 1996 the following are guilty of an offence and liable for prosecution:

(1) The parent of a child who has been "cleansed" under s522 but is again "infested" or in "a foul condition" is guilty of an offence (section 525);

(2) A parent or the employer of a child, who is a registered pupil, where that child is employed in contravention of a notice issued by the LEA either prohibiting his employment or imposing restrictions upon his employment (section 559);

(3) The parent of a registered pupil at a school who fails to attend regularly (section 444);

(4) Any person who is on school property without lawful authority and while there causes a disturbance or nuisance (section 457);

(5) A parent who fails to comply with the requirement of a notice to have a child medically examined (section 506);

(6) A parent who fails to comply with a notice requiring a child's attendance at an exam (paragraph 5(1) Schedule 26).

Information on prosecutions provided by the Home Office for the years 1997 to 2000 is as follows:

Number of defendants proceeded against at the magistrates courts, found guilty and sentenced at all courts under the Education Act 1996 England and Wales 1997–2000[1,2]

Offence description	*Statute*	*Year*	*Proceeded against*	*Found guilty*
Permitting child to be in verminous condition	Education Act 1996 sec. 525 (Consolidated Act 1994–96)	1997	—	—
		1998	—	—
		1999	—	—
		[1]2000	1	1

Number of defendants proceeded against at the magistrates courts, found guilty and sentenced at all courts under the Education Act 1996 England and Wales 1997–2000[1,2]

Offence description	*Statute*	*Year*	*Proceeded against*	*Found guilty*
Employment of children or young persons	Education Act 1996 (Consolidated Act 1994–96)	1997	1	1
		1998	3	3
		1999	1	1
		'2000	4	2
Other offences under Education Act 1996 (that cannot be separately classified)	Education Act 1996 (Consolidated Act 1994–96)	1997	4,204	3,623
		1998	5,601	4,872
		1999	5,610	4,852
		'2000	5,668	4,773

[1] Staffordshire police force were only able to submit sample data for persons proceeded against and convicted in the magistrates courts for the year 2000. Although sufficient to estimate higher orders of data these data are not robust enough at a detailed level and have been excluded from this table.
[2] These data are on a principal offence basis.
Source:
Crime and Criminal Justice Unit, Home Office

Standard Assessment Test

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment has been made of the impact on SAT results of greater inclusion in mainstream schools. [55187]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: My Department has not made any formal assessment of the impact on the key stage tests of greater inclusion in mainstream schools.

Further Education Funding

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans she has to increase the funding of further education colleges in England over the next five years. [56169]

John Healey: Funding from 2003–04 to 2005–06 is the subject of the current spending review in which we will be considering the resources available to deliver the Government's ambitions for further education in 2003–04 and beyond. The Government are making a massive investment in further education. By next year funding for FE will have risen by 26 per cent. in real terms since 1997 on current plans.

Funding Awards

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what efficiency gains have been factored into funding awards proposed for *(a)* further education colleges, *(b)* sixth-form colleges and *(c)* schools with a sixth form in England in each of the next five years. [56165]

John Healey: We are examining spending plans from 2003–04 until 2005–06 as part of the current spending review. We must await the outcome of this review before committing funds to specific areas of education.

Applied Science and Technology

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many vacancies for academic staff teaching applied science and technology subjects at *(a)* further education colleges, *(b)* sixth-form colleges and *(c)* sixth-forms in schools there were in England broken down by region, at the beginning of each academic year since 1997. [56164]

John Healey: The Department does not collect the specific information requested.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the median salary for the academic staff teaching applied science and technology subjects was in England, broken down by region at *(a)* further education colleges, *(b)* sixth-form colleges and *(c)* schools with a sixth form in each year since 1997. [56167]

John Healey: The Department does not collect this information. Further education sector colleges are run by independent corporations established under the Further Education and Higher Education Act 1992. There is no nationally agreed pay scale in the general FE sector. Colleges determine their own staff pay policies and salaries will, therefore, vary from college to college. Salary information is not available for teachers in school sixth forms.

Prison Education

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what capital investment her Department is making in prisoners' education; and if she will make a statement. [57251]

John Healey: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that £20 million capital modernisation funding will be provided over the next two years to develop and modernise prison education and training through the "Learning to Earning" project. Finding prisoners suitable employment plays a key role in helping them resettle into society. This project will improve dramatically opportunities for prisoners to acquire skills and knowledge that will equip them for jobs on release, and so reduce the likelihood of re-offending.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Throckmorton Carcase Disposal Site

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will respond to the requests made by the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire for a meeting to discuss compensation for the residents adjacent to the Throckmorton carcase disposal site. [4446]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 17 July 2001]:* I regret that this reply has been delayed pending consideration of meetings between officials and residents. I am aware of the interest of the hon. Member in this issue, and will be writing to him shortly.

Correspondence

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire will receive a reply to his letter of 12 November, as acknowledged on 16 November, reference 162094. [28503]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 22 January 2002]:* I am sorry for the delay in replying to the hon. Member's letter. A reply was sent on 13 May 2002 under reference 168207.

Technetium-99

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the costs of *(a)* introducing technetium-99 abatement technology and *(b)* storage facilities in order to reduce Sellafield's discharges to 10 terabecquerels per year; and if she will make a statement. [40496]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 11 March 2002]:* My right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Health and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have not carried out any separate cost assessment of their own. They have before them the cost assessment carried out by the Environment Agency, as set out in the agency's proposed decision published in September 2001. The agency's document sets out in some detail considerations of costs for the various technetium-99 abatement techniques that have been considered, and for a range of schemes to partially or fully replace the B211 facility where medium active concentrate (MAC), containing technetium-99, is stored. Costs are given both as undiscounted costs and present value costs, and they are further broken down into capital, operating and decommissioning costs. Where appropriate, the costs of combining abatement techniques with each other and with new storage facilities are also considered.

The undiscounted cost of introducing so-called "TPP abatement" would be in the order of £3 million, whereas "MAC Diversion" costs would be in the range £14–90 million. The so-called "end of pipe" abatement techniques that have been identified by BNFL are estimated to cost in the range of £76–256 million. Replacement of the B211 storage facility to include replacement of the current MAC storage capacity would cost in the order of £450 million. BNFL are also assessing options for refurbishing the B211 facility, which would be notably cheaper.

Stolen Equipment

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to her answer of 23 January 2002, *Official Report*, columns 926–27W, on stolen equipment, what criminal proceedings have been undertaken for cases of theft against her Department, stating in each case *(a)* whether the proceedings (i) led to a criminal conviction and (ii) were unsuccessful, *(b)* the cost incurred by her Department in pursuing a conviction and *(c)* the value of items recovered; and if she will make a statement. [41511]

Mr. Morley: Only one person has been prosecuted for stealing equipment from the Department since May 1997. He pleaded guilty at Horseferry Road magistrates court on 4 March 2002 to 10 offences of theft of departmental property. He received 80 hours community punishment concurrent on each offence and was ordered to pay £442.48 compensation. The prosecution's claim for investigative and prosecution costs of £500 was not granted by the sentencing court No stolen items were recovered.

Ambient Noise Strategy

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the targets are for her Department's ambient noise strategy. [46991]

Mr. Meacher: The proposal to develop a national ambient noise strategy was announced in the Rural White Paper in November 2000. The consultation on the development of such a strategy—"Towards a National Ambient Noise Strategy"—closed on the 15 March this year and the results of the consultation are currently being considered and may result in changes to our approach. However, currently it would only be at a later stage that the introduction of targets (if any) would be considered.

Staff Pay

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the cost in 2001–02 was of the pay increase to staff in her Department, agencies and the non-departmental public bodies for which she is responsible; and what the cost of the forthcoming increase will be in 2002–03. [50419]

Mr. Morley: The latest estimate of the pay increases for 2001–02 for the department and its agencies is as follows:

	£000
Core DEFRA	17,699
Veterinary Medicines Directorate	542
Pesticides Safety Directorate	703
Rural Payments Agency	3,738
Central Science Laboratory (CSL)	700
Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS)	620
Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA)	1,693

Notes:

1. These figures include earnings related national insurance contribution and superannuation liability.
2. Under the terms of their respective framework agreements, the chief executives of three of DEFRA's executive agencies (CSL, VLA, CEFAS) have delegated responsibility for pay arrangements for staff below senior civil service level.

The pay increase for 2002–03 has not been agreed yet and no estimate can be provided.

The information for non-departmental public bodies is not available. It will be published in their annual reports and accounts in due course. These are laid before Parliament each year and copies deposited in the Library of the House.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the written questions asked of her between *(a)* 1 to 30 June 2001, *(b)* 1 to 31 July 2001, *(c)* 1 to 30 September 2001, *(d)* 1 to 31 October 2001, *(e)* 1 to 30 November 2001, *(f)* 1 to 31 December 2001, *(g)* 1 to 31 January 2002, *(h)* 1 to 28 February 2002, *(i)* 1 to 31 March 2002 and *(j)* 1 to 30 April 2002 that had not received a substantive answer by 30 April; and if she will state (i) the name of the hon. Member asking the question and (ii) the reasons the question had not received a substantive answer. [54090]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council on 2 May 2002, *Official Report,* column 949W.

4,372 (97 per cent.) of the 4,500 written questions tabled up to 30 April this Session, have received a substantive reply. 40 questions (1 per cent.) tabled in April have not been answered, and are not overdue. However, the remaining 88 questions (2 per cent.) have yet to receive a substantive reply, and we are actively seeking to provide Members with replies to these shortly.

Public Liability Cover

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received about the cessation of public liability cover for local community groups; if she will provide a grant to BTCV to cover its public liability costs; and if she will make a statement. [R] [54735]

Alun Michael: Further to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's reply of 30 April 2002, *Official Report,* column 662W, I have replied to Tom Flood, chief executive of the BTCV, expressing my concern about the difficulty in obtaining public liability insurance for BTCV's associated local community groups. I have also discussed the issue with the chief executive of the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, who has offered to discuss with BTCV what might be done.

I understand that there is a general issue about the availability and cost of public liability insurance cover for voluntary organisations which goes beyond DEFRA's remit. However I have told BTCV and NCVO that I would be very willing to work with colleagues in so far as there are issues for DEFRA. To assist with this process I have raised the issue with ministerial colleagues. I have also suggested that a meeting with representatives of the insurance industry might be helpful.

Air Pollution

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures have been introduced since 1997 to reduce the amount of poisonous fumes people breathe in, with specific reference to those in urban areas. [55403]

Mr. Meacher: The Government's policies on improving air quality are set out in detail in "Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland", published in January 2000. The strategy explains the measures that are in place to reduce emissions of harmful pollutants from all sectors, including road transport and industry. Copies are available via the DEFRA website at www.defra.gov.uk/environment/airquality.

Air quality in urban areas has improved significantly over the last decade, as a result largely of the progressively tighter European Union standards for new vehicles and fuels, and of the continuing reduction in total emissions from industry. The air quality headline indicator, published annually, shows that the average number of days of moderate or poor air quality in urban areas of the UK has reduced from 59 days in 1993 to 21 days in 2001.

Marine Environment

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of how the production of an integrated assessment of the state of the seas, as proposed in the Government's first marine stewardship report, will contribute to the conservation of the marine environment. [56045]

Mr. Meacher: An integrated assessment of the state of our seas will enable us to gain a better overview of the competing pressures on the marine environment and the full range of impacts. This will help us target our actions to achieve improved conservation and sustainable development. The assessment will also provide a yardstick against which we can measure our progress. The report will be available in 2004.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps have been taken in the Government's marine stewardship reports to balance social, economic and environmental interests in the marine environment; and if she will make a statement. [55185]

Mr. Meacher: The first marine stewardship report reflects the principles of sustainable development, integrated management, the conservation of biological diversity, robust science, the precautionary principle and stakeholder involvement. We have adopted an ecosystem-based approach to integrate better marine protection objectives with sustainable social and economic goals.

Pesticides

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent guidelines have been introduced to monitor pesticides on vegetables and fruit. [55193]

Mr. Morley: The Government conduct an annual pesticide residues surveillance programme for fruit and vegetables and other produce. This programme is overseen by the independent Pesticide Residues Committee (PRC). The PRC advises Ministers and the chief executives of the Food Standards Agency and the Pesticides Safety Directorate on pesticide residues in foods.

Typically around 4,000 food samples are tested each year for a range of pesticide residues at a cost of £2.2 million. The objectives of the programme are threefold:

To back up the statutory approvals process for pesticides by checking that no unexpected residues are occurring;

To check that residues do not exceed statutory maximum residue levels (MRLs);

To check that human dietary intakes of residues are within acceptable levels.

Most samples tested currently are collected from retail outlets. Sampling is biased towards samples that are more likely to contain residues.

The scope of each year's programme and details of the samples analysed under the surveillance programme can be found on the PRC's website. The 2002 programme is on the website at www.pesticides.gov.uk/committees/PRC/prc.htm. The 2003 programme is currently being developed by the Committee.

The Department of Health also undertakes a similar monitoring programme for produce distributed to children under the national school fruit scheme. Details of the results from testing will shortly appear on the PRC's website.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the amount of pesticide sprayed in each of the last five years on UK fields. [56019]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* DEFRA surveys indicate that the following quantities of agricultural pesticides were used in each year since 1996. The corresponding figure for 2001 is not yet available.

	Tonnes of active ingredient
1996	34,115
1997	34,021
1998	33,680
1999	33,826
2000	30,930

Countryside Stewardship Scheme

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what percentage of farms taking part in the countryside stewardship scheme staff from the *(a)* Rural Payments Agency and *(b)* Rural Development Service visit after the first year of taking part in the scheme; and how regularly individual farms have been visited by the agency. [55295]

Mr. Morley: Staff from the Rural Payments Agency carry out compliance monitoring inspections of countryside stewardship scheme agreements in accordance with EU and our own audit requirements. EU rules require at least 5 per cent. of agreements to be inspected each year. The agreements to be visited are selected using risk-based criteria, which are not specifically related to the year of the agreement.

The programme of care and maintenance visits operated by technical staff from DEFRA's Rural Development Service currently aims to cover around 20 per cent. of agreements each year, including the visits scheduled for the first year of an agreement. More frequent visits may take place as circumstances require.

Forestry

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on Forest Enterprise procurement procedures for forestry harvesting and transport equipment. [55819]

Mr. Morley: Forest Enterprise procurement procedures for forestry harvesting and transport equipment follow HM Treasury guidelines and EU regulations and directives.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the value is of contracts awarded by Forest Enterprise to Mechanical Engineering Services in each of the last three years. [55814]

Mr. Morley: Mechanical Engineering Services is part of the Forestry Commission's Forest Enterprise Agency. It is responsible for supplying and maintaining the agency's fleet of machinery and vehicles. There is, therefore, no requirement for a contractual relationship. However, the value of this service to Forest Enterprise for the last three years has been £15.7 million (2001–02), £15.6 million (2000–01) and £15.7 million (1999–2000).

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what procedures are in place for ensuring fair competition for contracts issued by Forest Enterprise. [55820]

Mr. Morley: Forest Enterprise follows HM Treasury guidelines and EU regulations and directives when letting contracts.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what procedures are in place in Forest Enterprise for ensuring best value in *(a)* procuring and *(b)* disposing of forestry capital equipment contracts. [55815]

Mr. Morley: Forest Enterprise follows HM Treasury guidelines which are designed to ensure best value for use of public funds. The procurement of forestry capital equipment is subject to European Union procurement directives, and Forest Enterprise requirements are therefore advertised in the *Official Journal of the European Communities*. Disposal of forestry capital equipment is carried out by open tender and public auction.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many vehicles operated by Forest Enterprise are *(a)* cars and vans and *(b)* other forestry vehicles; and how many are obliged to have a valid current tax disc. [55813]

Mr. Morley: Forest Enterprise currently operates 1,718 cars and vans and 320 other forestry vehicles. Most of these vehicles (1,852) are used exclusively in the service of the Crown and hence are exempt from vehicle excise duty under section 183 of the Road Traffic Act 1988. The remainder (186 cars) are subject to vehicle excise duty due to an element of private use for which each user makes a payment.

Dairy Farmers

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to call upon further agrimonetary compensation to compensate dairy farmers for a fall in milk prices. [55824]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on 2 May 2002.

Director-General, Fisheries

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the removal from role of the Director-General, Fisheries. [55694]

Mr. Morley: The European Commission is responsible for senior staffing within the Commission services. The Commission announced changes affecting 13 senior staff on 24 April. The post of Director-General of Fisheries Policy is being advertised within the Commission. The present director-general remains in post pending the new appointment.

Deer

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what proposals she has to amend Schedule 2 of the Deer Act 1991 to permit the use of a rifle of a calibre less than .240 inches for the safe and humane killing of static injured deer. [56332]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* We have no current proposals to amend the Deer Act 1991.

Packaging Waste

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the United Kingdom's performance was in 2001 against the recovery and recycling targets in the EC directive on packaging and packaging waste; and if she will make a statement. [57136]

Mr. Meacher: The UK narrowly failed to meet the overall packaging waste recovery target in 2001 but met the overall recycling target and the material-specific recycling targets for all materials

The recovery and recycling of packaging waste carried out in 2001 is as shown in the table.

Recovery and recycling carried out in 2001 (UK)

	UK re-processing (1)	*Exported for re-processing (2)*	*Re-processing for which no PRN/PERN issued (incl. in (1)) (3)*	*PRN/PERN carried forward to 2002 (4)*	*Tonnes accepted for recovery and recycling, UK (5)*
Paper	1,851,505	179,439	25,895	83,064	2,030,944
Glass	696,578	39,016	17,036	29,273	735,594
Aluminium	25,869	3,161	1	821	29,030
Steel	141,343	136,736	3,051	8,365	278,079
Plastic	203,149	66,813	6,077	10,506	269,962
Wood	573,951	—	4,985	23,742	573,951
Alt. evidence	30,741	—	—	—	30,741
Total recycling	3,523,136	425,165	57,045	155,771	3,948,301
Efw	513,939	—	913	24,986	513,939
Total	4,037,075	425,165	57,958	180,757	4,462,240

Article 6(1) of the EC directive on packaging and packaging waste 94/62/EC set the following targets:

Between 50 per cent. and 65 per cent. recovery

Between 25 per cent. 45 per cent. recycling

15 per cent. recycling of each material.

The UK performance against the targets is shown in the table.

UK performance against 2001 directive targets

Material	*Target*	*Percentage Performance*
Paper	15	53
Glass	15	33
Aluminium	15	[1]24
Steel	15	[1]37
Plastic	15	16
Wood	15	57
Total recovery	50 to 65	47.9
Total recycling	25 to 45	42

[1] Metals 35 per cent.

The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997 (as amended) and parallel legislation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland implement these targets in the UK. The regulations place recovery and recycling obligations on producers to enable the UK to attain the directive recovery and recycling targets. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Environment Agency have reported that one compliance scheme and a number of individually registered businesses failed to meet their tonnage recovery obligations under the packaging regulations—a total shortfall of 263,832 tonnes against a combined total obligation of 823,003 tonnes.

New Forest Official Verderer

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the appointment of the Official Verderer for the New Forest. [54913]

Mr. Morley: We expect Her Majesty the Queen to make this appointment very soon.

Fishing Industry

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what progress she

has made in negotiating a derogation for the UK inshore fishing fleet, comparable to the Norwegian derogation, from this year's increase in fixed mesh sizes. [56127]

Mr. Morley: The Commission has asked Norway to confirm that it has exempted its inshore fleet from the increase in fixed fishing gear mesh sizes but has not yet received a response. We will continue to press the Commission for a similar derogation.

Foot and Mouth

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will calculate the number of ewes with lambs at foot slaughtered under *(a)* disease control restrictions and *(b)* the livestock welfare disposal scheme during the 2001 outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [35537]

Mr. Morley: It is not possible to calculate the number of ewes with lambs at foot slaughtered either for disease control purposes or under the livestock welfare disposal scheme because lambs at foot have not been recorded separately. For the purposes of disease control it is only necessary to record animals by species ie cattle, sheep, pigs goats, deer and other. Lambs at foot have therefore simply been included in the sheep category.

We are aware that to date not all the lambs at foot, slaughtered for disease control purposes, have been included in the figures on DEFRA's disease control system database (DCS). In the early stages of the outbreak, in line with normal husbandry practice, a number of ewes with lambs at foot were recorded as one unit (ie one animal). It was quickly recognised that each animal should be separately recorded and, as staff resources became available, an exercise to amend the DCS began.

This exercise is now well under way and many of the lambs at foot are already reflected in the total slaughter figure of around 4 million for disease control purposes. Information describing this exercise has been on the DEFRA website for some time, where it is also noted that the data on the DCS are being validated and may result in figures being revised.

Slaughtering under the livestock welfare disposal scheme took place at abattoirs and it was consequently more likely that lambs at foot were recorded in the slaughter figures. These figures are therefore very unlikely to change.

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will reply to the letter of 11 June 2001 from Mrs. M. Edmunds of Low Lorton, Cumbria concerning foot and mouth disease. [43039]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 March 2002]:* I am sorry that my hon. Friend has not received a reply to his letter, but we are unable to trace it.

I appreciate that my hon. Friend's constituent will be disappointed at not receiving a reply, and suggest, if a reply is still needed, that my hon. Friend sends us another copy of her letter so that we can provide an answer.

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many heating installations undertaken by *(a)* TXU Warm Front Ltd. and *(b)* Eaga Partnership were completed in each of the last four quarters for which information is available; what proportion were found to be (i) unsafe and (ii) requiring remedial work; and what was the (A) average and (B) longest wait for remedial work to be completed. [43568]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 18 March 2002]:* The number of electric and gas heating installations carried out for each quarter of 2001 were:

Quarter	*TXU*	*Eaga*	*Total*
1	2,715	8,112	10,827
2	5,131	12,574	17,705
3	5,287	11,513	16,800
4	5,907	15,567	21,474

The number and percentage of inspected installations found to be unsafe and those requiring remedial work during each quarter in that period

Quarter	*Number inspected*	*Of which unsafe*	*Remedial work required*	
			Number	*Percentage*
TXU				
1	384	1	92	24
2	950	1	128	13
3	1,696	7	180	11
4	1,379	5	136	10
Eaga				
1	4,158	1	544	13
2	4,260	1	513	12
3	7,152	4	1,023	14
4	9,927	2	1,238	13

All gas fired central heating installations are subject to inspection after installation. A percentage of other installations are also subject to inspection.

Those jobs identified as requiring remedial work were deemed to have failed on inspection.

Information on waiting times for remedial works to be carried out is not available in this format.

Chinese Honey

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if *(a)* chloramphenicol and *(b)* streptomycin have been found in Chinese honey imported by the UK. [42495]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

Following regulatory action by the European Commission on products of animal origin from China, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) immediately began testing some products of animal origin already in the United Kingdom and as a result called for the withdrawal of jars of Chinese and blended honey on sale in the UK to ensure consumers are protected.

Both streptomycin and chloramphenicol (antibiotics) were found in samples of Chinese and blended honey. The FSA published the results of this analysis in two press releases: 'Tests on Chinese and blended honey show

traces of illegal residue of veterinary drug', which was issued on 6 February 2002, and 'Tests on Chinese and blended honey show further illegal drug residue' which was issued on 19 February 2002. Illegal residues of chloramphenicol were also found in samples of another bee product, royal jelly, at similar levels as those found in honey. The FSA again called for the withdrawal of Chinese and other royal jelly products which did not meet legal requirements. The main known risk from chloramphenicol relates to aplastic anaemia, a rare but serious blood disorder in susceptible individuals. The FSA, on the advice of expert toxicologists, has concluded that overall the levels of this antibiotic in honey pose an extremely small risk to public health. The streptomycin found was not considered to be of toxicological concern.

The FSA's advice to the consumer is that, given the extremely small risk, people can continue to eat any honey they have already bought, irrespective of country of origin. This advice also applies to other foods that contain honey, where the risk is even lower. Given the low risk, consumers were not advised against the consumption of royal jelly.

Full details have been published on the FSA website, www.food.gov.uk.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Packaging Waste

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what basis the targets under the packaging waste directive were established for *(a)* plastics, *(b)* aluminium, *(c)* steel, *(d)* glass and *(e)* paper. [52610]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* As part of the current proposed revision of Directive 94/62/EC on packaging and packaging waste, the Commission has proposed differentiated material specific targets to be met in 2006. These were largely based on work carried out by the environmental consultants RDC/Pira, which looked at the costs and benefits of recycling each material in order to obtain optimum recycling ranges.

The draft proposal and RDC/Pira report are available on the Commission's website.

Export Credit Guarantees Department

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to which companies the Export Credit Guarantees Department has paid moneys as part of its credit guarantees to that company in each of the last five years; in each case, *(a)* how much was paid, *(b)* what the project was against which the guarantee had been made and *(c)* which country had defaulted on its contractual arrangements; and if she will make a statement. [54360]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* This question cannot be answered except at disproportionate cost. However, for each of the financial years 1997–98 to 2000–01 I have provided a list of the companies that ECGD paid claims to. I have also provided a list of the host countries of the defaulting buyers in each of these years and for these countries, the total claims paid in each industrial sector. I have placed a copy of the list in the Libraries of the House.

Figures for 2001–02 have not been provided as these have not yet been audited.

Career Packages (R and D)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps she is taking to improve the career packages offered to scientists and engineers working in research and development; and if she will make a statement on the recommendations in Sir Gareth Roberts' review, "SET for success", concerning the tackling of recruitment and retention problems. [56053]

Ms Hewitt: The career packages offered to scientists and engineers working in research and development are a matter for the employer. The Roberts' review's report "SET for success" identified a clear need for employers to improve the attractiveness of careers in R and D in order to compete effectively for talented staff.

In 1997 the Research Careers Initiative (RCI) was established to focus on the policy dimension of improving the career management and development of research careers in the UK. The RCI identifies, encourages and disseminates good practice in the career management and development of contract research staff.

More recently, Sir Gareth Roberts recommended that higher education institutions, as employers of scientists and engineers, should ensure that postdoctoral researchers have clear career development plans and access to training, and that researchers and academics should be better paid. He further recommended that R and D businesses should also offer improved career packages to attract the best science and engineering graduates and postgraduates that the UK has to offer.

"SET for success" recommended that businesses must review their recruitment mechanisms, the salaries offered to researchers, their career structure (including levels of responsibility and opportunities to progress), and the training and continued professional development opportunities that they make available. Sir Gareth also recommended that a group of R and D employers should monitor employers' progress in rising to these challenges.

The Government are formulating a response to the Roberts review, in tandem with the current spending review, and a statement on how the Government will be taking forward the recommendations will be made in due course.

"SET for success" is available electronically at www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Roberts.

Council of Ministers (UK Delegation)

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether a Scottish Executive Minister will be a member of the UK delegation to the forthcoming Internal Market, Consumer Affairs and Tourism European Union Council of Ministers meeting on 21 May and what information is being provided by her Department to guarantee effective pre-Council scrutiny by the European Committee of the Scottish Parliament. [55997]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I shall represent the UK at the Internal Market, Consumer Affairs and Tourism Council on 21 May. Pre-Council scrutiny by the European Committee of the Scottish Parliament is a matter for that Parliament and for the Scottish Executive. Council

agendas are sent to Scottish Executive officials as are the letters circulated by my officials setting out the prospects for each council meeting. They stand ready to provide other information in line with the provisions of the concordat.

Productivity

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what targets her Department uses to measure productivity in the UK *(a)* for year on year growth, *(b)* in comparison with other EU countries and *(c)* in comparison with other G7 countries. [55903]

Ms Hewitt: The joint DTI/HM Treasury PSA target is to improve UK competitiveness by narrowing the productivity gap with the US, France, Germany and Japan over the economic cycle. The method for measuring this target is set out in 'Public Service Agreement 2001–04 Technical Notes', which is available from DTI's website http://www.dti.gov.uk/about/spendingreview/psatechnicalnotes.htm.

Budget

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations she has received from businesses regarding the 2002 Budget statement; and if she will make a statement. [55908]

Ms Hewitt: As with all other Budgets, I have received a number of representations, for which I am grateful, from businesses and their representative bodies since the 2002 Budget statement.

Many welcomed the Budget announcements on enterprise, including cuts in corporation tax and capital gains tax, the proposed new training tax credit and the R and D tax credit for large companies, which complements the tax credit already available for smaller companies. I am also aware of business concerns about the Government's decision on employers' national insurance contributions. But there is widespread recognition in the country of the need for more investment—and reform—in our system of healthcare.

Rail Freight (Channel Tunnel)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will support the complaint made by EWS to the European Commission relating to France and the treaty of Rome free movement of goods provisions in relation to the movement of rail freight through the channel tunnel. [56030]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Commission has already invoked the Free Movement of Goods Regulation in this case. We remain in close contact with the Commission and France about the action that is required by the French authorities to enable normal rail freight services through the channel tunnel to resume. Representations to the Commission from affected businesses will help underline the need for this action.

UK Competitiveness

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations she has received from businesses regarding the competitiveness of the UK in comparison to *(a)* EU countries and *(b)* G7 nations. [55909]

Ms Hewitt: Benchmarking the UK's performance against the world's leading economies including other EU and G7 nations is frequently part of the discussions my Department has in its work with consumers, employees and business to drive up productivity and competitiveness.

Franchises

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what EU block exemption is available for franchises between 1990 and 2000; and whether this block exemption contains definitions for franchise, franchisee agreement and master franchise agreement; and if she will make a statement. [56439]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Until 31 May 2000, Commission Regulation 4087–88 provided the block exemption for franchising. This regulation contained definitions of franchise and master franchise agreement. With effect from 1 June 2000 (subject to transitional arrangements), Regulation 4087–88 was replaced by Commission Regulation 2790–99, which covers all types of vertical agreements, including franchising. Regulation 2790–99 contains no definitions of franchise, franchisee agreement or master franchise agreement, but the accompanying administrative guidelines (ref: 99/C 270–42, published in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* No. C270 of 24 September 1999) on the regulation contain a definition of franchise agreements.

Wind Farms

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many wind farm proposals her Department has opposed on the basis of advice from the Ministry of Defence in the last five years; and where those proposals were situated. [56412]

Mr. Wilson: Consent under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 to construct a 80 MW wind farm at Kielder in Northumberland was refused after an objection by the Ministry of Defence. Wind farms with a capacity of 50 MW or less are considered by the relevant planning authority under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

Electricity Supply Industry

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions she has had with representatives of consumers about future legislation relating to the electricity supply industry. [55044]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* Following the passage of the Utilities Act 2000, the Government have no plans for primary legislation relating to the electricity supply industry. Secondary legislation relating to such supply is introduced as appropriate, both by DTI and the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority. Proposals for such legislation are subject to consultation with interested parties, including consumers' representatives.

Sick Leave

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many days of sick leave were taken in her

Department last year; how many related to employees suffering *(a)* stress and *(b)* other mental health problems; and what the cost was to her Department. [56473]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* The average number of staff days lost per staff year through sickness absence in the DTI Group in 2000 (the most recent figure available) was 7.5. The figure is taken from the annual report on public sector sick absence commissioned by the Cabinet Office each year. The DTI Group, in addition to DTI HQ, consists of: ACAS, Companies House, Patent Office, Insolvency Service, National Weights and Measures Laboratory, Employment Tribunals Service, and the Radiocommunications Agency.

In answer to the second part of the question, both parts *(a)* and *(b)*, the information requested is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The DTI is committed to meeting targets for reducing the number of working days lost due to sickness absence generally (as contained in our published service delivery agreements), and has a commitment to reducing working days lost due to work-related injuries and illness arising from the Government's revitalising health and safety initiative.

East of England Development Agency

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the composition is of the board of the East of England Development Agency; and on what basis each member was appointed. [56547]

Alan Johnson: The following members make up the board of the East of England Development Agency (EEDA):

Vincent Watts (Chair)
Alan Cherry
Greg Grant
Peter Martin
Richard Powell
Neville Reyner
Marie Skinner
Ruth Bagnall
Sal Brinton
Marco Cereste
Leo Murray
Chris Paveley
Yasmin Shariff
Roger Ali.

The board is currently carrying a vacancy.

Appointments to the boards of all the RDAs are made in accordance with the Code of Practice set out by the Office for the Commissioner for Public Appointments. This means they are made on merit, following fair and open competition.

The RDA boards are business-led and the aim is that at least half of all the board members should have current or recent business experience. Four board members have local authority backgrounds and the rest of the board is made up of people with experience in some area relevant to the work of the RDA. In effect this means trade unions, further and higher education and the voluntary and community sectors.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the powers are of the East of England Development Agency. [56546]

Alan Johnson: The East of England Development Agency (EEDA) is one of the eight regional development agencies in England outside London established by the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998. Each regional development agency (RDA) has five statutory purposes. They are:

to further the economic development and the regeneration of its area

to promote business efficiency, investment and competitiveness in its area

to promote employment in its area

to enhance the development and application of skills relevant to employment in its area

to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the United Kingdom where it is relevant to its area to do so.

Section 5 of the RDA Act empowers the RDAs to do anything they consider expedient for their purposes, or for purposes incidental thereto, subject to the following provision:

An RDA may only

(a) give financial assistance,

(b) dispose of land for less than the best consideration which can reasonably be obtained, or

(c) form, or acquire an interest in, a body corporate,

if the Secretary of State consents; and an RDA may only provide housing by acquiring existing housing accommodation and making it available on a temporary basis for purposes incidental to its purposes.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes have been made to the 2002–03 allocations of the regional development agencies since 16 April. [57318]

Alan Johnson: There has been no change to the overall budget for the RDAs, but, following consultation with the RDAs it has been decided slightly to revise the size of the central contingency fund for in-year shocks. £5 million has been redistributed between the RDAs. The new individual budgets are shown in the table.

RDA	*Allocation*[1] *Gross*	*Net of receipts*
Advantage West Midlands	194,640	192,169
East of England	75,000	76,307
East Midlands	99,980	101,247
London	295,820	286,327
North West	284,740	274,827
One North East	192,360	185,338
South East of England	101,360	100,480
South West of England	91,880	93,840
Yorkshire Forward	220,220	186,620
Total	1,556,000	1,497,155

[1] Including additional programmes (regional selective assistance, broadband and regional centres for manufacturing expertise)

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Rwanda

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many ministerial visits were made to Rwanda between 1979 and 1997; and how many have been made since 1997. [52224]

Mr. MacShane: Information on how may ministerial visits were made to Rwanda between 1979 and 1995 could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

However, from 1995 when the British embassy in Rwanda opened there have been 11 ministerial visits to Rwanda. The majority of ministerial visits have been made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development (seven). She has visited Rwanda every year since 1997 and twice in 2002. Baroness Chalker visited in August 1996. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central, then Minister of State in the FCO, visited Rwanda twice in 1998 and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary visited Rwanda with his French counterpart, Hubert Vedrine, in January 2002.

Correspondence

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will reply to the letter dated 26 September 2001 from the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell relating to Mr. Jones of 1 West Farm Avenue, Ashtead, Surrey. [48208]

Mr. Bradshaw: My office has no record of having received the letter to which the hon. Member refers. Once made aware that the hon. Member was still awaiting a reply, we immediately obtained a fax copy of the letter from his office. We received this on 11 April 2002. I have now replied.

Coolants

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the climate change impact will be of the use of HFC 134A to chill the water at the new GCHQ building. [56390]

Mr. Straw: During its operational life, HFC 134A—a non-ozone depleting refrigerant—will be used in a sealed system and will have no impact on the climate. If a non-ozone depleting, non-global warming product becomes available commercially, the HFC 134A will be replaced.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment has been made of the independence of the judiciary in Zimbabwe. [56564]

Mr. MacShane: The International Bar Association visited Zimbabwe in March 2001 and concluded that the rule of law there was in peril, and that the Zimbabwe Government had acted in a way that put democracy at risk. We are not aware of any more recent assessments by expert legal organisations of the independence of the judiciary in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe Government ignored the recommendations of the International Bar Association, and continues to apply pressure to members of the legal profession. Our judgment is that this pressure has seriously undermined the independence of the judiciary.

Exports to Iraq

Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what goods subject to strategic controls have recently been approved for export to Iraq. [57317]

Mr. MacShane: Following consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Trade and Industry recently approved a licence to export laboratory equipment to UNESCO for use by higher education institutions in northern Iraq. The export included bacterial growth media and potassium cyanide subject to the UN Import/Export (IMPEX) regime. Potassium cyanide is also subject to the Dual-Use Items (Export Control) Regulations 2000 as amended. The conclusion that this export does not represent a proliferation threat has been reached after careful assessment.

The UN Iraq Sanctions Committee approved this export to Iraq under the Oil for Food programme (OFF). Under OFF Iraq is allowed to export unlimited quantities of oil to fund the purchase of humanitarian goods. The export is consistent with the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria.

Western Sahara

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action has been taken by United Kingdom representatives at the United Nations to ensure the people of the Western Sahara have the opportunity to vote on their future in a referendum; and if he will make a statement. [56587]

Mr. Bradshaw: United Kingdom representatives in New York have worked in the United Nations Security Council and through informal contacts and groupings to find a resolution to the dispute over Western Sahara.

During discussions on this matter, the UK's position remained consistent. The UK was impartial in this dispute and fully supported the position of the Secretary-General and his personal envoy, James Baker, to find a just and lasting solution to the situation in Western Sahara. The UK sought a just and durable outcome that allowed the people of the Western Sahara the right to self-determination. The UK wished to see both sides become flexibly engaged in the search for a long term solution, which at this point seemed stalled by their mutually exclusive objectives.

Gibraltar

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to change the status of Gibraltar; and if he will make a statement. [55860]

Peter Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to him on 10 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 396W.

Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the outcome of his discussions with the Spanish Foreign Minister on 15 May. [57316]

Mr. Straw: I met the Spanish Foreign Minister today to continue our discussions on Gibraltar. There was a friendly and constructive atmosphere. We noted that we have made good progress since July 2001 and remain committed to reaching agreement by the summer. At the same time we both acknowledged that there are real difficulties which remain to be resolved. We agreed to convene a further formal Brussels Process meeting in late June or early July.

Pakistan

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation of Mr. Ayub Masih, a Christian citizen in Pakistan; and if he proposes to monitor his appeal to the Supreme Court of Appeal against the charge of blasphemy. [56260]

Mr. Bradshaw: We are deeply concerned about the misuse of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and the fate of all Pakistani citizens, including Mr. Masih, who have been imprisoned and sentenced to death under these laws. Officials in London and Islamabad are in regular contact with human rights groups and Pakistan's minority communities. Together with our EU partners, we have raised our concerns at regular intervals with the Pakistani authorities, citing specific cases including Mr. Masih's. We raised his case again with the EU on 10 April 2002 and are now considering what further action we should take in support of Mr. Masih's Supreme Court Appeal.

Middle East

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 of 22 November 1967; and if he will make a statement. [55992]

Mr. Bradshaw: UN Security Council Resolution 242 of 22 November 1967 affirmed the need for a just and lasting peace in the middle east, including Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in the recent conflict, and the right of all regional states to live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries. Together with more recent UN Security Council resolutions, this continues to form the basis of our policy on the middle east.

Belarus (Weapons Export Contracts)

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what weapons export contracts have been signed by UK companies with Belarus since August 2001; what weapons and services were sold in these contracts; what each contract value was; and if he will make a statement. [55156]

Dr. Moonie: I have been asked to reply.

Details of commercial contracts are confidential between companies and their customers. However, details of the Government's export licensing decisions and information on the export of military weapons in major categories are published in the annual report on strategic export controls, copies of which are available from the Library of the House. The 2001 edition is currently being prepared.

Occupied Territories

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of damage caused to, and the likely costs of repair to, projects in the west bank and Gaza which are funded by Her Majesty's Government and EU institutions during *(a)* Israeli military incursions in April and *(b)* Israeli military action between September 2000 and April 2002; and if he will list the projects involved. [54860]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answers given on 26 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 877W, and 1 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 843W. A list of damaged projects was placed in the Library of the House.

The recent Israeli re-occupation has moved the issue of damage and assessment to an entirely different scale. A detailed damage assessment is being conducted by the international agencies. A joint World Bank/UNSCO (UN Special Co-ordinator's Office) paper is due to be circulated by 13 May, and follow-up action discussed at a local aid co-ordination committee meeting later next week. EU contribution to reconstruction efforts will be considered there (from the Commission and from member states).

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Committee Mandates

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Technical Adaptation Committee on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55228]

Dr. Whitehead: European Council Directive 89/391/EEC makes provision for committees to work on

> "the purely technical adjustments to the individual directives provided for in Article 16 (1) to take account of: the adoption of directives in the field of technical harmonization and standardization, and/or technical progress, changes in international regulations or specifications, and new findings . . ."

The UK representatives at such meetings would be drawn from staff with the relevant technical and policy responsibilities within the Health and Safety Executive. During the last 12 months they have received no invitations to such technical meetings; nor are any currently scheduled.

Together with member states, the European Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of the House on 26 February (Commission Document 5685–02). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee on the system of charging for the use of transport infrastructure is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55643]

Mr. Jamieson: The committee of Government experts on charging for the use infrastructure was established by the Commission following the publication of its 1998 White Paper "Fair Payment for Infrastructure Use: A phased approach to a common transport infrastructure charging framework in the EU" (COM(1998)466). It is composed of representatives of member states and is chaired by the European Commission. The terms of reference set for the group were to develop and advise the Commission on Community guidance on methods to estimate the marginal costs of transport; develop practices to promote transparency of accounts; promote the development of 'transport accounts' at member state level; and to advise the commission on statistical and research needs and priorities. The committee has met once in the last twelve months. The UK is represented by officials from my Department and the annual cost of its work to public funds is about £1,000. No items are currently under consideration by the committee.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the commission".

As an obligation to this decision, the commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee for granting community financial aid in the field of trans-European transport networks is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55639]

Mr. Jamieson: The transport trans-European network (TEN) Financial Assistance Committee is established under the provisions of Article 17 of the TEN financing regulation (Regulation (EC) 2236–95). The Committee is composed of representatives of member states and is chaired by the European Commission. The remit of the Committee is to consider—and, where appropriate, to vote upon—budgetary measures proposed by the Commission. The Committee has met twice in the last 12 months. The UK is represented by officials from my Department and the annual cost of its work to public funds is about £2,000. The Committee will next consider a proposal from the Commission for the allocation of the 2002 transport TEN budget.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology Committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the commission".

As an obligation to this decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of Committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government has encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology Committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Advisory Committee on aids to transport by rail, road and inland waterway is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55683]

Mr. Jamieson: This Committee was established under the provisions of article 6 of the 1970 regulation on the granting of aids for transport by rail, road and inland waterway (Regulation (EEC) No. 1107–70). The remit of the Committee is to assist the Commission in its examination of aids granted for transport by rail, road and inland waterway. When it met, the Committee was composed of representatives of member states and was chaired by the European Commission. But, as far as we are aware, the Committee has not met for several years. Were it to meet, the UK would be represented by officials from my Department. There have been no costs to public funds in recent years. No items are currently under consideration by the Committee.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of Committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee on the adaptation to scientific and technical progress of legislation concerning the transport of dangerous goods is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55678]

Mr. Jamieson: The Committee on the adaptation to scientific and technical progress of legislation concerning the transport of dangerous goods is established under the provisions of article 9 of Council directive 94/55/EC on the approximation of the laws of the member states with regard to the transport of dangerous goods by road (the so-called ADR framework directive), as amended. It also deals with the adaptation to scientific and technical progress of the technical annexes to Council directive 96/49/EC on the approximation of the laws of the member states with regard to the transport of dangerous goods by rail (the so-called RID framework directive), as amended; Council directive 95/50/EC on uniform procedures for checks on the transport of dangerous goods by road, as amended; Council directives 96/35/EC and 2000/18/EC on the appointment and vocational qualification and minimum examination requirements of safety advisers for the transport of dangerous goods by road, rail and inland waterways; and Council directive 99/36/EC on transportable pressure equipment, as amended.

The Committee is composed of representatives of the member states and is chaired by the Commission. Representatives of relevant European trade associations are also often invited to attend. The remit of the Committee is to consider—and where appropriate to vote upon—amendments to the technical annexes to the various directives listed above. The Committee has met twice in the last 12 months, and usually meets biannually. It often meets in tandem with a 'group of experts on the transport of dangerous goods' to discuss matters of mutual interest. The UK is represented by officials from my Department, usually accompanied by officials from the Health and Safety Executive, and the cost of its work, and that of the 'group of experts', to public funds is about £5,500.

The Committee is next scheduled to meet on 25–26 June 2002 but, since there is unlikely to be the need for a formal vote, it is anticipated that this will be in the form of the 'group of experts'. Items on the agenda are likely to be question and answer information on transportable pressure equipment; consideration of national derogations under articles 6.9 and 6.10 from the ADR and RID framework directives; consideration of formal amendment of the technical annexes of the ADR and RID framework directives; and possible measures on the security of dangerous goods in road and rail transport.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of Committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology Committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee on the development of trans-European transport networks is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55642]

Mr. Jamieson: The Committee on the development of the transport trans-European network (TEN) is established under the provisions of Article 18 of the transport TEN guidelines (decision no. 1692/96/EC). The Committee is composed of representatives of member states and is chaired by the European Commission. The Committee exchanges information on member states' transport TEN plans and programmes and assists the Commission in preparing its biennial report on the implementation of the TEN guidelines and its quinquennial report on the need for revisions to the guidelines. The Committee has met twice in the last 12 months. The UK is represented by officials from my Department and the annual cost of its work to public funds is about £2,000. The Committee is currently considering the scope of a revision to the transport TEN guidelines scheduled for 2004.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an

electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Planning

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the balance was between *(a)* favourable and *(b)* unfavourable responses to the proposal in the planning Green Paper to regionalise planning responsibilities held at county level. [55772]

Ms Keeble: An analysis of the responses to the planning Green Paper is contained in the report of the consultants Smith and Williamson, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Spoiled Ballot Papers

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will place in the Library a list of the number of ballots rejected owing to want of an official mark in the local elections held on 2 May broken down by *(a)* London borough and *(b)* London borough election ward. [56134]

Dr. Whitehead: This information is not collected centrally.

Marine Environment

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how the Government intends to combine simplification of the coastal development regulatory system with continuing to protect the marine environment and maintain stakeholder involvement. [56047]

Mr. Jamieson: The current regime for consenting development in coastal waters has developed over many years in a piecemeal way. There is general consensus among stakeholders that it has become too complex. The Government will therefore review the system with the aim of streamlining it and at the same time ensuring that Government's objectives for protection of the marine environment can be met. Stakeholders' views will inform the review and any proposals emerging from it will be fully consulted on. The terms of reference for the review will be announced shortly.

Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre

Lawrie Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what performance targets he has set the Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre Executive Agency for 2002–03. [57291]

Dr. Whitehead: The agency's principal financial target for 2002–03 is to achieve a minimum contribution to the Exchequer of £300,000.

An operational target has been set to achieve combined room occupancy of 400 days in the three key conference areas within the centre.

The agency is also being required to achieve a total of at least 25 stand-alone banqueting events. It also has the following quality of service targets:

Overall score for value for money satisfaction of 90 per cent.

The number of complaints received to be less than two per 100 events

An average response time when answering complaints of less than four working days.

Departmental Policies

James Purnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what impact his Department's policies have had on the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency since 1997. [54330]

Dr. Whitehead *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The principal kinds of funding which this Department has provided to Tameside metropolitan borough council since 1997 are shown in the table. It is for the borough council to decide where within its boundary, including the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency, these resources are applied.

£ million

Item	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
Revenue support grant	[1]—	90	95	93	99	98
Income from national non-domestic rates	[1]—	50	55	61	60	65
Central Government capital grant	7	5	9	8	[2]—	[2]—
Credit approvals available[5]	10	10	8	13	[2]—	[2]—
Neighbourhood Renewal Fund					0.6	1.0
Single Regeneration Budget	2.5	2.8	3.1	3.2	3.8	3.5
European Funding	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—
Transport Supplementary Grant	0.8	0.5	—	—	—	—

Notes:

[1] No figures available.

[2] These figures have come from returns made by Tameside MBC to the Department. Figures for 2001–02 and 2002–03 are not yet available.

[3] The 1997–99 Objective 2 Programme provided £38 million European funding to the Manchester City Pride Area which includes the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency.

[4] The 2000–06 Objective 2 Programme is providing £36 million European funding to the Manchester sub region which includes the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency.

[5] Covers housing, transport, social services, education.

Departmental Report

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he plans to publish his Department's annual report. [56033]

Dr. Whitehead: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on 15 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 774W.

Nesscliffe Bypass

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on the completion of the Nesscliffe bypass on the A5 road. [56185]

Mr. Jamieson: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to reply to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 15 May 2002:

The Transport Minister, David Jamieson, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about completion of the A5 Nesscliffe Bypass.

Work on Nesscliffe Bypass started in February this year and is on schedule for completion in Spring 2003. Current work includes site clearance, earthworks, drainage and the diversion of water, electricity and telecommunications services. Construction of the Wolfshead roundabout, which will link the new road with the existing A5, has begun and, during the early Summer, there will be traffic management on the A5 to enable the roundabout to be completed. The planting will be done towards the end of the contract.

If you require any further information, Paul Tully, the Project Sponsor for this scheme, would be pleased to help. He can be contacted at the Agency's offices at Broadway, Broad Street, Birmingham, B15 1BL or by telephone on 0121 678 8456.

Bus Services

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what proportion of public bus services in England have been operated by Arriva in the last three years for which figures are available. [56190]

Ms Keeble: This information is not collected by my Department. However, information in the Bus Industry Monitor 2001 (published by TAS Publications & Events Ltd.) indicates that Arriva services represent around 15 per cent. of the total bus market, measured by turnover.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how much public subsidy has been paid to Arriva to maintain public bus services in England in the last three years for which figures are available. [56191]

Ms Keeble: Arriva, like many other bus companies, receives public support for maintaining bus services in the form of local authority funding of contracted subsidised services and concessionary fares and fuel duty rebate from my Department.

My Department does not collect information on the amounts received by individual bus companies from local authorities.

The amounts paid to individual claimants for fuel duty rebate are regarded as commercially confidential.

We are undertaking a review of bus subsidy mechanisms to ensure that they contribute as effectively as possible to the achievement of our objectives.

Road Bridges (Railways)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what action he takes to ensure that contractors accessing pylons are not endangering road bridges over railways. [56050]

Mr. Jamieson: Contractors working on pylons on behalf of their operators are expected to comply with work practices that satisfy current safety legislation. This includes interaction with any related or third party structures.

Parking

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how much has been raised in England and Wales from the issuing of parking tickets in the last financial year for which figures are available. [55753]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray) on 26 March 2002, *Official Report*, columns 962–63W.

Network Rail

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when Network Rail's business plan will be published. [55784]

Mr. Jamieson: This is a matter for Network Rail.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) if EU state aid rules allow the Government *(a)* to provide initial financial support to Network Rail and *(b)* to provide subsequent, additional aid through the standby facilities from the Strategic Rail Authority; [55711]

(2) what rights exist under EU law to permit the Government to provide state aid to Network Rail to acquire the assets of Railtrack. [55773]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government will make sure that any state aid provided to Network Rail, if it is successful in its bid to acquire Railtrack plc, is fully compatible with the EC Treaty, bearing in mind the rescue and restructuring guidelines and also articles 73 and 86(2) of the Treaty. That is equally true of any initial financial support and any standby facilities.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions whether the Strategic Rail Authority expects Network Rail's business plan to require an interim review. [55783]

Mr. Jamieson: Any decision to apply to the rail regulator for an interim review would be a matter for Network Rail, if the company succeeds in its bid to acquire Railtrack plc and becomes network operator.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions through what mechanisms Network Rail's management will be held to account for their performance. [55781]

Mr. Jamieson: In common with other companies, Network Rail's management would be responsible to the company's board and also to the membership. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear when he outlined the structure of a possible company limited by guarantee, in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) on 23 October 2001, *Official Report*, columns 195W-97W, management would need to be properly incentivised to deliver a quality rail network. Discussions are continuing on the company's incentive

proposals. Finally, if Network Rail succeeds in its bid to become network operator, the company would, like Railtrack, be subject to the regulatory system.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) which members of Network Rail's management team have previous management experience in the heavy rail industry; and if he will make a statement; [55782]

(2) how many salaried employees Network Rail has; [55777]

(3) who will be responsible for the recruitment of board members to Network Rail; [55774]

Mr. Jamieson: The details of its proposals are a matter for Network Rail.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what information he has received from the Office of National Statistics about the status of debt raised by Network Rail. [55776]

Mr. Jamieson: The ONS took a preliminary view in October 2001 that the proposed company limited by guarantee described to them at that time would not be classified within the public sector. The ONS will take a view upon the Network Rail proposals once negotiations are completed.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions who took the decision to recruit each of the directors of Network Rail; and if he will list the directors. [55775]

Mr. Jamieson: When Network Rail was launched on 25 March 2002, the company announced that three non-executive directors—Ian McAllister, Adrian Montague and Iain Coucher—had been appointed. These appointments were made on the initiative of the CLG bid team. Further appointments are a matter for Network Rail. Appointments to the CLG bid team were covered in my reply to the hon. Member on 12 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 213W.

London Underground

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how much surplus office space London Underground has. [56427]

Mr. Jamieson: London Underground currently has no surplus head office space. Over the last few years, as part of a controlled programme of disposal of surplus assets, London Underground has disposed of virtually all of its commercial office space which can be separated from the railway undertaking.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he expects *(a)* London Underground and the infrastructure companies to complete their draft final contracts for the London Underground and *(b)* to sign approval of the final contracts; what processes up to this latter stage are still to be (i) undertaken and (ii) completed; and if he will make a statement. [55808]

Mr. Jamieson: London Underground Limited has agreed commercial terms for the Tube modernisation plans and signed agreements on 8 May to that effect with two consortia, Metronet and Tube Lines Group.

There are a number of detailed processes which need to be completed prior to the contracts taking effect, in addition to putting in place the necessary finance, and securing safety and other regulatory clearances.

I expect the contracts to take effect this summer, once these arrangements have been completed.

Railtrack

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the legal status of the financial guarantees by the Government to the Railtrack administrator will be if administration lasts beyond 30 September. [55710]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government's guarantee of Railtrack plc's commercial borrowing will continue in full force and effect until all guaranteed borrowing has been repaid. Under the terms of the commercial loan agreement Railtrack plc's commercial borrowing must be repaid no later than 23 September 2002.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he estimates that the target to end Railtrack administration by the end of July will be met. [55712]

Mr. Jamieson: Network Rail said at the time of making a bid for Railtrack plc that, if accepted, Railtrack could be released from administration by the end of July. Network Rail has not indicated that its timetable has changed. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has repeatedly said that this is a challenging time scale.

Air Pollutants

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what assessment his Department's Health committee on the medical effects of air pollutants has made to aldehydes in the last five years; what conclusions have been drawn; and if he will make a statement. [56259]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

In December 2000, the Department's committee on the medical effects of air pollutants (COMEAP) published a statement on the effects on health of aldehydes in ambient air. The statement reflected the committee's conclusions of the evidence of the effects on health of aldehydes.

A copy of the statement follows, and is also available on the Department's website at http://www.doh.gov.uk/comeap/statementsreports/aldehydes.htm

Committee on the medical effects of air pollutants statement on effects on health of aldehydes in ambient air

Aldehydes found in ambient air include irritant compounds such as formaldehyde and acrolein. It is possible, though unlikely, that exposure to the concentrations of these compounds found commonly in ambient air in the UK could cause symptoms of irritation of the eyes or mucous membranes of the upper respiratory tract. Outdoor concentrations of formaldehyde are generally low in comparison with concentrations that have been

shown to produce irritation. Concentrations indoors may, on occasion, be sufficient to cause irritation: this is due to the release of aldehydes from building materials and from house fittings.

Though formaldehyde is a carcinogen in rats, the risks to humans associated with exposure to ambient concentrations, if any, will be extremely small.

Occupational exposure to high concentrations of formaldehyde has been linked with the development of asthma and a hypersensitivity response to this compound. The evidence is not clear cut: much more convincing is the evidence regarding the response to glutaraldehyde, though the concentrations of this compound in ambient air are very low. It is highly unlikely that exposure to ambient levels of aldehydes would lead to allergic and respiratory problems. There is some evidence to suggest that exposure to formaldehyde indoors is associated with asthma symptoms in children. However, the overall evidence is not, however, completely clear cut and more research will be necessary before this issue can be finally resolved.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for what reason service invalid pensions are classed as occupational pensions when deciding the benefit entitlement from incapacity benefit; and when this rule was introduced. [53311]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: We introduced changes to the treatment of occupational pensions in incapacity benefit in April 2001. We believe it is right to take account of pensions which duplicate the purpose of incapacity benefit, which is to provide some replacement of earnings for people of working age. Benefit is reduced by 50 per cent. of pension income in excess of £85 a week.

Pension income includes occupational pensions paid on cessation of employment. Armed forces service pensions paid on cessation of service are occupational pensions and are treated in the same way as other occupational pensions.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the written questions asked of him between *(a)* 1 to 30 June 2001, *(b)* 1 to 31 July 2001, *(c)* 1 to 30 September 2001, *(d)* 1 to 31 October 2001, *(e)* 1 to 30 November 2001, *(f)* 1 to 31 December 2001, *(g)* 1 to 31 January 2002, *(h)* 1 to 28 February 2002, *(i)* 1 to 31 March 2002 and *(j)* 1 to 30 April 2002 that had not received a substantive answer by 30 April; and if he will state (i) the name of the hon. Member asking the question and (ii) the reasons the question had not received a substantive answer. [54082]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* At 30 April there were 10 written questions from January that remained unanswered, 18 from February, 82 from March and 114 from April. Of these, 33 were not due for answer until 1 May or later. The identification numbers and the names of the hon. Members who tabled the questions have been placed in the Library. For the reasons for delay I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. John Bercow) on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 225W.

Pension Entitlements (Public Sector)

David Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what powers he has to intervene against public sector employers who withdraw pension entitlements from their work force. [55629]

Mr. McCartney: My right hon. Friend has no powers to intervene against public sector or private sector employers who withdraw pension entitlements (i.e. pension rights that have been accrued in an occupational pension scheme) from pension scheme members. In the exceptional circumstance where an employee may have their entitlements withdrawn (for example if the employer becomes insolvent), then the matter would be handled by the competent authority—for example the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority, Pensions Advisory Service or the Pensions Ombudsman.

Public service pension scheme benefits and conditions are the responsibility of the sponsoring Departments, and are not the responsibility of the Secretary of State.

Benefits Decision Makers

David Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what the average length of time that decision makers involved on benefit entitlement have remained in their posts before being transferred to other duties has been over the last 12 months for which figures are available; [54151]

(2) what the average annual salary of decision-makers deciding on benefit entitlements is; [54149]

(3) what the average length of service of decision-makers employed in deciding on benefit entitlement is. [54150]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Social Fund

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has for making personal advisers available for social fund applicants. [51049]

Malcolm Wicks *[holding answer 18 April 2002]:* The role of the personal adviser is to provide work-focused advice and support to people of working age to give them the opportunity to work where they are able to do so. Many social fund applicants will already have had the opportunity to see a personal adviser, for example people making new or repeat claims to benefit at integrated Jobcentre Plus offices, people claiming jobseeker's allowance and people participating in the new deals.

Staff administering the social fund aim to provide the best possible advice to their clients over the telephone or in person, and this will continue under Jobcentre Plus and the Pension Service.

Timber

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the companies from which his Department has obtained timber and wood products and the total spent with each firm over the last five years. [43411]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Current data capture systems do not enable the information to be reported in the format requested.

Pensions

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many United Kingdom companies have ended their final salary pension schemes in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000, *(e)* 2001 and *(f)* 2002. [42713]

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many final salary schemes have closed in each year since May 1997; how many people have been affected; and what estimate he has made of how many such schemes he expects to close over each of the next five years. [44683]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is given in the table.

Data for the 1997–98 tax year include many schemes where a change occurred at an earlier date which was not reported to the Registry. This was because many schemes were not required to pay a levy until the Pensions Act 1995 came into force in April 1997. In these cases a default date of 1 April 1997 has been used therefore artificially inflating the figures for that year.

Defined benefit schemes that have closed, frozen, started to wind up or completed winding up.

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Schemes closed	542	113	116	157	103
schemes frozen	1,095	49	57	98	37
Schemes starting to wind up	11	19	632	306	228
Schemes completed winding up	800	917	681	576	278
Total schemes closed, frozen, starting to wind up or completed winding up	2,448	1,098	1,486	1,137	646

Notes:

1. The information is based on data held by the Pension Schemes Registry (PSR). It relates to final salary schemes only. There is a large minority of schemes on the Register where the scheme type is unknown, there are also some schemes offering a mixture of salary related and money purchase benefits. None of these schemes are included in the table.
2. Closed schemes do not admit new active members, but allow existing members to continue to accrue benefits. Frozen schemes do not allow any future accruals. Schemes starting to wind up are also frozen. Schemes that have completed wind up have no members—all assets are realised and all liabilities are discharged.
3. The information relates to schemes, not employers. Some employers operate several schemes. Closure of a scheme may be due to a bulk transfer of members to another scheme.
4. The PSR system holds information on the most recent change in scheme status and the effective date of the change. Because of the way the data is held a later change will overwrite an earlier change, so data for earlier years become increasingly inaccurate. Trustees are required to report changes within 12 months so there is likely to be a lag before the data reflects what is happening currently.

Industrial Action (Jobcentre Plus)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what research has been undertaken by his Department into the effectiveness of security screens in preventing physical assault upon staff in Benefits Agency and Employment Service offices. [32651]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 5 February 2002]:* The Department has undertaken a thorough review of the impact of screens in protecting staff from physical assaults. The review has taken account of the experience of a number of major public and private sector employers, both in the UK and abroad, as well as the results of an investigation carried out by the Tavistock Institute for the Employment Service. A copy of this latter research report has been placed in the Library. The general conclusions to emerge from this work are that the presence of screens tends to make communication between staff and customers seem more unfriendly and uncaring, which is, in turn, more likely to predispose agitated or anxious people towards aggression.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ethical Trading Initiative

5. **Mr. George Howarth:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she is taking to strengthen the work of the Ethical Trading Initiative in promoting core labour standards in developing countries. [54741]

Hilary Benn: DFID has supported the Ethical Trading Initiative since its establishment. The ETI's corporate members have a combined turnover of £100 billion and, working with trade unions and NGOs, they are trying to improve labour standards in supplier companies. We recently agreed funding of £1.3 million for the ETI over the next three years.

19. **Mr. Patrick Hall:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support her Department is providing to the ethical trading initiative in 2002–03. [54756]

Clare Short: I recently agreed funding of £1.315 million to strengthen the work of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) over the next three years. This will be disbursed in yearly tranches. The tranche for 2002–03 is £513,000. This is 47.5 per cent. of total ETI income in this year. Subsequent years will see a decrease in the proportion of DFID funds as a proportion of total funds, to 40 per cent. in year two and 26.5 per cent. in year three.

We have provided £780,000 since the ETI was set up in 1998 to the end of March 2002. This new three-year grant of £1.315 million represents 38 per cent. of total ETI income over this forthcoming three-year period. This new funding will enable the ETI to build on the excellent progress it has made over the last three years and to

develop expertise and knowledge in new areas which will help its increasing number of members continue to improve labour conditions in the supply chains of corporate members. The remaining 62 per cent. will be generated by corporate and NGO membership fees and a small amount of trading income from services provided to non-members, such as for training. The corporate membership fee total over the period is expected to be £1.92 million, or 56 per cent. of total income. However, ETI's "learning by doing" approach is very demanding on members' time and other resources and this contribution has been conservatively valued as a further £1.8 million over three years.

DFID has supported the Ethical Trading Initiative since its establishment in 1998. It is an alliance of major British retailers, non-governmental organisations and trade unions dedicated to the improvement of labour standards throughout the supply chains of its corporate members. The ETI's corporate members bring together almost £100 billion in annual turnover. Significant proportions of the corporate members' supply chains are located in developing countries and the ETI therefore has a considerable worldwide reach. The corporate members are committed to independent verification, and work to bring their supply chains into compliance with International Labour Organisation standards in a way that brings benefits to workers in developing countries.

Debt Relief

6. **Mr. Bacon:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made on debt relief for poor countries. [54742]

Clare Short: So far, 26 out of a total of 42 countries have qualified for relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, and we expect Cote d'Ivoire to qualify soon. Five countries either are not opting or do not qualify for HIPC. Many of the remaining countries are in conflict and cannot gain debt relief until they make peace.

11. **Dr. Murrison:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made on debt relief for poor countries. [54748]

Clare Short: So far, 26 out of a total of 42 countries have qualified for relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, and by the autumn, Cote d'Ivoire could be added to the list of countries benefiting from the Initiative. Relief of more than US$60 billion will be provided to these countries, reducing their debts by more than two-thirds on average. Of the 26 countries, 21 have reached decision point and are receiving interim debt relief on their 'flow' of payment, and five have completed the HIPC process, and have received an irrevocable reduction in their stock of debt. We hope that a further three will reach their completion point this year. The prospects for the remaining eleven unsustainable countries are not good. Six—Burundi, Congo Republic, Liberia, Myanmar, Somalia and Sudan—are still affected by conflict; Togo has governance problems; Central African Republic, DR Congo and Comoros might go through next year and Lao PDR is undecided as to whether to opt for HIPC relief. Angola, Kenya, Vietnam and Yemen are regarded as sustainable cases, eligible for relief from the Paris Club.

Peacekeeping Units (Balkans and Chechnya)

7. **Mr. Brazier:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the MOD over restoring payments from her budget to military units engaged in peacekeeping for local development work in *(a)* the Balkans and *(b)* Chechnya. [54744]

Hilary Benn: DFID works closely with the MOD in peacekeeping operations.

In Bosnia and Herzegovena and in Kosovo we have provided funding to British forces, initially to support humanitarian assistance activities and then to encourage refugee return.

There is no international peacekeeping force in Chechnya.

Afghanistan

8. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to her oral statement of 17 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 558, on Afghanistan, what action she has taken to provide farmers with a chance of making a living by planting crops other than poppies. [54745]

Clare Short: There is no quick or easy solution to the problem of drug cultivation in Afghanistan. We are supporting long-term development and poverty reduction strategies in order to create an environment in which a reduction in the opium poppy crop can be sustained beyond the next harvest.

9. **Mr. Lloyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made with the reconstruction of Afghanistan. [54746]

Clare Short: Good progress is being made with the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The Interim Afghan Authority has prepared a national development framework and draft budget. Major investment and advisory projects are being designed in key sectors. The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund has been established. Preparations are well advanced for the Emergency Loya Jirga next month that will appoint a Transitional Authority for the coming two years. Meanwhile, humanitarian assistance continues to be provided. Recovery activities are gathering pace, although it will take some time for the benefits to be felt by ordinary Afghans. Refugees are returning to Afghanistan in increasing numbers. But the security and political situation is still fragile. Much remains to be done: reconstruction will require a long-term effort.

At the Tokyo conference in January, donors pledged $4.5 billion in aid over the next two and a half years. The agreed objective was to support the establishment of a secure and stable sovereign state based on the rule of law, able to absorb returning refugees, no longer a haven for international terrorists and drug traffickers, and in stable relationships with its neighbours based on mutual respect and non-interference. The continuing necessity of humanitarian relief was recognised.

The conference also emphasised the need for close coordination between international donors and the Afghan Interim Administration. Donors have participated in

multi-donor missions covering a range of areas, including health, education, agriculture, public finance, transport, infrastructure and community development.

The UK is playing its part, in the political, military and development arenas. Our leadership of the International Security Assistance Force has helped to bring stability to Kabul, establishing the authority of the Interim Administration. We have provided support for poppy crop eradication. We have disbursed around £60 million since 11 September through direct contributions to multilateral agencies and quick impact projects. We have plans in hand for further expenditure of about £40 million this financial year. It is clear that this year, and perhaps next, the majority of this assistance will need to continue to fund humanitarian and recovery programmes. As now, this will include direct contributions to UN agencies and NGOs, quick impact projects to kick-start the recovery process and to underpin the Interim Administration until the Emergency Loyal Jirga, practical support to the political process, and help to establish the Afghan Authority for Assistance.

For the longer term reconstruction effort, we believe it will be important to avoid overburdening the Transitional Authority with many bilateral programmes, each funded by different donors with their own procedures and reporting mechanisms. For that reason we will channel much of our assistance through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. We intend to commit at least half of our Tokyo pledge—£100 million—to the fund. We have already paid in our first contribution—the first donor to do so. We are encouraging other donors also to maximise their contributions to the fund, which we believe should be the main source of funding both for the reconstruction programme and for any quick impact recovery work.

Our bilateral technical assistance is deliberately focused on support for capacity building in the Ministry of Finance and Central bank, in conjunction with the World bank and IMF. We also plan to support security sector reform, drawing on funds from the Global Conflict Prevention Pool.

17. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. [54754]

Clare Short: The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remains serious. However, although some areas remain inaccessible due to volatile security conditions, the United Nations is now able to access 80 per cent. of the country, humanitarian aid is being delivered in significant quantities, and agencies are adapting their programmes from the provision of relief to include recovery activities. Since October 2001, the international community has contributed over $750 million to Afghanistan to meet humanitarian and recovery needs, as identified by the United Nations in its Immediate and Transitional Assistance Programme.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many refugees have returned to Afghanistan from *(a)* Iran and *(b)* Pakistan in the last six months; and what proportion of these have been provided with adequate food and shelter when they return. [55891]

Clare Short: The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimate that approximately 820,000 people have returned to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan in the last six months: 145,000 from Iran and 675,000 from Pakistan. Approximately 535,000 (65 per cent.) of those have returned with assistance from UNHCR as part of their assisted voluntary return programme. As well as transportation, returnees taking part in UNHCR's programme receive plastic sheeting, a repair kit, blankets, kitchen equipment and other [illegible] items. Assisted returnees also receive an emergency ration of 150kg of wheat from the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of the poppy fields used for drug cultivation in Afghanistan have been destroyed. [55890]

Mr. MacShane: I have been asked to reply.

According to the Interim Administration a total of approximately 16,000 hectares of opium poppy have been destroyed so far. This is equivalent to approximately 74 tonnes of heroin which is up to three times the estimated UK annual consumption. The amount destroyed represents about a third of the crop in the main poppy-growing areas. Eradication continues in regions where the harvest starts later.

Kaliningrad

10. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions her Department has had about programmes to support the development of civil society and to combat social problems in Kaliningrad. [54747]

Clare Short: The focus of DFID's bilateral programme in Russia is at the federal level and in two partner oblasts—Leningrad and Nizhny Novgorod. Kaliningrad is not one of the partner oblasts. However, we are major contributors to the European Commission's TACIS programme, which does work in Kaliningrad.

Developing Countries (Political Systems)

12. **Ross Cranston:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support her Department is giving to strengthening political systems in developing countries. [54749]

Clare Short: Most poor countries have adopted formal democratic institutions. We work in many countries to support their efforts to strengthen these institutions so that all their people, especially the poor, have effective representation and participation. To this end we have supported the development of the better working of formal political institutions: electoral processes, parliaments, civil society, the media; and political panties on a non-partisan basis.

In supporting these areas we often work through international organisations such as the Commonwealth and independent bodies such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.

Malawi

13. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the work of her Department in Malawi. [54750]

Clare Short: My Department is managing a £70 million programme this year, making DFID the largest donor in Malawi. Assistance is concentrated on rural livelihoods, health, education and governance.

There has been a substantial shortfall in Malawi's 2002 maize harvest (the country's main staple). DFID is at the forefront of efforts to help. Since January, my Department has provided an additional £4.6 million in direct food relief for distribution through local non-governmental organisations. We have provided a further £1.2 million for "winter" food production (expected to yield 75,000 metric tonnes of maize by September) and a much larger programme, timed to coincide with November rains, is in preparation.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she is taking to improve food distribution by NGOs in southern Africa, with particular reference to Malawi. [55892]

Clare Short: We have provided £5.1 million for NGOs to distribute food to those who are worst affected by maize shortages in Malawi. Now that the 2002 harvest is coming in, there is time to concentrate on improving national food security strategy. DFID is supporting joint Government, NGO, private sector, donor working groups to this end.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the level of cholera in Malawi; and what is being done to reduce levels of cholera. [55880]

Clare Short: According to WHO, Malawi's recent cholera epidemic was one of the worst that the country has experienced with 981 deaths resulting from 33,510 cases. The epidemic started last October and reached a peak in March 2002, since when case numbers have returned to pre-epidemic levels. The average cholera case fatality rate was particularly high this year because the outbreak coincided with food shortage. In these circumstances, reduced attention to hygienic practices in food preparation and consumption led to increased infection rates; these contributed to higher death rates. A national shortage of intravenous fluids contributed to the difficulties in treating the abnormally high case load. The Ministry of Health and Population (MOHP) only presented a situation report and appealed for assistance in mid-March, by which time it was too late to co-ordinate an external response and the epidemic was already waning. The MOHP and development partners in the health sector are planning support for improved disease surveillance and response to avoid the same situation arising next year.

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the prospects for famine in Malawi; and if she will make a statement. [56202]

Clare Short: We are in contact with FAO which is making an assessment of the food situation in Malawi and neighbouring countries. Their report is expected within the next two to three weeks. DFID has spent £5.1 million since January on food relief in Malawi. We stand ready to do more in the light of FAO findings.

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the *(a)* European Union and *(b)* United Nations about a co-ordinated response to the humanitarian situation in Malawi. [56203]

Clare Short: We are working closely with all donors represented in Malawi including the European Union and the World Food Programme. FAO will complete an assessment of the food situation in Malawi and the region within the next 2–3 weeks. Donors will then discuss with the Government of Malawi what steps should be taken to cover the maize shortfall.

United Nations Children's Summit

14. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what was agreed at the UN children's summit. [54751]

Clare Short: The UN General Assembly Special Session on Children agreed an outcomes document entitled "A World Fit for Children" which sets global priorities for tackling child poverty and promoting child rights and repeated the UN commitment to the millennium development goals. The document gives particular emphasis to health, education, child protection and HIV/AIDS. The Chancellor of the Exchequer attended the special session and urged world leaders to provide additional finance to tackle child poverty.

EU Aid Budget

15. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made in reforming the EU aid budget. [54752]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 10 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 387W.

Georgia

16. **Paul Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what further steps she plans to take to assist Georgia. [54753]

Clare Short: We are committed to providing direct assistance to Georgia, in support to the Government of Georgia's poverty reduction and economic growth programme, working closely with the World bank and the EU.

DFID's proposed direct assistance to Georgia over the next three years will amount to £6.75 million.

We also contribute to multilateral assistance to Georgia. For example in 2000 we contributed £1.7 million through the EU, £0.3 million through the UN and £0.8 million through the World bank.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative

18. **Ann McKechin:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what reforms she plans to support the heavily indebted poor countries initiative when the issue is discussed at the autumn meetings of the World bank and the IMF. [54755]

Clare Short: We are currently examining a range of options for discussions about the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative at the Annual Meeting of the World bank and IMF this autumn. Our key priority is to ensure that no country exits the HIPC Initiative with an unsustainable debt burden. We also need to look at debt relief in conjunction with other policies and instruments, to ensure that countries committed to poverty reduction are able to finance their poverty reduction strategies.

21. **Mr. Pond:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to address the issue of debt sustainability for those countries which have qualified under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative. [54758]

Clare Short: The Government has been working to try to ensure that countries exit the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative process with sustainable debt levels. At the Annual Meetings of the World bank and IMF in Ottawa last November, we raised this concern and asked the World bank staff to revisit the debt sustainability analyses of all commodity dependent low-income countries, including HIPCs. The IMF and World bank analysis, published last month, shows that, although the situation varies from country to country, the external debt indicators for most HIPC countries have deteriorated, and several HIPC countries now face unsustainable debt burdens as a result. Following UK pressure, the World bank and IMF boards have agreed to provide additional relief to countries in this situation. This was reconfirmed at the Spring Meetings last month, and Burkina Faso became the first HIPC country to benefit from 'topping up' at Completion Point. We are also pressing the Bank and Fund to take more concrete action to encourage non-Paris Club creditors that have not yet delivered debt relief, to do so.

Debt relief is, however, not a panacea and further measures, including sound economic and debt management by HIPCs themselves, will be required beyond HIPC, to enable countries to maintain debt sustainability levels. To this end, the UK is co-financing a multi-donor funded project to help strengthen the debt management capacity in HIPC countries.

Developing Countries (Effective Negotiation)

20. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance her Department is giving to help developing nations negotiate effectively in international organisations; and if she will make a statement. [54757]

Clare Short: In our second White Paper on international development, Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor (2000), we made a commitment to work towards a stronger and more effective voice for developing countries in the policy and regulatory mechanisms of the international financial system. To this end we are providing capacity-building support in diverse ways, bilaterally and in collaboration with other donors, to small states and least developed countries in order to strengthen their negotiating capacity.

In addition to many capacity building projects in-country, we are collaborating with other donors to provide support at key institutions. Examples of this include support to:

the multi-donor Debt Capacity Building Programme, which assists countries negotiate HIPC relief with the International Financial Institutions and the Paris Club;

the Agency for International Trade Information and Co-operation, which helps countries with little or no representation at the WTO in Geneva;

the independent, Geneva-based, Advisory Centre on WTO Law which helps countries take a case through dispute settlement at the WTO;

a Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights and Development Capacity Building Project with the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and ICTSD (International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development), which aims to improve the ability of country partners to participate effectively in negotiations on intellectual property rights; and

the Caribbean Community's (CARICOM) Regional Negotiating Machinery (RNM) to strengthen the region's capacity in trade negotiations with the European Union on the Cotonou Agreement, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

EU Development Funds

22. **Mr. David:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what improvement there has been in the way EU development funds are allocated since 2000. [54759]

Clare Short: In 2000 only 38 per cent. of EC official development assistance payments went to poor countries down from 52 per cent. in 1999. Accurate figures for EC spending in 2001 will be available early next year. However, it is likely that the share of EC spending in low income countries will have risen since expenditure from the European Development Fund in Africa, Caribbean and Pacific countries-most of which are low income-is reported to have increased significantly.

There have also been improvements in the budgetary allocations for Asia, which has the largest number of poor people of any region. Last year we secured an extra e70m for Asia including humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan. In the Preliminary Draft Budget for 2003 these increases have been sustained and are balanced by cuts in assistance to the Balkans now that the emergency reconstruction phase has ended.

The poverty focus and effectiveness of EC allocations is still low. My Department continues to push for allocations based on developmental needs to countries committed to reducing their poverty.

Debt Cancellation

23. **Vera Baird:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress towards cancellation of unpayable debt owed by the poorest countries to the IMF and World Bank she expects from the G8 summit in Canada. [54760]

Clare Short: Under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, the World Bank and IMF have agreed to meet their share—estimated at US$10.8 billion—of the total estimated US$36.4 billion costs for the Initiative. We are currently exploring with our G8 partners whether there are further actions they might wish to support

on debt. It is important to ensure the full financing of any multilateral debt relief, to reduce the risk of skewing development resources away from other very poor countries who have handled their debt well. We will therefore be raising the issue of HIPC financing, and the possible need for further contributions to the HIPC Trust Fund.

Investment (Social Responsibility)

24. **Dr. Desmond Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to help promote socially responsible business practice by UK companies that invest in developing countries. [54761]

Clare Short: Many companies are now recognising the key role they are able to play in making globalisation work for the poor. They are also realising that socially and environmentally responsible business practices in developed and developing countries can make their operations more sustainable. Many UK businesses are playing a leading role in the development of socially responsible business practices, but there is still much progress to be made. My Department supports a number of socially responsible business initiatives aimed at improving the social, ethical and environmental impact of businesses operating in developing countries. It is also supporting research to develop tools to measure the poverty impact of such initiatives.

Trade Barriers

25. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations her Department has made to the EU with regard to removing barriers to trade for developing countries. [54762]

Clare Short: The UK recognises that, even with the preferential trade access available to many developing countries, the highest tariffs continue to fall on historically sensitive products of interest to developing countries, particularly agricultural goods, textiles and clothing. In order to tackle the substantial barriers to trade, a new trade round was launched at the fourth WTO ministerial meeting in Doha in November last year with a pro-development agenda. The meeting resulted in agreement on the need to reduce barriers to trade in agriculture and manufactured goods. In response to this, my Department is working with the DTI and DEFRA to ensure that these commitments become a reality.

Zimbabwe

26. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid her Department is providing to Zimbabwe; for what purpose; and what steps they are taking to ensure that it reaches the intended destination. [54763]

Clare Short: DFID provided assistance of approximately £16 million for Zimbabwe in 2001–02. Our programme is fully focused on mitigating the humanitarian crisis and combating HIV/AIDs.

Due to the continuing poor policy environment, I have recently permanently closed a number of activities which were previously suspended, as it is now impossible for these to achieve their original objectives. This included a project on poverty monitoring and analysis with the Ministry of Social Welfare, and the civil society Land Resettlement Challenge Fund. One remaining programme, supporting a local district council, will cease in September on completion of outstanding works. All other programmes work with non-Governmental and multilateral organisations, and we continue to monitor these very closely to ensure maximum impact on intended beneficiaries.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to reduce levels of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. [55884]

Clare Short: With an adult HIV infection rate of 35 per cent., it is estimated that AIDS claims the lives of over 2,000 Zimbabweans weekly and that up to 900,000 children have lost one or both parents. AIDS is a major factor in poverty, affecting the lives of sufferers and those who care for them and orphaned children. It is a priority for DFID's programme in Zimbabwe.

Currently DFID is spending around £6 million annually in Zimbabwe on the provision of condoms and other contraceptives; targeted HIV prevention; the provision of drugs for sexually transmitted infections and TB; and strengthening civil society organisations that care for people living with AIDS. DFID supports innovative ways of reaching young people, sex workers, and mobile populations including partnering with Coke-Zimbabwe to promote condom use in rural areas.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the New Partnership for Africa's Development in bringing good Government to Zimbabwe. [55885]

Clare Short: As an African owned and led initiative, we believe that NEPAD is of significant importance, but is a long-term process. Peer review of governance issues is one of its key elements. If Zimbabwe signs up to this, such reviews can help increase pressure for reform, a message that may carry greater weight coming from Africa's leaders.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she last held meetings with officials from the Government of *(a)* South Africa and *(b)* Nigeria to discuss the political situation in Zimbabwe. [55888]

Clare Short: I have had no such meetings recently. Officials from my Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have frequent contacts with representatives of African Governments to share concerns about developments in Zimbabwe.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she last held discussions with representatives from the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe. [55886]

Clare Short: I last met Morgan Tsvangirai and other senior members of the MDC leadership on 2 July 2001. DFID officials have continued a dialogue with MDC representatives and with a wide range of civil society organisations on matters of developmental and humanitarian interest.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to improve food security levels in Zimbabwe. [55882]

Clare Short: It is for the Government of Zimbabwe to provide leadership in improving food security in Zimbabwe. As yet there is no credible national plan to tackle the problems, which continue to deteriorate. DFID has provided £3.5 million to the World Food Programme and £4 million to NGOs to help feed children and vulnerable adults. We are waiting for the results of a new UN food assessment that is currently under way, and we will consider any new proposals that may arise from its findings.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what policy her Department is pursuing to encourage the restoration of democratic Government to Zimbabwe. [55881]

Clare Short: We believe that the restoration of democratic Government to Zimbabwe is essential if Zimbabwe is to restore its economy and services to its people. Her Majesty's Government will continue to work closely with colleagues in the EU, the Commonwealth, the United States and other countries to impress this on the Zimbabwe authorities. We are also working closely with African countries to this end.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what NGOs and charities her Department supports in Zimbabwe. [55883]

Clare Short: I will write to the hon. Member.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the levels of political violence in Zimbabwe; and if she will make a statement on her Department's strategy to deal with political violence in Zimbabwe. [55887]

Mr. MacShane: I have been asked to reply.

Politically motivated violence in Zimbabwe continues unabated.

We deplore the failure of the Zimbabwean Government to take steps to stop the violence. In response, the international community, including the UK, has imposed a number of measures against the Zimbabwean regime, including an arms embargo, a travel ban and an assets freeze aimed at senior figures. The EU, US and others have said they will consider additional measures if the political violence and abuses of democratic principles do not stop. We support this.

Palestinian Authority

27. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on how much aid has been given to the Palestinian Authority. [54764]

Clare Short: The international community has provided financial and technical assistance to the Palestinian Authority since the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993 and 1994. This has been designed to support the delivery of basic social services, and help develop the capacity of the Palestinian Authority to participate effectively in the peace process. Total donor assistance since 1994 (figures most readily available) for the Palestinian Territories and for Palestinian refugees was $3.87 billion.

The major contributor has been the European Commission, the UK share of which comes from the Department for International Development budget. Between 1994 and 2001, EC aid for the period totalled euro 1.446 billion. The UK share of this is an estimated euro 245 million. Over the same period, the World bank provided about £13 million between 1994 and 2001. The UK share was £650,000.

UK bilateral aid for the period 1996–97 to 2001–02 totalled £48.838 million. Between 1997 and 2001, the UK also provided £65.9 million to UNRWA for Palestinian refugees.

Sierra Leone

28. **Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support she plans to give to Sierra Leone. [54765]

Clare Short: We intend maintaining a development programme of around £40 million annually over the next few years. Our primary aims are to help the Government restore and maintain security throughout the country, improve standards of governance, help ensure better management of the country's diamond resources, and combat the endemic corruption that has put a brake on the country's developmental progress.

Middle East

29. **Richard Burden:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the impact of recent Israeli military actions on British and EU-funded development projects in the west bank and Gaza. [54766]

Clare Short: The recent escalation of the conflict has resulted in the destruction of infrastructure, damage to private property and government buildings. This includes British and other European-funded development projects. It has clearly had a dramatic effect on the Palestinian people—further endangering livelihoods, disrupting the delivery of basic services, and undermining the institutions of government. But the high morale and dedication on the part of project staff and community partners has often enabled good progress to continue in the most adverse conditions.

Together with our EU partners we have raised with the Israeli authorities grave concern about the damage to EU and other donor-funded projects and demanded that this practice stop. The EU has reserved the right to demand compensation.

Criminal Offences

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many criminal offences have been *(a)* created and *(b)* abolished by her Department since 1997. [55427]

Clare Short: No legislation introduced by the Department for International Development since 1997 has contained criminal law provisions.

Southern Africa

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid is being

provided to each country in southern Africa this year *(a)* through her Department's bilateral aid budget and *(b)* via the EU aid budget. [55879]

Clare Short: DFID plans to spend £40 million this year through its bilateral programme for the five countries of the Southern African Customs Union (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland). This will be spent partly on activities in individual countries, and partly on regional activities covering several countries.

The EU does not publish expected annual disbursement figures for the current year. In 2001, the EU spent 5 million euro in Botswana, 12 million euro in Lesotho, 11 million euro in Namibia; 112 million euro in South Africa and 7 million euro in Swaziland. The UK contributes 19 per cent. of the EU's spending in South Africa (which is from the EU budget), and 12.7 per cent. of the EU spending in the other four countries (which is from the European Development Fund).

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what actions her Department is taking to prevent the occurrence of famine in southern Africa this year. [55893]

Clare Short: We have provided £13 million for feeding programmes in Malawi and Zimbabwe. We are in contact with the World Food Programme who, once their assessments in the countries affected are completed, will confirm regional needs in early June.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the possibility of famine in southern Africa this year. [55899]

Clare Short: We have been monitoring food shortages in the region since September 2001. Six countries in southern Africa will not produce sufficient maize to meet their requirements this year. Localised food shortages are likely to occur as household stocks run out.

Montserrat

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations her Department has received on the siting of an airport for Montserrat. [55702]

Clare Short: Following an assessment of the options, the Government of Montserrat has selected Gerald's Park as the site for a new airport. Although some reservations about this decision have been raised by a local non-governmental group, detailed design work is proceeding. I shall be writing to the hon. Member about this shortly, in response to his letter of 28 April.

Palestine

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what recent discussions she has had with the Israeli Government regarding the destination of UK funds provided to the Palestinian Authority; [55895]

(2) whether her Department has evidence that *(a)* EU aid and *(b)* UK aid has reached (i) the Fatah movement and (ii) the al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade; and if she will establish an investigation into allegations relating to the diversion of aid to those organisations; [55894]

(3) what assessment she has made of reports that EU aid to the Palestinian Authority has been misappropriated for terrorism; [55897]

(4) what recent discussions she has had with Commissioner Patten regarding the destination of EU aid to the Palestinian Authority. [55896]

Clare Short: The allegations made by the Israeli Government about the misuse of European development funds relate to budgetary support provided through the European Commission (EC). Commissioner Patten wrote to EU Foreign Ministers on 7 May stressing that to date the EC has had no evidence corroborating the allegations that EU moneys have been misused to finance terrorist activities; or for anything other than their original purpose. The EC attach strict conditionality to the direct budgetary assistance provided to the Palestinian Authority (PA). The conditions mainly reinforce the need for transparency on the PA's public finances, strengthening the prudent management of the budget, and encouraging progress on overall financial and administrative reform. We are satisfied that the EC, with the assistance of the IMF, is ensuring the conditions are met.

Child Soldiers

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what organisations her Department supports which are working for the disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation of child soldiers. [55898]

Clare Short: We are working with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence to prevent and manage conflict through the Africa and Global Conflict Prevention Pools. We are contributing £3 million from the Global Conflict Prevention Pool to UNICEF over a three-year period to build its capacity to implement programmes which will prevent children becoming involved in, or otherwise affected by, armed conflict, including the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers. This is part of a broader capacity building programme designed to strengthen UNICEF's programming in crises and conflicts.

£3 million is also being contributed from the Global Conflict Prevention Pool to the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children to support his advocacy and research work to reduce the impact of conflict on children, including the use of child soldiers by state and non-state actors alike. The work of these two institutions spans a wide range of countries in Africa, Asia and Europe.

We are also supporting the Quakers Office in New York to carry out a research programme into the experiences of girl soldiers, a little-acknowledged and researched aspect of child-soldiering, including disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration issues.

DFID collaborated with the Government of Sierra Leone, UNICEF and other partners in the DDR programme in Sierra Leone, which resulted in the demobilisation of 6,485 child soldiers. DFID continues to support local communities involved in the reintegration of ex-combatants, many of whom were recruited as children.

Through its regional offices, DFID has also supported Save the Children UK in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and in Sudan to help demobilise and reintegrate child soldiers. Similarly, in Rwanda DFID has supported UNICEF to help reintegrate child soldiers into communities.

On 12 April, the UK pledged £25 million contribution towards the World bank Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme for the Great Lakes region. This programme is aimed at the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of some 350,000 soldiers and militia in the region. It is envisaged that part of this $500 million programme over five years will include the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers.

The UK was among the first 60 states to ratify the statute of the International Criminal Court, which will come into force in July 2002. This statute makes it a war crime to recruit or use children under 15 in armed conflict.

Burma

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what actions she is taking to promote democracy in Burma following the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. [55889]

Clare Short: The UK has played a leading role in pressing for change in Burma. My Department continues to work closely with the FCO in support of efforts to bring about national reconciliation and facilitate political progress. The apparent unconditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest is a welcome step forward but much more remains to be achieved. We will continue to do everything in our power to facilitate and support national reconciliation, human rights, the restoration of democracy, and thereby the conditions for eventual re-engagement with the international community.

Palestinian Refugee Camps

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what Palestinian refugee camps in *(a)* Lebanon and *(b)* Syria are (i) run directly by her Department, (ii) run by organisations with DFID involvement and (iii) run by UK non-governmental organisations; and if she will make a statement; [55998]

(2) what Palestinian refugee camps in *(a)* Lebanon and *(b)* Syria are (i) directly funded by her Department, (ii) funded by projects co-funded by her Department and (iii) funded by UK non-governmental organisations; and if she will make a statement. [55991]

Clare Short: The UK Government do not run or fund Palestinian refugee camps. This is the responsibility of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), the local authorities, and the camp communities. We provide voluntary contributions to UNRWA, the camps' main services provider, and have funded UK NGOs engaged in camp community development projects.

Departmental Staff (Scotland)

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many and what percentage of *(a)* civil service, *(b)* executive agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public body jobs under the remit of her Department are located in Scotland; and how many of each have been relocated to Scotland since May 1997. [56313]

Clare Short: DFID civil service staff are located in London, East Kilbride and, increasingly, overseas. The number of posts currently located in Scotland is 530, which represents just over 33 per cent. of the total.

We do not hold detailed records of civil service jobs relocated to Scotland between 1997 and 2002 but the information we do hold indicates that staff numbers in East Kilbride increased by around 70 in that period.

No posts within the three non-departmental public bodies under the remit of the Department have been relocated to Scotland.

Millennium Development Goals

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she plans to take at the Development Council Meeting at the end of May to promote the pursuit of the millennium development goals for education. [56163]

Clare Short: On 30 May EU Development Ministers are expected to approve a Council resolution on education and training in the context of poverty reduction in developing countries. This recognises that education, especially of girls and women, is central for poverty reduction and sustainable development, and the community and member states undertake to adjust their policies and allocation of resources to reflect this.

Reiterating the Council's strong commitment to the education millennium development goals and to the Dakar framework for action on education for all (EFA), the resolution indicates that universal and free primary education should be the first priority of the community and member states' development cooperation strategy for education. The main responsibility for meeting these goals lies with developing country Governments. But the Commission and member states will strongly support their efforts, undertaking to increase the volume and improve the delivery of assistance for primary education and to cooperate more effectively with other international organisations, like UNESCO and the World bank.

The UK has been actively involved in the drafting of this resolution and will strongly support, and closely monitor, its implementation.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Correspondence

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will indicate the whereabouts of the Home Office file on a constituent of the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Home Office reference: E105598); and when that constituent's case will be resolved. [46653]

Angela Eagle: The original papers relating to this file have been mislaid and despite a number of searches have not yet been found. Searches for the file are continuing.

In view of this, further information has been requested separately and, once received, the case will be considered as a priority.

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will answer the letters from the hon. Member for Ashford of 16 January and 21 March, concerning the site of the former Aldington prisons. [55088]

Angela Eagle: A reply to the hon. Member was dispatched on 7 May 2002.

Police

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether he plans to review legislation governing police powers and procedures. [56902]

Mr. Blunkett: I am initiating a review of the provisions of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) and the Codes of Practice issued under it. The review will be carried out jointly by the Home Office and the Cabinet Office. PACE and its Codes are vital parts of the framework providing the police with the powers they need to combat crime. I am determined, however, that this should be taken as an opportunity to reduce the administrative burdens on the police, not allow them to be tied in procedural knots which prevent them bringing criminals to justice. I want to ensure that after nearly 20 years PACE is still a useful tool supporting the police and, if changes are needed, I will have no hesitation in making them.

Refugees

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what change to international conventions and treaties on refugees it is his policy to promote; and if he will make a statement. [28041]

Angela Eagle: In June 2000, my right hon. Friend Jack Straw, the then Home Secretary, called for the international community to examine how better the 1951 Geneva Convention could be operated to deal more effectively with issues caused by large mixed flows of migrants. Later that year, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) launched a series of global consultations on the legal framework, operation and gaps in the 1951 convention. The consultations will conclude this year. I reaffirmed, on 12 December 2001, the United Kingdom Government's commitment to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol at a commemorative meeting to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its signing.

At European Union (EU) level the Treaty of Amsterdam requires that a community instrument must replace the Dublin Convention by May 2004. The commission has presented a draft proposal for a Council regulation establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the member state responsible for examination of asylum applications made within the EU. The Government's view of this draft regulation can be found in the Home Office Explanatory Memorandum dated 23 October, deposited in the Library.

Mobile Telephones

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for 1997–98 and for each subsequent financial year, the amount spent *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* abroad by (i) his Department, (ii) its agencies and (iii) its non-departmental public bodies on (1) providing mobile telephone equipment, including handsets and other associated equipment, (2) for telephone calls made using such equipment and (3) telephone calls made using privately owned mobile telephones but subsequently reclaimed by (x) ministers and (y) staff. [34316]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 7 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 126W.

National Insurance Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the cost in the next 12 months of the budget changes to employers' national insurance contributions to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* agencies of his Department, *(c)* local government carrying out functions within the responsibility of his Department, *(d)* the Police and *(e)* the Prison Service. [52076]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Smith), on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 544W.

It is estimated that the changes to employers' national insurance contributions announced in the Budget will increase pay costs on average by 0.7 per cent. next year.

Family Visitor Appeals

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish the report of the inter-departmental review of family visitor appeals. [54107]

Angela Eagle: Following the announcement of the abolition of the fee by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary (Mr. Blunkett) on 24 April 2002, the report is now being finalised.

Damilola Taylor

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the actions that he plans to take as a consequence of the Damilola Taylor case. [54120]

Mr. Keith Bradley: First of all I would like to express my heartfelt sympathy for the Taylor family who still have many questions left unanswered despite an intensive police investigation and a lengthy trial.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister (Mr. Blair) has said there should be no rush to judgment. This was always going to be a difficult case.

My right hon. and noble Friend the Attorney-General (Lord Goldsmith) has asked the Director of Public Prosecutions to look into the handling of the case, to consider whether there are implications for the conduct of future cases and to make recommendations. Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate will be involved in the review. In particular, the Director has been asked to

examine whether the time has come to introduce a system where, before trial, interviews of certain key witnesses are conducted by the prosecutor in a limited category of cases. The review will report by mid-summer.

We are already taking steps to help children and other vulnerable or intimidated witnesses give their best evidence.

In June 1998 the Government published "Speaking up for Justice", a report of an interdepartmental working group on the treatment of vulnerable or intimidated witnesses in the Criminal Justice system. It proposed a coherent and integrated scheme to provide appropriate support and assistance for vulnerable or intimidated witnesses. Key recommendations include a range of special measures available for use at the trial including:

screens around the witness box;

clearing the court, in certain circumstances, so that evidence can be given in private;

removal of wigs and gowns;

video recorded statements to replace the evidence-in-chief;

video recorded pre-trial cross-examination;

live television links;

assistance with communication if necessary, including the use of an intermediary.

The measures requiring legislation were included in Part II of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999.

Implementation of the special measures is imminent and they will be an improvement on the current arrangements. In January I announced a phased implementation programme starting on 24 July this year. In the Crown court all the special measures will be implemented for vulnerable witnesses, with the exception of intermediaries and pre-trial cross-examination which will be subject to pilot projects. The same measures, with the added exception of video-recorded statements, will be implemented at the same time for intimidated witnesses.

All other measures will be introduced in 2003–04 for all qualifying witnesses.

In magistrates courts implementation of special measures in July 2002 will be restricted to television links and video recorded evidence for child witnesses in cases involving sexual offences, violence (including threats) and cruelty. This will provide protection for children in cases involving assaults, muggings and domestic violence. It will also bring the adult magistrates courts into line with the current provision in the Youth court. Most of the measures will be extended to magistrates courts by 2003–04 (after their evaluation in the Crown court) to bring them in line with the Crown court.

Over the next year or two we will also be starting pilot projects on video-recorded pre-trial cross-examination and the use of intermediaries.

A whole range of guidance and training materials for the criminal justice agencies have been published including:

"Achieving Best Evidence", which is comprehensive guidance on preparing for and conducting interviews with vulnerable or intimidated witnesses (both adults and children). It will replace the "Memorandum of Good Practice in Video Recorded Interviews With Child Witnesses For Criminal Proceedings" from 24 May 2002;

A practice guide on early special measures meeting between the police and Crown Prosecution Service and meetings between the Crown Prosecution Service and vulnerable and intimidated witnesses. From July, prosecutors will meet vulnerable witnesses to discuss special measures that can be taken in connection with their giving evidence.

We are working closely with a full range of agencies in the criminal justice system and voluntary sector in implementing these measures. Arrangements are already in place to evaluate the special measures once they have had a chance to bed down. We will also be looking closely at the findings of the inquiries being conducted by the Crown Prosecution Service and the Metropolitan police to see if there are any lessons to be learned for the measures needed to enable children and other vulnerable or intimidated witnesses to give their best evidence.

On the wider front, Sir Robin Auld's Review of the Criminal Courts was published in October last year which resulted in a public consultation. The report contains 328 recommendations and makes wide proposals for reforming the courts and their proceedings. The Government is looking at the report and the results of the consultation carefully as well as other ideas for modernising the criminal justice system. We will publish a White Paper setting out our proposals for the way forward shortly.

Christopher Edwards

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will establish a public inquiry into the death of Christopher Edwards at Chelmsford Prison; [55407]

(2) if he will make a statement on the decision by the European Court of Human Rights in the case of the homicide of Christopher Edwards at Chelmsford Prison. [55409]

Beverley Hughes: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave about the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights to my hon. Friend for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) on 25 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 438W.

I see no grounds for a new inquiry. The Court recognised the changes that have taken place since

Mr. Edward's death and found no grounds to order further investigation.

Policing Costs (Commonwealth Games)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will announce his decision on the funding of policing costs which will be incurred by Greater Manchester police in connection with the Commonwealth Games. [55043]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 14 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 603W.

Prisoners (Suicide Risks)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the last review was undertaken of

procedures to be followed in prisons, for inmates considered as possible suicide risks; and if he will make a statement. [55199]

Beverley Hughes: A three-year strategy was launched in February 2001 following the Prison Service's review "Caring for the Suicidal in Custody", which recommended a radical move from awareness to prevention, including a commitment to reduce self-inflicted deaths in prison. The strategy embraces targeted, preventative measures within a holistic approach that seeks a supportive prison culture based on good prisoner/staff relationships; a physically safe environment with reduced opportunities for self-harm; and strong multi-disciplinary partnerships within prisons, with the courts, police and other criminal justice partners and with voluntary agencies particularly the Samaritans. Related work is tackling bullying and violence.

The strategy focuses additional resources where the risks are highest such as the busy local prisons. Included in the strategy is a "care of prisoners at risk" project which is reviewing procedures and processes for identifying and supporting prisoners at enhanced risk. New procedures are being developed and will be trailed later this year.

Life Sentence Tariffs

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the range is of life sentence tariffs; and what the average tariff for *(a)* women and *(b)* male prisoners convicted of murder is. [55278]

Beverley Hughes: Tariffs for murderers range in length from four years to whole life. Excluding whole life tariffs, the average length of tariffs set for women currently serving mandatory sentences for murder is 13 years one month, and for men 14 years two months.

Lost Property

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the laws governing the ownership of lost property; and if he will review them. [55788]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Civil law governs questions of ownership of property, and that it is a matter for my right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor. The criminal courts consider questions of ownership on the facts of each case, in the light of the applicable law. The Government have no plans to review this area of the law.

Released Prisoners

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assistance is provided for *(a)* prisoners being released after serving their sentence and *(b)* prisoners who are released as a result of their conviction being overturned. [55620]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* While there is no statutory obligation on the probation service to provide support on release to offenders who complete their sentences in prison, support can be provided to an offender seeking help, if local resources allow. The current position is the same in respect of prisoners released after a successful appeal against conviction. However, I am currently considering proposals for an advice service specifically for those who have successfully appealed against conviction and will be making an announcement shortly.

Private Prisons

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the privately run prisons in England and Wales. [56295]

Beverley Hughes: There are nine privately managed prisons in England and Wales: Altcourse prison, Ashfield young offender institution, Doncaster prison and young offender institution, Dovegate prison, Forest Bank prison and young offender institution, Lowdham Grange prison, Parc prison and young offender institution, Rye Hill prison and Wolds prison.

Conviction Statistics

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many women in prison in the United Kingdom are convicted of *(a)* murder and *(b)* manslaughter of male partners and former partners; [55277]

(2) how many men in United Kingdom prisons have been convicted of *(a)* murder and *(b)* manslaughter of female partners and former partners. [55280]

Beverley Hughes: No data are held centrally on whether people in prisons in England and Wales were related in any way to the victim or victims of their crime.

Provisional information shows that at the latest available date (31 March 2002) there were 3,533 males and 138 females in prisons in England and Wales that had been convicted of murder, and 583 males and 42 females that had been convicted of manslaughter.

Chapter Four of "Criminal Statistics England and Wales" contains further information on homicides and the relationship between the victim and the main suspect of the crime. Extracts of the 2000 edition are available at the website address: http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm53/5312/crimestats.pdf.

Information about prisoners in Scotland and Northern Ireland should be sought from the Scottish Executive (Helen Liddell) and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland respectively.

Animal Testing

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to reduce the number of safety tests where animal testing is required by law. [56018]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* The Home Office neither sponsors safety tests involving the use of animals, nor does it set any requirements for data produced by any such procedures. Examples of specific legislative requirements under which procedures on animals may be carried out include the Medicines Act 1968, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations, the Control of Pesticides Regulations, European Union Pesticides Directives, and the Food Safety Act. These requirements are matters for the relevant sponsoring Department.

Where testing using animals is required, we ensure that the 3Rs are rigorously applied (the use of alternatives which replace animal use entirely, reduce the numbers of animals used, or refine the procedures to minimise suffering). In deciding whether to grant a licence for any regulated procedure, the 1986 Act also requires that the likely benefits of the programme are weighed against the likely adverse effects on the animals concerned (the cost/benefit assessment). We must also be satisfied that the procedures are likely to achieve the stated objectives.

In addition, in August 2000, we announced an interdepartmental concordat on data sharing to enable Government Departments to reduce the duplication of tests on animals. The concordat commits United Kingdom regulatory authorities to help resolve legal and other obstacles and encourage data sharing between clients and thereby reduce animal tests. Progress in implementing the concordat is currently being reviewed.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the extent to which animal tests provide a reliable model on which to estimate likely reactions in humans. [56014]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 requires that regulated procedures can only be authorised and performed if there are no scientifically suitable alternatives that replace animal use, reduce the number animals needed, or refine the procedures used to minimise suffering. The likely benefits to humans, other animals or the environment must be weighed against the likely welfare costs to the animals involved.

Although it has been suggested that information derived from procedures on animals cannot be extended to humans, these views do not reflect the consensus in the wider scientific community. This recognises that while there are physiological or bio-chemical differences between species, there are greater similarities. Species differences are taken into account within the design of research projects and the results of testing a new drug, for example, on animals can be used to predict the effect on humans.

Animal procedures are, in any case, only one element of the tests carried out to assess the efficacy and safety of products. Before animals are used, they will also have been subjected to a variety of other screening processes including the use of computers, cell cultures and other non-animal tests. Clinical trials in humans also play an important part. It is not justified, therefore, to single out animal experiments for criticism when unexpected results are seen in full-scale clinical use. The simple fact is that biological science is not exact. However, until other suitable alternatives are developed, animal tests will continue to play an important part in minimising the adverse effects to humans caused by unexpected reactions during clinical trials and use.

Yarl's Wood

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department further to his statement of 25 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 442 on the Yarl's Wood fire, if he will list the different expert sources that informed his decision not to fit sprinklers. [49845]

Angela Eagle: The Minister responsible took advice not only internally but also from the local fire service and from our contractors.

Asylum Seekers

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what information he has collated on asylum seekers leaving the premises allocated to them under the National Asylum Support Service and moving to another area without housing support from NASS. [55610]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* Information is not currently available on asylum seekers who leave accommodation allocated to them by the National Asylum Support Service.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the contract to carry out forced removals of asylum seekers whose applications have been refused. [49966]

Angela Eagle: Enforcement action is employed in cases where the subject is unwilling to comply with removal of their own volition. This includes the use of detention.

Where necessary, private security companies are employed to provide escort services. This ensures the safety and well being of the individual who is being removed, as well as that of fellow passengers.

The same carrier is required, under the Immigration Act 1971, to remove failed asylum seekers for whom there is evidence of inbound carriage. Where there is no evidence of inbound carriage, removal will take place at public expense.

The Immigration Service also uses charter flights, for which the most competitive tender is sought.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Coroners (Maternity Leave)

Mr. Colman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the entitlement of coroners to maternity leave. [34894]

Beverley Hughes: I have been asked to reply.

As office holders, coroners have no entitlement to the statutory provisions for maternity leave, unless they are also employees. However, it is open to any coroner to negotiate contractual terms with the local authority who pays their salary, including in relation to maternity leave. The Department of Trade and Industry is currently undertaking a review of employment status in relation to statutory employment rights, and this is looking at certain groups excluded from employment rights legislation, including officeholders.

Rural Awareness

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when her Department will establish rural targets and monitoring as

part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, "Rural Proofing in 2001–02". [54410]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Minister of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 9 May 2002, *Official Report*, columns 274 and 275W.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when her Department will introduce measures to raise rural awareness through staff *(a)* training, *(b)* development and *(c)* secondments as part of overall rural proofing measures set out in the Countryside Agency's report Rural Proofing in 2001–02. [54420]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Minister of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 9 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 274W.

Consultation Document (Making Decisions)

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will list those organisations and individuals who have been sent copies of the consultation document "Making Decisions: Helping People who have Difficulty Deciding for Themselves". [55289]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The consultation document "Making Decisions: Helping People who have Difficulty Deciding for Themselves" has been sent to the organisations listed who have an interest in all aspects of mental incapacity. Many private individuals have also received copies on request and the document is available on our website.

List of Organisations

Mencap
Mind
The Alzheimer's Society
Action on Elder Abuse
Age Concern
Age Concern Cymru
Help the Aged
Values into Action
People First
British Medical Association
General Medical Council
Royal College of Nursing
The Law Society
The Bar Council
Society of Trust and Estate Practitioners
Solicitors for the Elderly
Association of Contentious Trust and Probate Specialists
Royal College of Psychiatrists
National Association of Citizen's Advice Bureaux
The Local Government Association
The Voluntary Euthanasia Society
The Association of Directors of Social Services
The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities
Citizen Advocacy Information and Training
Christian Action Research and Education (CARE)
The Pro-Life Alliance
Alert
Carers UK
The Abbeyfield Society
Action for Victims of Medical Accidents
Advice Services Alliance
Advocacy Partners
Age-Link
The Ann Craft Trust
Association for Residential Care
Association of Crossroads Care Attendant Schemes
British Association for Service to the Elderly
British Council of Organisations of Disabled People
British Geriatrics Society
British Pensioners and Trade Unions Action Association
British Society of Dentistry for the Handicapped
Careline
Centre for Policy on Ageing
Consumers' Association
Contact the Elderly
Continuing Care at Home Association
Counsel and Care
Mental After Care Association
Mental Health Media
Legal Action Group
Disabilities Alliance Educational and Research Association
Disability Awareness in Action
Disability Law Service
Research into Ageing
The National Autistic Society
Social Care Association
The Society for the Autistically Handicapped
United Kingdom Homecare Association
VOICE UK
National Association for Mental After-Care in Registered Care
National Benevolent Fund for the Aged
National Care Homes Association
National Council for Hospice and Special Palliative Care
National Development Team for People with Learning Disabilities
National Pensioners Convention Council
National Schizophrenia Fellowship
National Society for Mentally Handicapped People in Residential Care
Nuffield Foundation
Voluntary Organisations Disability Group
Down's Heart Group
Down's Syndrome Association
Christian Council on Ageing
Pensioners' Voice
Relatives Association
Research Institute for Consumer Affairs
Dementia Care Trust
Home from Hospital
Headway National Head Injuries Association Ltd.
Long-Term Medical Conditions Alliance
Forum of Chairmen of Independent Hospices

Hospice Information Service
Law Centres Federation
RESPOND
Retirement Trust
United Response
Manic Depression Fellowship
SANE
Sign—Campaigning for Services in Mental Health and Deafness
Patients Association
Stroke Association
Patient Concern
Better Government for Older People Network
The Joseph Rowntree Foundation
British Association of Brain Injury Case Managers
Ex-Services Mental Welfare Society
Rehab Without Walls
Relatives and Residents Association
RESCARE
SCOPE
Prince's Royal Trust for Carers
Terence Higgins Trust
London Lighthouse
Body Positive
Mary Ward Legal Advice Centre
Caring Matters
Tizard Centre
Medical Defence Union
Medico-Legal Society
Society for Advanced Legal Studies
Society of Clinical Psychiatrists
President of the Family Division
Royal College of GPs
Royal College of Surgeons
Association of Wardens of Sheltered Housing
Association of Home Care Agencies.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assistance she received from the Voluntary Euthanasia Society prior to publication of the consultation document, "Making Decisions: Helping People who have Difficulty Deciding for Themselves". [55290]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The consultation document, "Making Decisions: Helping People who have Difficulty Deciding for Themselves" seeks views on a series of leaflets which offer practical guidance and set out the current legal position with regard to decision-making on behalf of mentally incapacitated adults. As part of the compilation of this guidance, the Voluntary Euthanasia Society commented on factual information that was to be provided on advance directives.

Jury Service (Exemptions)

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many people summoned for jury trial last year were excused on the basis of the statutory exemption of their profession. [55458]

Mr. Wills: During the 2001 calendar year, 579,157 summonses were issued by the Jury Central Summoning Bureau. 175,644 (30.3 per cent. of those summoned) people were excused from jury service, of which 32,321 (5.6 per cent. of those summoned) were excused as of right.

We do not collect statistics of the individual reasons why people are excused by right. We have however taken a three week sample in eight courts to obtain an estimate of the number of excusals. The sample showed that 1.3 per cent. of those summoned were excused on the grounds of their profession. If this figure is accurate then nationally this would equate to under 7,500 of the 579,157 summoned.

Ministerial Papers

Brian Cotter: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department in what circumstances the 10-year rule applies with regard to the pulping of ministerial papers; how long the rule has been in existence; and who is responsible for determining which material is to be destroyed. [56027]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I have no knowledge of any 10-year rule concerning the pulping of ministerial papers. Ministers' official papers are public records and, in common with all public records, are reviewed for disposal or preservation in line with the requirements of the Public Records Act 1958 and the 'thirty-year rule'. The Public Record Office has recently published guidance entitled 'Management of Private Office Papers', which is available on the Public Record Office website at http://www.pro.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/standards/privateoffice.htm.

Crown Courts

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what options are being considered by the Courts Service for improving the quality of Crown court accommodation and for the provision of new Crown court buildings in Buckinghamshire. [55831]

Mr. Wills: The Court Service is constantly seeking to improve Crown Court accommodation to meet modern standards and changing requirements. Various options are being considered for replacing the current Crown Court accommodation in Buckinghamshire. We have concluded that the existing accommodation cannot be refurbished to meet modern standards. The options, including the possibility of entering into a Private Developer Scheme, need to be developed further and the appropriate funding secured.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans his Department has for the future of the Crown Court buildings in Aylesbury. [55832]

Mr. Wills: The Court Service is currently seeking to renew the leases under which it occupies the Crown Court accommodation in Aylesbury for terms expiring in March 2007. Options are being considered as to how the longer term accommodation needs in Buckinghamshire can best be met.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Terrorist Organisations

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which organisations have claimed responsibility for terrorist or criminal acts in Northern Ireland since Good Friday 1998; and for which acts. [53689]

Jane Kennedy: We have made inquiries with the police service of Northern Ireland concerning the issue raised and they have advised that it will take some time for them to investigate the matter. I will reply to the hon. Member in due course.

Paramilitary Beatings

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many paramilitary beatings were carried out between 31 March and 30 April by *(a)* Loyalists, *(b)* Republicans and *(c)* others. [55721]

Jane Kennedy: The information is as follows:

Casualties as a result of paramilitary-style attacks

	31 March	*1–30 April*
Attributed to Loyalists		
Assaults	1	7
Shootings	—	4
Attributed to Republicans		
Assaults	—	3
Shootings	—	4

Note:

2002 statistics are provisional and may be subject to minor adjustment at a later date.

Police Service of Northern Ireland

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what efforts are being made to encourage more women and members of ethnic communities, with particular reference to the Chinese community, to join the Police Service of Northern Ireland. [55720]

Jane Kennedy: Consensia have taken particular account of the need to attract more women and members of ethnic communities in both the design and publication of advertisements for the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Familiarisation days, consisting of presentations from various specialisms within the Police Service, have also been held for both females and the Chinese community in the course of marketing the PSNI as a worthwhile career.

Under section 48 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, the Policing Board are required to make an action plan for monitoring the number of women in the service, and for increasing their numbers if they are under-represented.

In addition, part-time working arrangements have been introduced to encourage more women to consider a career in the Police Service.

PRIME MINISTER

Ms C. Booth

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will make a statement on the role he has asked Ms C. Booth QC to play in connection with Government policy formulation; [55834]

(2) if he will list the official functions which he has asked Ms C. Booth QC to undertake since 1 January 2000; [55835]

(3) if he will make a statement on the public accountability of Ms C. Booth QC in respect of activities she undertakes which contribute to the work of Government; [55836]

(4) whether Lord Birt was present at the recent transport seminar chaired by Ms C. Booth QC; [55837]

(5) if he will list those who attended the recent seminar on transport at No. 10 Downing Street chaired by Ms C. Booth QC; [55838]

(6) if he will make it his policy that seminars held at No. 10 Downing Street will henceforth be chaired by elected Ministers; [55742]

(7) if he will make a statement on the outcome of the recent transport seminar at 10 Downing Street chaired by Ms C. Booth QC; [55743]

(8) if he will list the dates since 1 May 1997 on which Ms C. Booth QC has chaired seminars at 10 Downing Street listing in each case *(a)* the subject under discussion and *(b)* which Ministers attended. [55744]

The Prime Minister: Mrs. Blair does not participate in the work of the Government and therefore the issue of accountability does not arise. She has not chaired a policy-making seminar at No. 10.

The nature of the lectures Mrs. Blair has attended at No. 10 was made clear in the press notice issued by my office of 5 January 1999: "The Prime Minister and Mrs. Blair will launch a debate on Britain in the new millennium by hosting a series of lectures by leading figures to highlight some of the challenges we will face in the next century. The 1999 millennium lectures will cover education, work, leisure, wealth creation, science, arts and culture and what it means to be British in the 21st century". The lectures are not part of the policy-making process and there are no formal outcomes. Mrs. Blair has invited questions from guests when I have been unable to remain for the duration of the lecture, and hosted the drinks reception after the lecture. She plays no part in the discussions.

Mrs. Blair has attended the following lectures:

27 January 1999—Professor Jonathan Gershuny on work and leisure.

11 March 1999—Professor Susan Greenfield on science.

26 May 1999—David Potter on wealth creation and the knowledge economy.

15 July 1999—Sir Geoff Hampton on education.

13 October 1999—Derrick Anderson on art and culture.

8 December 1999—Professor Linda Colley on Britishness.

6 March 2000—Sue Page on health.

4 December 2000—Tessa Tennant on the environment.

17 December 2001—K. Y. Amoako on Africa.

11 February 2002—Jeremy Acklam on transport.

13 May 2002—Martin Narey on the criminal justice system.

It is not my practice to list individual names of guests invited to receptions and events at 10 Downing Street. People who attended were from Government and a wide range of outside organisations. Representatives from the media have been invited and have attended the series of lectures. Lord Birt did not attend the transport seminar.

For details of official and charity receptions hosted by Mrs. Blair and me, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 28 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1444–48W.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Social Exclusion (Transport)

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what progress the Social Exclusion Unit has made in its project on transport and social exclusion. [57434]

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: The Social Exclusion Unit will publish interim findings from its transport and social exclusion project, 'Making the Connections—Transport and Social Exclusion: Interim Findings' on its website (www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk) on Thursday. Copies will be placed in both Libraries of the House in due course.

Child Care

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 24 April 2002 to the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), *Official Report*, columns 315–16, on the National Child Care Strategy, if he will break down the total expenditure on the new tax credit system into figures showing the cost of each individual credit. [56469]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

The costs of the new tax credit system are shown in Table A.1 on page 154 of the Financial Statement and Budget Report April 2002. It is not possible to split these costs between the working tax credit and the child tax credit.

Ministerial Training

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much has been spent by his Department on training in leadership skills for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52729]

Mr. Leslie: Information concerning specific types of training is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, total training expenditure can be broken down as follows:

£000

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–00	2000–01
Core Cabinet Office	1,068	1,192	1,223	1,326
Central Office of Information	298	195	237	441[1]
Centre for Management and Policy Studies	70	116	118	137

[1] This includes training partly funded by the Civil Service Modernisation Fund.

Regional Government

Mr. Brady: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral statement of 9 May 2002, what proportion of the £730 million annual budget for a regional assembly in the north-west would be constituted of funds at present spent by *(a)* local government and *(b)* central Government Departments. [56489]

Mrs. Roche: All of the £730 million estimated annual budget for a regional assembly in the north-west will be made up of funds currently allocated by central Government Departments, their agencies and public bodies. Of this total my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions allocates £130 million to local authorities, for housing capital investment to improve their own housing stock, to support new build by housing associations and to renew private stock. Should an elected assembly be established in the north-west, it would be responsible for providing resources to local authorities in the north-west for these purposes.

Consultation Exercises

Lynne Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues about the conduct of consultation exercises; and if he will make a statement about conformity with Criterion 6 Cabinet Office Guidelines. [55707]

Mr. Leslie: No formal discussions have taken place with ministerial colleagues on the general conduct of consultation exercises. The conduct of such exercises is the responsibility of each Government Department and its agencies. Compliance with the Code of Practice on Written Consultation, including conformity with criterion 6 of the Code, also rests with each Department.

Parliamentary Branch

Mr. Beith: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) if he will list the responsibilities of the Cabinet Office Parliamentary Branch; [56271]

(2) if he will list the Cabinet Office Parliamentary Branch's *(a)* planned and *(b)* outturn budgets for electronic hardware and software for each financial year since 1997–98 to the last year for which budgets have been set; [56251]

(3) for each year since 1997 to the latest year for which the information is available, *(a)* how many staff were working in the Cabinet Office Parliamentary Branch and *(b)* what the total cost of the operation of the Cabinet Office Parliamentary Branch was. [56248]

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State: The Cabinet Office Parliamentary Branch supports all Ministers within the Cabinet Office, as well as the Lord Privy Seal, in all their dealings with Parliament.

A total of £9,613.85 including VAT was spent on a database for Cabinet Office parliamentary questions in December 2000. The branch is also supported by the Cabinet Office in its usual contract for IT equipment. There are no plans for any further expenditure on IT hardware.

Expenditure for the Parliamentary Branch is as follows:

Year	Expenditure (£000)	Post Numbers
1997–98	106	4
1998–99	142	5
1999–2000	147	5
2000–01	[1]162	5
2001–02	[1]171	6

[1] From 2000 the budget for Parliamentary Branch was incorporated into the Parliamentary and Ministerial Support Services therefore the specific information requested on the Parliamentary Branch could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Therefore the costs listed above are for Parliamentary Branch staffing only.

Internet Access

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many households, broken down by *(a)* class, *(b)* age and *(c)* region, have a PC; and what figures he has collated on other major European countries in terms of rates of household and work place access to the internet. [55873]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Dr. Ashok Kumar, dated 15 May 2002:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary questions regarding information on British household computer ownership broken down by (a) social class, (b) age and (c) region, and rates of household and workplace access to the Internet in major European countries. (55873)

The tables below show the most recently available percentages of households in Great Britain with a home computer broken down by social class of head of household (table 1), age of head of household (table 2) and region and country of Great Britain (table 3). The latest headline estimate is that 49 per cent. of households in the UK had a home computer in the quarter October to December 2001. A more detailed analysis has to be based on a full sample over a 12-month period.

Table 1: Percentage of households in Great Britain with a home computer by social class of head of household; April 2000 to March 2001

Social class of head of household	*Percentage*
Professional etc.	80
Managerial and technical	70
Skilled non-manual	55
Skilled manual	47
Partly skilled occupations	39
Unskilled occupations	24
All households	45

Source:
Family Expenditure Survey, 2000–01

Table 2: Percentage of households in Great Britain with a home computer by age of head of household; April 2000 to March 2001

Age of head of household (years)	*Percentage*
Under 30	44
30 and under 50	61
50 and under 65	48
65 and under 75	23
75 or over	7
All households	45

Source:
Family Expenditure Survey, 2000–01

Table 3: Percentage of households with a home computer by Government Office regions and countries of GB; April 2000 to March 2001

Government Office region and country of GB	*Percentage*
North East	37
North West	42
Yorkshire and the Humber	41
East Midlands	43
West Midlands	44
East	47
London	50
South East	50
South West	51
England	46
Wales	38
Scotland	37
Great Britain	45

Source:
Family Expenditure Survey, 2000–01

Table 4 below shows the percentage of households and enterprises with Internet access for major European countries for 2000, the latest available consistent estimates.

Table 4: Percentage of households and enterprises with Internet access for major European countries; 2000

Percentage

Country	*Households with Internet access*[1]	*Enterprises with Internet access*[2]
United Kingdom	32	63
Sweden	54	90
Germany	27	67
France	12	[3]—
Italy	15	66

[1] *Source:* UK—Family Expenditure Survey (April 2000 to March 2001); Sweden and Germany—Eurobarometer; France and Italy—National Statistics Institutes.

[2] *Source:* Eurostat co-ordinated e-Commerce surveys 2000. Enterprises with 10 or more employees. Richard Deiss (2002): "e-Commerce in Europe, Statistics in Focus".

[3] Not available

Like all estimates from sample surveys the figures presented are subject to sampling variability. This is greater for sub-groups of the population than for national estimates.

Sponsorship

Mr. Beith: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) if he will list the occasions when departments have sought his Department's guidance in accordance with paragraph 8 of his Department's guidance on the sponsorship of Government events in *(a)* 2000 and *(b)* 2001, stating in each case the (i) department and (ii) event concerned; [56249]

(2) whether records are held within his Department for the purpose of enforcing paragraph 3 of his Department's guidance on sponsorship of Government events. [56252]

Mr. Leslie: The 1999 guidelines, "Sponsorship of Government Events", were superseded in July 2000 by the current guidelines, "Guidance to Departments on Sponsorship of Government Activities".

Individual Departments are responsible for ensuring that the central guidance is appropriately applied when they are seeking sponsorship for their events and activities. My officials provide advice to departments on a case-by-case basis when requested to do so. Not all requests will be recorded as some will be no more than a passing request for advice in the margins of other discussions.

TREASURY

Higher Rate Tax

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is his policy to freeze the level of the threshold for the higher rate of income tax in 2003–04. [52951]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* No, the Government's plans, as set out in the Budget, assume the indexation of the basic rate limit (£29,900 in 2002–03).

National Insurance Records

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many records of individuals were stored in the national insurance record system as at 31 December 2001; how many of these records concerned individuals who are known to be deceased; and in how many of these records there has been no contributions activity since 1 January 2001. [54723]

Dawn Primarolo: On the basis of information held, the position is that 69,852,367 individual records were stored in the national insurance record system at 31 December 2001.

5,987,933 of those concerned individuals who are known to be deceased. Records are retained beyond death because of potential and ongoing claims by dependent spouse.

There has been no contributions activity on 5,784,733 of these records since 1 January 2001.

Small Firms

Mr. Bacon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the taxation of small firms that trade as *(a)* limited companies and *(b)* unincorporated businesses. [56853]

Dawn Primarolo: Small firms trading as limited companies are subject to corporation tax on their trading profits. The owners of small firms trading as unincorporated businesses are subject to income tax on the trading profits of the business.

Lone-parent Families

Martin Linton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many children are in lone-parent families in *(a)* London, broken down by borough and *(b)* in the Battersea constituency. [55803]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Martin Linton MP, dated 15 May 2002:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question on the number of children in lone-parent families in (a) London, broken down by Borough, and (b) in the Battersea constituency. (55803)

Estimates of the number of dependent children living in one-parent families in each London Borough are only available from the 1991 Census and are shown in the attached table.

A 1991 census estimate of the number of dependent children in one-parent families is not available for the Battersea constituency, although some population estimates (including those of children), by household composition, were published in: "New Parliamentary Constituency, Key Counts Census Monitor, 1991" (HMSO, 1996)

See also:

Estimated numbers of one parent families and their prevalence in Great Britain in 1991, John Haskey, Population Trends 78, HMSO (London, 1994) (gives some other estimates for one-parent families by London Borough, using 1991 Census data)

One-parent families and their dependent children in Great Britain, John Haskey, Population Trends, 91, The Stationery Office (London, 1998) (gives latest available national estimates)

Regional Trends No 36 (2001 edition), Sub-regions of England (Table 14.4 page 199) (gives projected—from earlier censuses up to and including the 1991 Census—percentage proportions of households which are lone parent households in 1999 by London Borough)

(Copies of Population Trends, Regional Trends and Census Monitors are held in the House of Commons Library.)

2. Counts from the 2001 Census will become available during 2003 and will be placed in the House of Commons Library.

Number of—(a) dependent children in lone parent families and (b) dependent children in all families; and (c) lone parent families with dependent children by London Boroughs, 1991

Thousands

London Borough	*Dependent children[1] in lone parent families (a)*	*Dependent children[1] in all families (b)*	*Percentage of dependent children[1] in lone parent families (a) divided by (b) times 100*	*Lone parent families with dependent children (c)*
City of London	.07	.20	33	.05
Camden	9.8	30.4	32	6.2
Hackney	15.1	44.8	34	9.2
Hammersmith and Fulham	9.2	25.7	36	5.6
Haringey	13.0	42.8	30	8.2
Islington	12.2	33.2	37	8.0
Kensington and Chelsea	6.4	22.4	29	4.3
Lambeth	19.6	49.5	40	12.6
Lewisham	16.4	48.2	34	10.3
Newham	13.7	55.7	25	8.3
Southwark	18.3	47.2	39	11.2
Tower Hamlets	10.6	44.2	24	6.4
Wandsworth	12.3	44.7	28	8.1
Westminster, City of	6.5	25.7	25	4.3

Number of—(a) dependent children in lone parent families and (b) dependent children in all families; and (c) lone parent families with dependent children by London Boroughs, 1991

Thousands

London Borough	*Dependent children[1] in lone parent families (a)*	*Dependent children[1] in all families (b)*	*Percentage of dependent children[1] in lone parent families (a) divided by (b) times 100*	*Lone parent families with dependent children (c)*
Inner London	163.3	514.8	32	102.6
Barking and Dagenham	6.1	31.7	19	3.9
Barnet	9.7	63.5	15	6.1
Bexley	6.2	47.4	13	4.0
Brent	13.0	53.7	24	8.2
Bromley	8.0	59.0	14	5.2
Croydon	12.4	67.9	18	8.1
Ealing	11.3	59.1	19	6.9
Enfield	9.1	57.0	16	5.8
Greenwich	13.1	48.2	27	7.5
Harrow	5.3	44.4	12	3.5
Havering	6.4	49.4	13	4.4
Hillingdon	7.1	49.2	14	4.6
Hounslow	8.4	46.0	18	5.0
Kingston upon Thames	3.2	26.2	12	2.3
Merton	5.4	34.0	16	3.6
Redbridge	6.1	49.3	12	4.1
Richmond upon Thames	3.9	30.1	13	2.7
Sutton	5.2	35.1	15	3.2
Waltham Forest	10.2	45.6	22	6.4
Outer London	150.1	896.8	17	95.5
Greater London	313.3	1,411.6	22	198.1

[1] A dependent child is either a person aged 0–15 in a household; or one aged 16–18, never married, in full-time education, and economically inactive.

Note:

Estimated numbers have been calculated at London Borough level then summed to obtain estimates for Inner London, Outer London and Greater London

Source:

1991 Census (based on 10 per cent. Census figures, grossed up)

HEALTH

Intermediate Care

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to his Department's guidance HSC/LAC (2001) 1 Intermediate Care, if he will publish a breakdown of the allocation of the £900 million spending announced in the NHS Plan for Intermediate Care. [52279]

Jacqui Smith: Health service circular 2001/001: local authority circular (2001)/1 Intermediate Care, issued on 19 January 2001, explains that, as part of the extra £900 million made available by 2003–04 for intermediate care and related services to promote independence, around £255 million is specifically for national health service investment in intermediate care. This is on top of the extra £150 million available recurrently from 2000–01, and a further £64 million is for community equipment services.

The circular also confirms that £100 million will be available in 2003–04 for a personal social services (PSS) performance fund, focusing initially on development of intermediate care. Beyond that, a substantial component of the £900 million relates to resources being provided to local government, mostly through the PSS standard spending assessment. Deployment of those resources remain a decision for councils to make in the light of local circumstances.

The circular is in the Library.

Young People

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what subjects and on which dates his Department has consulted organisations representing young people; and if he will list such organisations. [52500]

Jacqui Smith: Quality Protects is the Government's flagship programme to improve the management and delivery of children's social services. Participation of children and young people underpins the Quality Protects programme and is a priority area for special grant funding. In September 2000, the Department formed a Quality Protects young people's reference group to ensure the contemporary views of children and young people inform the development of the programme. The Department meets with this group three times a year. The last meeting took place on 6 April 2002. Topics discussed included the Department's review of foster care (Choice Protects) and draft advocacy standards.

In addition to the Quality Protects reference group, the Department meets regularly with A National Voice—a young people's organisation which exists to enable young people currently or previously in care to have an effective voice in consulting and developing policies that will bring about positive change for young people. A National Voice is unique in that it is managed and staffed by young people with experience of having been in care.

Further, as part of the paediatric cardiac review, the Department has consulted children, young people and parents about their experiences of heart treatment and care. Visits took place to 14 heart units across the country in September 2001 and November 2001.

Consultation on policy developments relating to children routinely takes place involving organisations representing young people, alongside other organisations.

GP Recruitment

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to make a statement on the review process of the qualification level for health authorities to receive the extra golden hello funding incentive for recruitment of general practitioners in their area. [53328]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* We are currently reviewing the list of under-doctored primary care trusts which qualify for an additional general practitioner golden hello payment. We expect to publish our proposals shortly and the revised list to take effect from 1 October 2002.

Solar Panels

Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what buildings owned by his Department have solar panels installed. [53493]

Ms Blears: None of the buildings owned and occupied by the Department for its own use has solar panels installed.

This reply does not include information about the national health service.

NHS Dentistry

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review dental services in England. [53708]

Ms Blears: During 2001 the Chief Dental Officer led a working group to look at options for change to modernise national health service dentistry building on the Government's strategy document "Modernising NHS dentistry: Implementing the NHS Plan" published in September 2000.

This group has completed its deliberations and the Government announced on 25 April that we intend to move forward plans to reform NHS dentistry developed by the "Options for Change" group. The ideas behind "Options for Change" need practical testing and demonstration sites will be set up across the country, with the assistance of the NHS Modernisation Agency. The sites will explore a variety of new methods for providing NHS dentistry, such as allowing primary care trusts to commission all NHS dental services and allowing dentists to choose to work in different ways at different times in their careers.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money has been spent on NHS dental treatment in each of the past five years in each of the health authorities of the north-west of England. [55110]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* Fee expenditure in the general dental service is shown in the table, both gross and also net of patient charges. Figures are given by health authority in the north-west region for the years 1996–97 to 2000–01.

Fee expenditure covers dentists' claims for treating patients and patient registrations payments. It excludes some other payments to dentists where a breakdown by health authority is not collected centrally, for example reimbursement of practice rates.

Expenditure by other national health service dental services is not collected centrally.

General dental service: gross and net fees by health authority in the north-west region, 1996–97 to 2000–01

£ million

	1996–97		*1997–98*		*1998–99*		*1999–2000*		*2000–01*	
Health authority	*Gross*	*Net*	*Gross*	*Net*	*Gross*	*Net*	*Gross*	*Net*	*Gross*	*Net*
Bury and Rochdale	10.8	7.7	10.8	7.7	11.6	8.2	11.8	8.4	12.1	8.5
East Lancashire	12.9	9.1	13.3	9.4	13.9	9.7	14.3	10.0	13.9	9.8
Liverpool	14.5	11.7	14.6	11.8	15.1	12.2	15.3	12.2	15.5	12.4
Manchester	14.8	11.6	14.8	11.6	15.6	12.2	16.3	12.7	17.0	13.1
Morecambe Bay	7.8	5.0	7.9	5.1	8.2	5.2	8.5	5.3	8.8	5.4
North Cheshire	7.9	5.5	8.1	5.6	8.4	5.8	8.8	6.1	9.2	6.3
North-west Lancashire	13.6	9.3	14.1	9.7	15.0	10.3	15.8	11.0	15.9	10.9
Salford and Trafford	14.5	10.4	14.4	10.3	15.1	10.8	15.4	11.1	16.0	11.4
Sefton	8.6	5.9	8.9	6.1	9.3	6.3	9.2	6.1	9.0	5.8
So[illegible]heshire	17.6	11.5	18.3	12.1	19.0	12.5	18.5	12.2	19.5	12.8
[illegible]h Lancashire	6.7	4.7	7.0	4.9	7.6	5.1	7.9	5.4	8.6	5.9
St. Helens and Knowsley	9.1	7.0	9.6	7.3	9.9	7.5	10.0	7.5	9.9	7.4
Stockport	8.8	5.6	8.9	5.6	9.4	5.9	9.6	6.0	10.2	6.4
West Pennine	14.3	10.4	14.6	10.5	15.1	10.7	15.9	11.4	16.2	11.4
Wigan and Bolton	16.7	11.6	17.4	12.1	18.4	12.7	18.5	12.9	18.8	13.1
Wirral	9.5	6.7	10.0	7.0	10.9	7.5	11.3	7.7	11.7	8.1
North-west region total	188.1	133.8	192.6	136.8	202.5	142.7	207.2	145.9	212.1	148.6

Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the percentage changes in the incidence of Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus in *(a)* the NHS and *(b)* the private sector in each of the past five years. [54015]

Yvette Cooper: The mandatory reporting of Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) bacteraemias by national health service acute trusts began in April 2001. The system does not cover private hospitals. The data are published quarterly in the CDR Weekly. The data collected so far can be used as baselines only and do not indicate trends.

Microbiology laboratories in England and Wales have been voluntarily reporting MRSA bacteraemias to the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) for many years. Provisional quarterly data are published in the CDR Weekly. Corrected annual data have been published recently in the 1999–2000 Review of Communicable Disease.

Some private microbiology laboratories report some infections to the PHLS, but these are a very small proportion of reports received.

Data from a voluntary system are shown as follows:

Laboratory reports of staphylococcus aureus isolated from blood and their susceptibility to methicillin: England and Wales, annual totals 1997–2001

	Total reports	*Susceptibility not reported*	*Sensitive to methicillin*	*Resistant to methicillin (MRSA)*	*Total susceptibility reported*	*Percentage (MRSA)*
1997[1]	9,328	1,719	5,312	2,297	7,609	30.2
1998[1]	9,374	1,746	5,020	2,608	7,628	34.2
1999[1]	10,813	1,848	5,624	3,341	8,965	37.2
2000[1]	11,635	1,667	5,792	4,176	9,968	42.0
2001[2]	12,631	1,238	6,626	4,767	11,392	41.8

[1] Corrected data (PHLS Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre 1999–2000 Review of Communicable Diseases)
[2] Provisional data (CDR Weekly)

Smallpox Vaccine

Mr. Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason it was decided to establish a national stockpile of smallpox vaccine; who took the decision; and on what date. [53930]

Mr. Hutton: The United Kingdom has held a substantial stockpile of smallpox vaccine for contingency purposes since smallpox vaccination ceased in the 1970s. The existing stock of vaccine is nearly 30-years-old. Although the vaccine has retained its potency, the technology underpinning these stocks is now also 30-years-old. In the aftermath of the events of September 11, we reviewed our ability to deal with terrorist attacks involving biological weapons. We have decided that the sensible course of action is to up-date our existing smallpox vaccine supplies with new supplies of cell based vaccines to reflect advances in vaccine development and safety standards.

Ministers took the decision to proceed to purchase smallpox vaccine on 11 March, and a contract was signed with PowderJect on 11 April.

Mr. Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many doses of smallpox vaccine have been procured; at what cost; and how was the number of doses determined. [54022]

Mr. Hutton: The Department is not putting information about the size of its smallpox vaccine stock or its deployment in the public domain as this is information that might be useful to terrorists. As smallpox has been eradicated since the 1970s, its re-introduction into the UK is only likely if there is a terrorist attack on the United Kingdom. This therefore raises issues of national security. The cost of the current procurement is £32 million.

Mr. Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the smallpox vaccine to be supplied by Powderject will be trialled. [53932]

Mr. Hutton: There are currently no plans to undertake clinical trials of the smallpox vaccine in the United Kingdom. Since smallpox does not currently exist in the population, trials of protective efficacy are not possible.

The European Union committee for proprietary medicinal products is currently considering the requirements for the development and manufacture of second generation smallpox vaccine, which will include guidance on the design of clinical trials.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which population of humans will be targeted in clinical testing of smallpox vaccines; and what tests will be used to determine immunity protections. [53902]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* There are currently no plans to undertake clinical trials of the smallpox vaccine in the United Kingdom. Since smallpox does not currently exist in the population, trials of protective efficacy are not possible.

The European Union committee for proprietary medicinal products is currently considering the requirements for the development and manufacture of second generation smallpox vaccine, which will include guidance on the design of clinical trials.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer of 25 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 460W, on the smallpox vaccine, who the members of the specially convened sub-group of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation are; what their institutional and commercial affiliations are; and how often the sub-group meets. [53897]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* The expert sub-group, under the chairmanship of the chair of the joint committee on vaccination and immunisation (JCVI), was convened by the Department. The sub-group was comprised of those core members of the JCVI with experience relevant to smallpox vaccine issues, other experts with related expertise in virology, communicable disease control, smallpox eradication, intensive clinical care, smallpox research, and vaccine production and licensing. The Ministry of Defence and the Department were also fully represented at the meeting. In the interests of national security, the discussions were confidential as they related to the nation's preparedness to deal with a bioterrorist attack, and the experts gave their individual views on this basis. The names of the participants are therefore not being made public.

A declaration of interests and their academic affiliations is required of all members of the JCVI and a full list of members and their interests is shortly to be placed in the Library.

The expert sub-group has met five times since 11 September on an ad hoc basis to advise on medical countermeasures and outbreak control issues for smallpox and other biological agents. The sub-group was convened on an ad hoc basis and there is no timetable for regular meetings.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he plans to issue information on smallpox vaccination quantities and deployment to *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* local hospitals and *(c)* the police. [53903]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* As smallpox has not occurred naturally in the world since the 1970s, its re-introduction into the UK is likely to be as the result of a direct terrorist attack on our country. This raises issues of national security as well as public health. For this reason the Department is not making public details about the quantities of vaccine stocks or vaccine deployment, as this might be information that could be useful to terrorists. The Department issued guidance to all health authorities and regional directors of public health on the procedures to be followed in the event of a deliberate release of smallpox and other biological agents, on 17 October. At the same time, guidance for medical and laboratory staff was issued by the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) concerning the precautions to be adopted in the event of an outbreak of smallpox. This advice is available on the PHLS website: http://www.phls.co.uk/advice/smallpox—guidelines.pdf

In the event of an outbreak, more detailed information for patients and the public will be made available.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how long it will take Powderject to develop the plant and methodology to produce smallpox vaccine. [53901]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* PowderJect's chosen UK partners, Bavarian Nordic, are already producing the smallpox vaccine to meet the UK contract.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what contact his officials have had with Impfstoffwerke Dessau Tornav in connection with the supply of smallpox vaccine. [54863]

Mr. Hutton: An official from the Department accompanied officials from the Ministry of Defence on a visit to Bavarian Nordic and Impfstoffwerke Dessau Tornav at the end of January on a fact-finding visit to discuss vaccine developments and manufacturing techniques and capacity for both types of smallpox vaccine being made by the company.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health where the smallpox vaccine to be acquired under the contract with PowderJect Pharmaceuticals is to be manufactured; and which company will be responsible for its manufacture. [54864]

Mr. Hutton: Under the contract recently awarded to PowderJect, the smallpox vaccine will be manufactured in Germany under the responsibility of PowderJect and its collaborative partner Bavarian Nordic.

MMR Vaccine

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of eligible children in Surrey were vaccinated with the MMR vaccine in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [55033]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* Information about children immunised against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) in East Surrey and West Surrey health authorities, by their second birthday and fifth birthday, is shown in the table.

Percentage of children immunised against MMR

		By their fifth birthday	
At 31 March	*By their second birthday*	*First dose*	*First and second dose*
East Surrey			
1999	83	—	—
2000	82	87	72
2001	80	86	62
West Surrey			
1999	87	—	—
2000	84	89	66
2001	81	89	58

Note:
Information about uptake of MMR immunisation at age five was collected for the first time in 1999–2000.
Source:
Department of Health, Statistics Division SD3

Vasectomy

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Under-Secretary of State for health, the hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Salisbury dated 7 January about her policy on vasectomy. [53958]

Yvette Cooper: A reply was sent on 10 May.

Salt

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what role the Department of Health plays in the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition's review of the evidence on salt; in what form the SACN will publish the results of their consideration of evidence on salt in

the diets of adults and children; and whether consultees will be given the opportunity to comment on the draft of SACN's report on salt prior to publication. [54245]

Yvette Cooper: The Department provides the joint Secretariat for Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) with the Food Standards Agency.

SACN's review of salt will be the first such report published by this new committee (which held its first meeting in June 2001). The final form of the report has not yet been decided. It will be placed on the SACN website to make it available to stakeholders as soon as it has been agreed by the committee. There are no plans to conduct consultation on the report before this is done.

Violence (Hospitals)

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* red cards and *(b)* yellow cards were issued in each hospital taking part in the trials to reduce violence; and what changes have taken place in the levels of violence in (i) those hospitals using the schemes and (ii) those who are not. [54462]

Mr. Hutton: No trials have been undertaken by the Department on the yellow and red card schemes. Barts and the London NHS Trust introduced a policy on the withdrawal of treatment from violent patients, also known as the yellow and red card scheme, in September 2000. The policy has had a deterrent effect, and although the trust has issued 12 yellow cards (formal written warnings), it has proved necessary to issue only the one red card (withdrawal of treatment).

Barts and the London NHS Trust have provided the following information on the number of reported violent incidents.

Quarter	*Total reported incidents*
July-September 2000	56
July-September 2001	102
April-9 May 2002	40

The trust attributes the increase in reported incidents to increased staff awareness of the importance of reporting all incidents, which has been achieved through publicising the trust's policy in staff bulletins, and on posters, and wage slips.

The Department issued national guidelines, based on the Barts scheme, to national health service trusts to help develop policies on withholding NHS treatment from violent and abusive patients on 2 November 2001. All trusts must consider the need to develop a local policy on withholding treatment from violent and abusive patients. Such policies and procedures should form part of local policies addressing safer working conditions and should have been in place by April 2002.

Information on violent patients who have had treatment withheld because of their violent behaviour is not collected centrally, but may be held at a local level by NHS employers.

NHS Staff (Assaults)

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many assaults there have been on NHS staff in Surrey in each of the past five years. [55034]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* This information is held by individual national health service trusts and, therefore, is not available centrally.

Health Teams

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* crisis resolution teams, *(b)* early intervention teams and *(c)* assertive outreach teams have been set up since the NHS Plan; and how many such teams have been set up, and where, in the northern and Yorkshire NHS region [54684]

Jacqui Smith: The numbers and distribution of these teams are monitored in the adult mental health services mapping exercise. Figures for England, and for the northern and Yorkshire region, are shown in the table.

Northern and Yorkshire

Local implementation team	*Assertive outreach teams*	*Crisis resolution teams*	*Early intervention teams*
Bradford	2	1	—
Calderdale	—	—	—
County Durham and Darlington	5	—	—
Craven	—	—	—
Dewsbury (north Kirklees)	1	—	1
East Yorkshire	1	—	—
Gateshead	1	—	—
Hambleton and Richmondshire	1	—	—
Harrogate	1	—	—
Hartlepool	1	1	—
Huddersfield (south Kirklees)	1	—	—
Hull	1	—	—
Leeds	2	1	—
Middlesbrough	1	—	—
Newcastle and north Tyneside	1	1	—
North Cumbria	1	—	—
Northumberland	1	2	—
Redcar and Cleveland	1	—	—
Scarborough	1	1	—
Selby	1	—	—
South Tyneside	1	—	—
Stockton	1	—	—
Sunderland	3	—	—
Wakefield	1	—	—
York	1	—	—
Northern and Yorkshire	31	7	1
Total for England	184	52	16

Treatment Abroad

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what rights an NHS patient has to demand treatment overseas as a result of the recent European Court ruling. [54896]

Mr. Hutton: Following the Decisions of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in the cases of Garaets-Smits/ Peerbooms (C157/99) and Vanbraekel (C368/98), my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State announced last autumn that he was removing the obstacles in domestic legal provision to allow health care commissioners in England to purchase care elsewhere in the European Economic Area (EEA) for English residents.

These arrangements for direct purchase of care operate alongside the provisions of European Community law in Regulation (EEC) 1408–71. This allows referral of patients from the country of residence to the state medical sector in any of the member states of the EEA specifically to receive treatment for a pre-existing medical condition,

using EC Form E112. The procedures for obtaining this document are set out in the Department of Health leaflet 'Health Advice for Travellers' available from Post Offices (copy available in the Library).

In considering the national legislation of the Netherlands at issue in the Garaets-Smits/Peerbooms case, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) said that their system which required prior approval from the patient's sickness insurance institution for treatment in other EEA states, was contrary to the freedom to provide services provisions of the treaty establishing the European Community. However, the ECJ said that, provided certain conditions were met, such a rule was justified in the interests of maintaining the financial stability of the Dutch national health system.

In the light of the ECJ rulings, the United Kingdom continues to operate a requirement that prior authorisation for treatment elsewhere in the EEA must be obtained. In the case of E112 referrals responsibility for this prior authorisation rests with the Department. Direct commissioning of health care services by national health service bodies by its very nature requires prior authorisation by the referring NHS organisation. Patients arranging treatment elsewhere in the EEA without obtaining the appropriate prior authorisation are personally liable for the costs involved.

Care Homes

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes have taken place to invoicing arrangements for care homes since the introduction of payments for nursing care. [54898]

Jacqui Smith: Invoicing arrangements are matters for care home providers to agree with individuals and local authorities, according to the terms of any contract. From 1 October 2001, no one should be charged for the care they need to receive from a registered nurse.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what requirement there is in the new National Care Home Standards for minimum corridor widths; and how this will apply to homes in older properties. [54897]

Jacqui Smith: The national minimum standards do not specify corridor widths.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether his Department has commissioned the website www.nhsonline.net to provide an internet directory of care homes. [55003]

Jacqui Smith: No.

Medical Students

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on incentive schemes that are *(a)* in place and *(b)* planned to encourage the study of medicine by students. [54581]

Mr. Hutton: The study of medicine continues to be a very popular option among university applicants offering as it does the opportunity of a challenging, worthwhile and highly esteemed career within a huge range of possible job opportunities. Universities and colleges admissions services data are showing that home applications have increased by almost 17 per cent. in the current application cycle.

In recognition of the longer length of medical training courses and the need to guarantee the increased future supply of medical staff, the Government have already introduced special financial support arrangements for undergraduate medical students. English domiciled pre-registration medical students who joined their courses from 1 September 1998 onwards, qualify for NHS bursaries in their fifth and subsequent years of study. NHS bursaries are also available to English-domiciled students undertaking the new four-year graduate-entry medical courses. These students qualify for NHS-funded support in years two to four of the course.

Medical and dental students receive the same package of support as other health professional students studying at degree level and are therefore eligible for a means tested NHS bursary of up to £2,640 for students studying in London (rate for academic year 2002–03), supplemented by a non-means tested reduced rate student loan. In addition all NHS-funded students have their liability for a tuition fee contribution (£1,100 for academic year 2002–03) met in full, and without means testing. Additional allowances are available for older students, individuals with disabilities, single parents and others with dependants, and also to take account of the longer academic year attended by health professional students.

During the first four years of the undergraduate medical course, students are supported under the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) student support regulations. On 3 October my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Estelle Morris) announced her Department's plans for a fundamental review of mainstream student support arrangements. The Department will be working with DfES to ensure the needs of medical students are taken fully into account in the design of any new arrangements.

Correspondence

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Ashford of 10 April 2001, 16 July 2001 and 17 December 2001, on Ehlers Dantos Syndrome. [55069]

Jacqui Smith: The Department had been unable to trace the hon. Member's letters. Duplicates were requested and a reply was sent on 10 May.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter of 28 January concerning Mr. Wong of Chelmsford from the hon. Member for West Chelmsford. [54678]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The Department has no record of receiving this correspondence. The hon. Member's office has been asked to supply a duplicate.

Social Services

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of *(a)* the cost to (i) local authority social services and (ii) North

Yorkshire county council social services, of the proposed bed blocking fines and new NI rates and *(b)* the increase in funding for social services for (i) and (ii). [55028]

Jacqui Smith: None. The new approach is about putting in place the right incentives to ensure that people are able to leave hospital as soon as treatment is completed and it is safe for them to do so. Councils that meet their responsibilities in reducing delayed discharges will not be disadvantaged. We will consult on the details of the scheme in due course.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will give priority in the provision of digital hearing aids to former service men whose hearing was damaged during the course of their service duties as defined by the War Pensions Agency. [54460]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* National health service hospitals should ensure that they give priority to war pensioners, both as in-patients and as out-patients, for examination or treatment relating to the condition for which the patient receives a pension or received a gratuity (unless there is an emergency case or another case demands clinical priority).

Rheumatologists

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of rheumatologists per head of population. [55274]

Mr. Hutton: Since 1999, the number of consultant rheumatologists has increased from 371 to 411, an increase of 11 per cent.

The requested information is shown in the table. The standard ratio used in the Department is per 100,000 of the population and these data have also been provided.

Hospital, medical staff within the rheumatology specialty—England at 30 September 2001

	Number	*Per head of population*	*Per 100,000 population*
All staff	900	0.0	1.8
of which			
Consultant	410	0.0	0.8

Source:
Department of Health 2001 medical and dental work force census.

Bed Blocking

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds are blocked in Surrey hospitals because patients cannot be discharged; and what the average cost is per bed per day of these blocked beds. [55035]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* Quarterly information on delayed discharges, by health authority, has been placed in the Library. The most recent figures available are for quarter 3 of 2001–02.

The cost to national health service trusts resulting from delayed transfers of care is management information and, as such, is not collected centrally.

Hospital Discharges (Elderly People)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what power local authorities will have over hospital discharges when the penalty system on local authorities for delays in discharging elderly people from hospitals is in place; [55591]

(2) what discussions he and his officials had with the Treasury prior to the Budget regarding the plan to penalise local authorities for delays in discharging elderly people from hospitals; [55589]

(3) what will constitute a delay in discharge of an elderly person from hospital under the proposed penalties on local authorities for delayed discharge; [55592]

(4) what estimate he has made of the cost to local authorities of the proposed fines for delays in discharging elderly people from hospitals, broken down by category of authority. [55590]

Jacqui Smith: Before the Budget, Departments had a wide range of discussions with Treasury. Councils will need to use the resources announced in the Budget to ensure that people are able to leave hospital once their treatment is completed. If they are successful in that they will have the freedom to use these resources to invest in social care services.

We will consult on the details of the scheme in due course.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to set targets for the reduction in delayed discharges of elderly patients from hospitals for each local authority. [55593]

Jacqui Smith: The current target is for a continued reduction in the number of delayed discharges from hospitals so that there will be 20 per cent. fewer blocked beds in March 2003 compared to March 2002.

Mental Health

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on the funding by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight health authority of proposed crisis and home treatment services for the mentally ill in 2002–03; [55636]

(2) what guidance he has given to the Hampshire and Isle of Wight health authority in respect of *(a)* ring-fencing NHS funding for the modernisation of mental health services and *(b)* the allocation of NHS funding for mental health between the provision of (i) medium secure units and (ii) crisis and home treatment services. [55637]

Jacqui Smith: At this time discussions on the service and financial framework for Hampshire and Isle of Wight health authority are still on-going. I can assure the hon. Member that the importance of providing appropriate mental health services for the local people who need them is fully recognised by both the Department and the local health authority.

It is for local health authorities in partnership with primary care trusts to determine how resources are used to provide the greatest benefits for patients. For that reason no guidance has been issued on the funding of specific mental health services. From 2002–03 it will be

possible to identify precisely how the earmarked allocations, including those for mental health services, are being spent.

East Cheshire Hospice

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will provide extra funds to Cheshire Social Services and the Eastern Cheshire Primary Care Trust to enable them to increase support for the East Cheshire Hospice. [55417]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* Eastern Cheshire Primary Care Trust (PCT) is working closely with East Cheshire Hospice and is investing significantly in the services it provides. This follows a comprehensive review of cancer services, including palliative care, by the former South Cheshire health authority, which developed a four-year strategy in consultation with all relevant partners, including the hospice itself. Funding has risen in real terms over the last year. We have pledged, in the NHS Cancer Plan, that the national health service contribution to the costs of specialist palliative care will increase.

Mid Essex Hospital Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients in the Mid Essex Hospital Trust area have been waiting *(a)* over 12 months and *(b)* over 15 months for treatment. [55738]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* At 31 March 2002 Mid Essex Hospital Services national health service trust had 320 patients waiting more than 12 months for elective admission. The trust had no patients waiting more than 15 months.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* general practitioner and *(b)* practice nurse vacancies there are within the Mid Essex Hospital Trust area. [55736]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* The Department first carried out a survey into general practitioner (GP) recruitment, retention and vacancies in 2000. The information is collated on a health authority basis.

In the 2001 survey North Essex health authority reported that it had 27 GP vacancies outstanding at some time in the 12-month period 1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001.

Results from the 2002 survey should be available later in the year.

Information on practice nurse vacancies is not collected centrally.

Broomfield Hospital, Chelmsford

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations have been cancelled at Broomfield Hospital, Chelmsford in the last available month; and what percentage of the cancelled operations were carried out within four weeks. [55734]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* Data are collected quarterly. In Quarter 3 2001–02 there were 88 operations cancelled at Mid Essex Hospital Services national health service trust at the last minute (operations cancelled by the hospital for non-clinical reasons on, or after the day the patient was due to be admitted). Fifteen patients were not readmitted within one month.

From 1 April 2002 if a patient has their operation cancelled by the hospital on the day of surgery for non-clinical reasons the hospital will have to offer another binding date within a maximum of the next 28 days or fund the patient's treatment at the time and hospital of the patient's choice.

Ashford and St. Peter's Hospitals

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the *(a)* income and *(b)* expenditure of the Ashford and St. Peter's hospitals was during the financial year ended on 31 March; [53912]

(2) how much money has been borrowed by the Ashford and St. Peter's hospitals NHS trust to cover overspending in each of the past three years; and what arrangements are being made to repay this money. [53913]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 2 May 2002]:* Ashford and St. Peter's hospitals national health service trust's final audited accounts for the 2001–02 financial year are still to be produced.

The trust received planned support at the beginning of the 2001–02 financial year from West Surrey health authority (HA) in the form of non-recurrent revenue support. This was given as part of an agreed performance improvement plan. No in-year brokerage has been received by the trust in the last three years. The trust has also received cash support from West Surrey HA to support its historical debt but this does not effect its break even position.

The trust is aware of its statutory duties to achieve a financial balance over a three year period and has made plans to ensure that this is achieved by the combination of land sales and the introduction of a savings action plan with North Surrey primary care trust.

Prescription Charges

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps are being taken to ensure students are informed about their eligibility to pay medical prescription charges when they arrive at university. [55329]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* Posters are made available for display at general practitioner surgeries, pharmacies and hospital out-patients departments, drawing attention to the availability of free national health service prescriptions. Leaflet HC11—'Help with health costs'—provides more details and is available from main post offices, benefit offices and NHS hospitals. Some universities make this leaflet and other relevant literature, for example claim form HC1—'Help with health costs', available to students through student unions and campus medical sites.

In addition, the notes on the reverse of the prescription form advise patients to obtain leaflet HC11 if they need information about exemption from prescription charges or refunds.

Health and Social Care Act

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to implement Part IV of the Health and Social Care Act 2001; and if he will make a statement. [54579]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* Sections 50–55 and 59 of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 have already been commenced. Sections 49 and 56–58 have been partially commenced. It is intended that they will be fully implemented by April 2003.

Chelmsford Primary Care Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the prescribing budget is for the Chelmsford PCT in 2002–03. [55735]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* I am advised that Chelmsford Primary Care Trust has allocated from their 2002–03 unified budget £13.452 million towards the anticipated cost of prescribing for their general practitioners.

Pesticide Residues

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to publish the results of the monitoring programme for pesticide residues in fruit supplied to the National School Fruit Scheme. [57435]

Yvette Cooper: The first set of results has been published today on the website of the Pesticide Residues Committee and a copy has been placed in the Library. I have been advised by the Food Standards Agency and the Pesticides Safety Directorate that none of the residues found would give rise to concern for consumer health generally, and specifically for children's health. Further results will be published at regular intervals.

Military Hospitals

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many military hospitals have been used in the past two years to supplement the national health service. [53935]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* I have been asked to reply

Within the last two years, the Royal Hospital Haslar has treated NHS patients as part of arrangements with the NHS which enable Defence Medical Services personnel access to a wide mix of cases necessary to develop and maintain their clinical skills for their operational role. A small number of NHS patients have been treated at the Duchess of Kent's Psychiatric Hospital, Catterick.

Asbestos-related Illness

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the levels of compensation received by *(a)* mesothelioma sufferers and *(b)* those suffering from the effects of asbestos. [42632]

Mr. Wills: I have been asked to reply.

The levels of compensation awarded by the courts in relation to mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases are a matter for the discretion of the court in the individual circumstances of the case. The Judicial Studies Board produces guidelines for the assessment of personal injury damages, based on existing case law. The most recent edition of the guidelines, published in 2000, indicates that at that time awards in respect of mesothelioma or asbestosis causing severe impairment both of function and of quality of life usually fell within the range of £40,000 to £50,000.

European Hospitals

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those European hospitals which have received official visits from his Department since 1 January 2001. [42313]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 11 March 2002]:* The list shows hospitals that received visits from a Minister or officials since January 2001 according to data held by the Department.

Belgium

Genk Clinic

Denmark

Frederiksberg Hospital, Copenhagen

Finland

University Hospital, Helsinki

France

La Louviere Polyclinic, Lille

Centre Hospitalier Privé de la Loire, St. Etienne

Germany

Gilead Hospital, Bielefeld

Das Klinikum, Osnabruck

Henriettenstiftung, Hanover

Lutherhaus, Essen

Klinik für Minimal Invasive Chirurgie, Berlin

Zentralkrankenhaus Bad Berka, near Erfurt

University Hospital in Munster

Norway

National Hospital, Oslo

Spain

Alcorcon Foundation Hospital, Madrid

Alzira Hospital, near Valencia

Hospital de Madrid

Sweden

Medocular Cataract Clinic in Stockholm

St. Gorans Hospital, Stockholm

Hospital in Simrishamn, Lund

Helsingborg Hospital Ltd., Lund

St. Goran's Hospital, Malmo.

Human Cloning

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many human cloning research licence applications have been received to date by the HFEA; in whose name the applications have been made; who the grants organisations are financing the proposed research; and who the peer reviewers assessing the applications will be. [50901]

Yvette Cooper: No applications for research involving cell nuclear replacement (therapeutic cloning) have yet been received by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority.

Organ Donation

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of the organ donation campaigns targeted at the Black and Asian communities. [52451]

Jacqui Smith: The South Asian campaign was launched in 1999 and an evaluation was carried out by the Department in August 2000. The evaluation indicated that awareness levels were rising within the South Asian community.

The Black campaign was launched in March 2002 and the Department will monitor the progress of this campaign carefully.

Ministerial Training

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been spent by his Department on voice coaching for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52702]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* Ministers have not received voice coaching provided by an external supplier and paid for by the Department in any of the last five years. Any voice coaching bought in for individual officials would represent individual minimal expenditure. A trawl for accurate data could be carried out only at disproportionate cost.

Colorectal Cancer

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representatives concerned with treatment of colorectal cancer sit on NICE appraisal panels assessing drugs used to treat colorectal cancer. [53297]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 29 April 2002]:* Membership of the National Institute of Clinical Excellence appraisal panels are decided by the Institute. However, I understand that organisations representing patients and professionals had the opportunity to submit evidence, to nominate experts and patients to speak directly to the appraisal committee, and to participate in consultation on the committee's provisional determination. I understand that nominees of the Royal College of Surgeons (a reader in medical oncology) and the Royal College of Nursing (a colorectal cancer nurse specialist) attended the first meeting of the appraisal committee.

Obesity

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures the Government have taken to encourage people to walk more and use cars less for health reasons. [54792]

Yvette Cooper: We support measures to encourage businesses, schools and other organisations to develop and implement travel plans that include measures designed to reduce car use and increase walking to and from particular sites.

The national service framework (NSF) for coronary heart disease (CHD) contains a milestone that every local health community, as an employer, should develop "green" transport plans. To assist national health service bodies in developing a travel plan, the Department has funded four regional seminars for NHS staff, and the production of a travel plan newsletter. Local strategies on increasing physical activity, including walking, are also being developed as part of the NSF CHD.

In January 2002 the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), in association with this Department, published "Walk in to Work Out", a pack which provides practical assistance on how to give people more choice about walking and cycling to work. A copy of this pack has been placed in the Library.

DTLR intends to publish a national walking strategy later this year which will cover the health benefits of walking. These benefits will also be featured in a series of regional seminars this summer for local authority walking officers, businesses and other interest groups.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospitals have specialist units for treating obesity; and what plans he has to increase their numbers. [54794]

Yvette Cooper: The national health service's future health improvement plans are expected to take account of guidance on effective strategies to address overweight and obesity in supporting the implementation of the national service framework (NSF) for coronary heart disease (CHD) and ultimately diabetes. This is to be agreed at a local level and should include the assessment for the need for specialist obesity units, which will be addressed locally.

As part of the NSF CHD milestones, all NHS bodies need to contribute to the delivery of local programmes of effective policies on overweight and obesity. The Department has commissioned the health development agency to produce briefing that will help primary care trusts to design effective policies and strategies on healthy eating, physical activity, overweight and obesity, and tobacco control.

Oral Cancer

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what correlation he has calculated exists between the incidence of undetected oral cancer and the number of NHS dentists in a given locality ; and if he will make a statement. [55444]

Yvette Cooper: It is not possible to measure the incidence of undetected oral cancer. However, we have investigated the number of dentists and the rate of admissions for oral cancer and have found no relationship between oral cancer and the number of dentists or dental availability.

This summer, the United Kingdom national screening committee (NSC) will also be considering outcomes from workshops to identify what part public awareness, professional development and research priorities can play in the issue of oral cancer. In forming any proposals they make to Ministers, the NSC draws on the latest research evidence and assesses new screening programmes against a set of recognised criteria to ensure that they are as beneficial as possible.

Children's Commissioner

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer of 22 April 2002, *Official Report*,

column 108W, if he will make a statement on the differences between the role of a children's commissioner and the role of a children's rights director. [55302]

Jacqui Smith: There is no one standard model for a children's commissioner. The models that have been adopted in other countries vary considerably, and arise from the specific needs and individual circumstances of each country. While only Wales, among the devolved Administrations, has established the role of a children's commissioner, the possible forms of such a role within Northern Ireland and Scotland, now being considered in those countries, show both similarities and differences to the model introduced in Wales.

The role of the children's rights director, located within the national care standards commission, was established by the Care Standards Act 2000. The primary role is to safeguard those children who are in receipt of a range of regulated services. These services include those provided by children's homes; independent fostering agencies; local authority fostering services; the welfare aspects of boarding schools; and, in due course, residential family centres, voluntary adoption agencies, and local authority adoption services. Regulations specifying the children's rights director's functions are expected to commence on 24 May 2002.

Shellfish Hygiene

Richard Younger-Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what notification he has received as to the proposed dates for the visit by the European Commission Health and Consumer Directorate regarding shellfish hygiene; and which Government offices it will be visiting. [55018]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The date for this visit has yet to be finalised, however discussions with the European Commission indicate that it is likely to take place in the middle of July. Once the dates have been agreed, the Food Standards Agency will produce an agenda, taking account of the comments of the Commission on where they wish to visit and what they wish to see.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if the health service across England will be ready to implement the prescription-plus-monitoring scheme for beta interferons from its start date of 6 May; [55317]

(2) how many people he estimates will receive beta interferon under the prescription-plus monitoring scheme; [55307]

(3) what progress has been made on the prescription-plus monitoring scheme for disease-modifying drugs for MS; [55308]

(4) how long he estimates it will take for all people who may benefit from beta interferons to have been assessed by a neurologist for the prescription-plus-monitoring scheme; [55309]

(5) when he estimates that all people who may benefit from beta interferons will be in receipt of them; [55310]

(6) if he will list the centres that will be authorised to prescribe beta interferons through his Department's prescription-plus-monitoring scheme; [55311]

(7) what predictions each centre authorised to prescribe disease-modifying drugs for MS has made on how long it will be before all people who may benefit from beta interferons and glatirimer acetate have been assessed by a neurologist for the prescription-plus-monitoring scheme; [55313]

(8) which authorised centres have begun prescribing beta interferon and glatirimer acetate under the prescription-plus-monitoring scheme for disease-modifying drugs for MS. [55314]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* It has been estimated that up to 9,000 multiple sclerosis patients in England and Wales may be eligible to receive treatment under the risk-sharing scheme, which started on 6 May 2002. Some centres have now started prescribing under the scheme, though the guidance in HSC 2002/004 recognises that appropriate NHS infrastructure may not yet be in place in some localities. It may take 18 months or longer before all potentially eligible patients are assessed under the scheme. The list of locally agreed prescribing centres is not yet finalised. The scheme co-ordinator, whose appointment will shortly be announced, will collect information on progress and activity under the scheme.

Sheppey Community Hospital

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to announce the appointment of new GPs to the GP surgery attached to the Sheppey Community Hospital. [55465]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* The new Sheppey Community Hospital is still under construction and is not expected to be completed before September 2002. The appointment of general practitioners to the practice on the hospital site will be a matter for Swale Primary Care Trust.

Health Action Zones

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what information he has collated on changes in health levels of residents within health action zones; and if he will make a statement; [55625]

(2) if he will list, for each year of their existence, and projected for 2002–03, the expenditure of each health action zone. [55612]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* The available data relating to specific causes of mortality collected for the years 1996–98 and 1997–99 has been placed in the Library.

For details on expenditure for health action zones, may I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 22 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1079W, which provided details of the expenditure of each health action zone from 1999–2000 to 2001–02, and projected expenditure for 2002–03. Expenditure for each health action zone for 1998–99 has been placed in the Library.

Speech Therapists

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer of 18 April, *Official Report*, column 1184W, if he will provide equivalent figures for unfilled vacancies for speech therapists. [55915]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* Vacancy information was not collected prior to 1999.

Vacancy information by trust for 1999 and 2000 has been placed in the Library.

I refer the hon. Member to the response I gave him on 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 991W, for vacancy information as at March 2001.

Clinical Negligence

Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the *(a)* legal costs of defending clinical negligence claims against the NHS and *(b)* estimated costs of administration and management time incurred in defending clinical negligence claims against the NHS, in each of the last five years. [56008]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* Information on costs for legal defence and management/administration for clinical negligence claims against the national health service are not identified separately in the National Audit Office summarised accounts for the NHS (England).

Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total cost of clinical negligence claims paid by the NHS was for 2001–02. [56009]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* The total cost of clinical negligence claims paid by the national health service for 2001–02 is not yet available.

Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish a White Paper on clinical negligence. [56007]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* In July 2001 the chief medical officer was asked to set up an advisory group to look at the reform of clinical negligence in the national health service. It has not yet been possible to publish proposals for reform, because of the complexity of the issues raised by potential reforms, the need to consult widely (including through the Lord Chancellor's Department on how compensation is paid) and also to consider how potential proposals sit alongside a concurrent review of the NHS complaints procedure. Nevertheless, the chief medical officer has now held the last of his advisory group meetings and will shortly publish the findings along with recommendations for reform.

Suicide

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to reduce the number of suicides by young men. [56424]

Jacqui Smith: In December 1997 the Department launched the campaign against living miserably (CALM) telephone helpline in Manchester. The helpline, aimed at young men, offers advice, guidance, information and counselling at the onset of depression. CALM has been extended to Merseyside and Cumbria and Bedfordshire and we are looking to make it available in other areas in partnership with local agencies. Ultimately, we hope that the helpline will help to bring down the suicide rate in young men.

In addition, the Department is in the process of developing, under the direction of the national director for mental health Professor Louis Appleby, a coherent national suicide prevention strategy to ensure that we are doing all we can to prevent suicides. This strategy was launched for public consultation on 26 April 2002. Copies of the strategy are available in the Library.

Expenditure (NHS Bodies)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if, on the basis of the information currently available to his Department in respect of the 2001–02 outturn figures, he will list the NHS trusts and other bodies which used brokerage to remain within their revenue resource limits, capital resource limits and cash limits; and the amount of that brokerage. [56281]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* The information for 2001–02 is not yet finalised.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how much of the allocation for 2002–03 for each primary care trust is earmarked for *(a)* mental health, *(b)* coronary heart disease, *(c)* cancer, *(d)* information management and technology, *(e)* primary care and *(f)* capacity; [56284]

(2) how much of the allocation for 2002–03 for each primary care trust is *(a)* recurrent and *(b)* non-recurrent. [56287]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* Health authorities share their total recurrent allocation between their constituent primary care trusts (PCTs) in line with guidance issued by the Department.

In 2002–03 health authorities were instructed to allocate earmarked funding to PCTs on the same basis allocations were made to health authorities.

Figures on primary care trust shares of health authority total recurrent allocations and earmarked funding within this have been placed in the Library. Information on the allocation of the non-recurrent funding to primary care trusts is not collected centrally.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much, in terms of *(a)* value and *(b)* percentage, of the budget for 2002–03 of each primary care trust is expected to be spent on *(a)* specialist commissioning, *(b)* other consortia-based commissioning, *(c)* primary care prescribing and *(d)* meeting the deficits of local provider trusts. [56285]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* This information is not available centrally. However, it is expected that this type of information would form part of the overall commissioning plans of primary care trusts. Strategic health authorities have a responsibility in performance managing the delivery of these plans.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if, on the basis of the information currently available to his Department in respect of the 2001–02 outturn figures, he will list those NHS trusts and other bodies whose recurrent expenditure exceeded their recurrent income; and if he will state for each such body *(a)* the amounts

involved, *(b)* how the imbalance was funded in 2001–02 and *(c)* how the imbalance will affect the finances of the body in 2002–03. [56282]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* The information requested is not collected centrally.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if, on the basis of the information available to his Department in respect of the 2002–03 budgeted or projected figures, he will state which NHS trust, strategic health authority and primary care trust expects *(a)* to exceed its recurrent expenditure, *(b)* to exceed its revenue resource limit, *(c)* to exceed its capital resource limit and *(d)* to exceed its cash limit; and what amounts are involved in each case. [56283]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* Information on national health service trusts, strategic health authorities and primary care trusts expect in their recurrent expenditure to exceed their recurrent expenditure is not collected centrally.

We expect all strategic health authorities and primary care trusts to operate within their agreed resource and cash limits.

All NHS trusts are expected to operate within their agreed capital resource and external financing limits.

Allocations

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total increase in allocations for 2002–03 is for the NHS; and how much of that, in *(a)* value and *(b)* percentage terms, is accounted for by (i) generic cost pressures (ii) increases in primary care prescribing costs, (iii) increases in medical negligence costs and (iv) increases in earmarked funding. [56286]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* Health authority allocations for 2002–03 increased by £3,704 million, or 9.9 per cent.

This included funding to meet increases in pay, prices and other pressures faced by all health authorities, but these are not separately identified within allocations. It also included £775 million, or 2.1 per cent. earmarked funding.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 16 May 2002

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the budget is for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for the financial year 2002–03. [57782]

Mr. Browne: The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has a budget of £1.2 million for the year 2002–03. The Northern Ireland Office will continue to consider seriously, against other pressures on its resources, bids for increased funding, provided they are supported by an appropriate business case.

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will publish the Government's response to the recommendations made by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission under section 69(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. [57780]

Mr. Browne: I have today laid copies of the Government's draft response in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament. The Government are publishing the document for consultation to allow others to have their say. Comments are being sought by 16 August 2002.

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what level of remuneration is paid to members of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; and what time commitment is required of them. [57781]

Mr. Browne: Part-time members of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission are expected to spend four to five days each month on Commission duties. From the Commission's establishment in 1999, Commissioners have received £8,000 per year for this work. With effect from 1 April 2002, this rate will increase to £10,000 per year.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Register of Interests

Norman Baker: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, for what reason the register of interests relating to the Church Commissioners is not available for public inspection; and if he will make a statement [55477]

Mr. Bell: The Church Commissioners' Board of Governors introduced a register of interests in June 2000 in line with good practice. It is available for inspection on request by MPs, Government officials, members of the Church of England's General Synod and Commissioners and other committee members, reflecting the Commissioners' accountability to the Church and Parliament. Its operation and availability will stay under review.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

UNESCO

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether her Department takes the lead in policies connected with UK membership of UNESCO; and if she will make a statement concerning co-operation with other Government Departments in this matter. [56336]

Clare Short: My Department is the sponsoring Department for UK relations with UNESCO. It pays the UK's share of UNESCO's assessed budget. The Government's top priority for UNESCO is the achievement of the millennium development goals for education. We co-ordinate closely and regularly with other UK Government Departments and with the parallel Departments in the devolved Administrations with an interest in UNESCO's work.

Temporary Staff

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the cost to her Department was of employing staff in *(a)* London and *(b)* the south east from employment agencies in each year since 1997. [56512]

Clare Short: The information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Global Environmental Facility

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much assistance the Government have given to the Global Environmental Facility in each of the last five years. [56658]

Clare Short: The UK has provided the following financial assistance to the Global Environmental Facility:

	£ million
1997–98	14.2
1998–99	8.6
1999–2000	10.92
2000–01	14.58
2001–02	18.42

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which countries have received assistance from the Global Environmental Facility in each of the last five years; and how much they received. [56659]

Clare Short: The figures are as follows:

Global Environmental Facility grants to countries—financial year 1997 to financial year 2002 (partial)

US$ million

Country	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Albania	0.096	—	—	0.014	—
Algeria	0.231	0.195	0.014	0.750	0.100
Antigua and Barbuda	0.139	0.162	—	0.114	—
Argentina	15.938	22.315	0.736	—	—
Armenia	0.175	—	—	—	0.243
Azerbaijan	—	7.192	—	0.098	0.351
Bahamas	0.150	0.199	—	—	0.290
Bahrain	—	0.335	—	—	—
Bangladesh	—	12.200	5.175	5.799	—
Barbados	0.144	0.189	—	—	—
Belarus	—	0.081	—	—	0.496
Belize	0.185	0.169	6.860	—	0.832
Benin	—	6.492	1.235	6.295	0.302
Bhutan	1.614	—	—	—	—
Bolivia	4.446	—	15.739	0.100	—
Botswana	—	—	—	—	0.359
Brazil	40.943	20.000	11.386	49.932	0.750
Bulgaria	2.596	—	0.155	—	0.250
Burkina Faso	0.473	0.014	—	—	18.980
Burundi	—	—	0.549	0.011	0.119
Cambodia	0.325	0.350	2.750	—	6.080
Cameroon	0.300	0.278	—	1.000	—
Cape Verde	0.527	4.944	—	—	0.120
Central African Republic	0.165	0.350	—	0.014	0.271
Chad	0.243	—	0.014	0.100	—
Chile	0.350	—	—	0.271	18.247
China	31.611	45.590	20.776	28.600	87.120
Colombia	0.253	—	1.095	25.725	4.775
Comoros	0.132	—	0.324	—	—
Congo	0.248	—	0.333	—	—
Congo DR	0.677	6.332	0.013	—	—
Cook Islands	—	—	0.204	—	—
Costa Rica	7.479	—	—	9.080	0.750
Cote d'Ivoire	0.238	0.341	17.695	—	0.095
Croatia	0.102	0.346	0.750	—	11.675
Cuba	0.206	—	4.043	13.265	0.192
Czech Republic	5.092	0.101	0.448	—	—
Djibouti	—	—	0.310	—	—
Dominica	—	0.265	0.007	—	—
Dominican Republic	—	0.230	0.350	—	—
Ecuador	—	0.289	1.905	19.675	12.230
Egypt	0.288	0.014	—	5.084	7.365
El Salvador	0.518	0.750	—	0.100	0.225
Equatorial Guinea	0.296	—	—	—	—
Eritrea	5.565	—	—	—	—
Estonia	0.166	—	—	—	1.203
Ethiopia	0.213	—	2.242	—	—
Fiji	0.198	—	0.766	—	—
Gabon	—	0.245	0.319	—	—
Gambia	0.381	0.014	—	—	0.193
Georgia	0.445	—	12.850	0.850	—
Ghana	2.531	9.020	—	8.450	0.100
Grenada	—	0.134	0.184	0.748	—
Guatemala	0.541	—	—	1.156	8.350
Guinea	0.346	—	—	2.000	—
Guinea-Bissau	0.541	—	—	—	0.014
Guyana	6.326	0.279	—	—	—
Haiti	—	0.612	—	—	—
Honduras	7.625	0.250	—	—	0.100
Hungary	0.166	6.057	—	2.500	4.200
India	—	15.183	7.868	6.213	8.320
Indonesia	12.280	0.228	6.010	11.181	0.832
Iran	0.700	—	—	—	1.500
Jamaica	—	0.426	—	—	—
Jordan	1.949	0.088	—	—	—
Kazakhstan	—	—	—	8.500	8.847
Kenya	0.157	—	3.366	1.500	—
Kiribati	—	0.199	—	0.013	—
Korea DPR	0.453	—	—	0.750	—
Kyrgyzstan	0.108	—	—	—	0.332
Lao PDR	—	0.744	—	—	—
Latvia	5.120	1.633	—	—	0.957
Lebanon	0.145	—	3.410	—	0.200
Lesotho	0.464	2.507	—	—	0.100
Liberia	—	—	—	—	—
Libya	—	—	—	—	0.275

Global Environmental Facility grants to countries—financial year 1997 to financial year 2002 (partial)

US$ million

Country	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Lithuania	0.225	4.645	—	—	10.000
Madagascar	20.825	0.010	0.350	—	—
Malawi	0.483	0.011	8.718	—	—
Malaysia	0.037	7.301	6.309	—	4.025
Maldives	0.151	—	—	0.012	—
Mali	0.252	0.108	—	—	0.100
Malta	—	—	—	0.265	—
Marshall Islands	0.230	—	—	—	—
Mauritania	0.233	0.514	—	—	0.148
Mauritius	0.235	0.152	—	0.750	—
Mexico	0.198	—	10.190	79.005	44.251
Micronesia	—	—	—	1.029	—
Moldova	—	0.450	—	—	0.400
Mongolia	0.033	5.160	0.334	0.750	1.898
Morocco	0.191	10.364	46.865	4.509	—
Mozambique	0.216	0.229	4.080	—	—
Namibia	—	—	0.242	—	2.703
Nepal	—	0.310	0.013	0.728	1.375
Nicaragua	7.430	0.299	—	0.252	0.850
Niger	0.230	0.357	—	—	0.100
Nigeria	0.260	0.314	—	—	8.350
Niue	—	0.431	—	—	0.114
Oman	—	0.266	—	—	—
Pakistan	—	11.176	8.374	—	—
Palau	—	—	—	—	0.309
Panama	8.800	0.313	0.750	—	0.321
Papua New Guinea	—	—	17.482	—	—
Paraguay	—	—	9.532	—	—
Peru	—	4.378	17.070	—	1.884
Philippines	—	0.191	5.275	10.259	0.843
Poland	0.205	0.011	8.400	11.184	1.975
Romania	5.325	—	—	—	15.800
Russian Federation	3.033	—	31.300	0.750	2.356
Rwanda	0.171	0.014	—	—	0.330
Samoa	—	0.172	0.925	—	0.014
São Tomé and Principe	—	—	—	0.163	0.350
Saudi Arabia	—	—	—	—	—
Senegal	0.205	0.078	—	—	9.450
Seychelles	0.436	0.750	—	0.747	0.100
Sierra Leone	0.309	—	—	—	0.275
Slovak Republic	0.077	—	2.200	0.750	—
Slovenia	—	0.434	4.398	—	0.095
Solomon Islands	0.123	—	0.009	—	—
South Africa	—	12.731	0.762	2.446	—
Sri Lanka	5.025	—	—	1.508	10.300
St. Kitts and Nevis	—	0.263	—	—	—
St. Lucia	—	0.340	—	—	0.280
St. Vincent and Grenadines	0.117	0.350	—	—	—
Sudan	0.290	1.084	0.764	0.100	0.102
Suriname	0.092	—	9.590	—	—
Swaziland	0.429	—	—	0.014	—
Syria	4.264	—	1.500	0.014	0.120
Tajikistan	—	—	—	0.327	1.182
Tanzania	—	0.254	—	2.363	—
Thailand	—	0.190	2.500	6.830	0.100
The F.Y.R. of Macedonia	—	—	1.845	0.750	0.337
Togo	0.338	—	1.135	0.239	0.100
Tonga	—	—	—	0.325	—
Trinidad and Tobago	0.127	0.219	—	4.200	—
Tunisia	0.089	0.710	4.360	—	—
Turkey	—	8.550	—	—	—
Turkmenistan	0.350	—	0.515	0.304	0.850
Uganda	10.289	0.125	0.750	30.350	0.100
Ukraine	23.000	13.570	—	—	2.350
Uruguay	2.621	—	0.014	1.596	—
Uzbekistan	0.509	—	3.412	0.098	0.750
Vanuatu	0.207	0.013	—	—	0.132
Venezuela	0.273	—	0.964	9.787	0.350
Vietnam	—	0.012	0.213	0.997	0.750
Yemen	5.455	0.014	1.500	0.100	0.100
Zambia	0.545	—	—	—	—
Zimbabwe	0.393	—	—	—	1.095
Total	266.923	254.439	342.520	383.387	335.150

Notes:

1. This list excludes the regional and global projects
2. The GEF fiscal year ends 30 June

Water Conservation

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her Department has spent on research into innovative water technologies and water conservation techniques for the agriculture sector in the past five years; and if she will list each research project. [56660]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development funds a substantial programme of knowledge and research in water-related issues. Over the past five years £5 million has been allocated to innovative water technologies and water conservation techniques for the agricultural sector. Specific projects include:

Project title	*Research agency*
Smallholder irrigation in Africa	International Programme on Technology and Research in Irrigation and Drainage
Sustainability of modern irrigated agricultural systems	HR Wallingford
Technology transfer and sustainable rural development	Silsoe College
Aids to improved agricultural drainage	HR Wallingford
Fuzzy logic for water resource allocation	Centre for Ecology and Hydrology
Improved irrigation in peri-urban areas	HR Wallingford
Improved irrigation and drainage to save water	HR Wallingford
Low cost micro-irrigation technologies for the poor	Intermediate Technology and Development Group
Privatisation/transfer of irrigation management in central Asia	Mott MacDonald
Improving community spate irrigation systems	HR Wallingford
Achieving sustainable local management of irrigation water in water-short basins: South Africa case study	International Water Management Institute

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what financial assistance her Department gave to *(a)* South Africa, *(b)* Uganda and *(c)* Nigeria for sustainable water supplies and sanitation systems in (i) 2000–01 and (ii) 2001–02. [56661]

Clare Short: In financial year 2000–01 the Department gave the following financial assistance for sustainable water supplies and sanitation systems:

	£
(a) South Africa	1,503,450
(b) Uganda	[1]2,324,094
(c) Nigeria	590,577

[1] Figure includes school sanitation component of an education project

Expenditure figures for 2001–02 are not yet available.

Anti-corruption Bureaux

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much assistance her Department provided in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02 to support anti-corruption bureaux in developing countries; and if she will list them. [56662]

Clare Short: Our planned and operational support for anti-corruption bureaux in developing countries in 2000–01 and 2001–02 using figures available from our central management information system includes the following:

	Planned commitment	*Expenditure 2000–01*	*Expenditure 2001–02*
	£	£	£
Honduras	41,000	41,000	—
Malawi	1,272,000	94,902	269,751
Pakistan	431,000	—	168,000
Sierra Leone	1,445,000	137,158	898,743
Uganda	1,000,000	5,589	248,064
Zambia	2,126,000	276,720	233,524
Total	6,315,000	555,369	1,818,082

We are also currently developing support to the new Independent Corrupt Practices Commission in Nigeria.

Support for anti-corruption bureaux is normally only one part of wider programmes of activity to bear down on corruption.

Trade and Poverty Programme

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the progress of the Africa trade and poverty programme. [56664]

Hilary Benn: The trade and poverty programme (TPP) aims to build capacity in sub-Saharan African countries and regional organisations for trade reforms which support poverty reduction. Detailed proposals for capacity building projects have been prepared in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Botswana and the East African community. The project design process has itself been contributing in these countries to better co-ordination between trade policy and poverty reduction and to building the national understanding and ownership of the projects which is vital for their success. Full implementation of these projects is expected to start in July 2002. DFID is also working on possible TPP projects with Lesotho, Mozambique, Zambia and the Southern African trade network and plans to make visits to assess interest in Nigeria in June and with the West African Economic and Monetary Union shortly after.

UNGASS

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her assessment was of the outcomes of the UN Special Session on Children (UNGASS) which took place in New York in May. [56667]

Clare Short: The UNGASS helped to raise the profile of child poverty and child rights issues. It provided an opportunity for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Minister for Children and Young People and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development to advocate UK views and network with

others. But negotiations on the outcomes document were difficult. The outcomes document is good on HIV/AIDS, gender equality and education. But we were not able to secure optimal language on reproductive health and child rights in the face of strong American opposition. The language on reproductive health and child rights is acceptable and the best that could be agreed by all UN member states, but is not as strong as we would ideally have liked.

Sustainable Development

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made towards the implementation of national strategies for sustainable development for developing countries; and which countries have strategies in place. [56668]

Clare Short: DFID has been supporting the development of National Strategies for sustainable development (NSSDs) initially through working with colleagues at the OECD/DAC to produce policy guidance on this topic. This work has been taken up by the United Nations who have now developed their own policy guidance. This will be a priority issue at the World Summit on sustainable development later this year.

One conclusion of work so far is that developing strategies is more of a process than preparing a document that sits on a shelf. Moreover, the label does not matter. If a national strategy adheres to an agreed set of principles or characteristics of strategic processes for sustainability, then that strategy in effect becomes a NSSD. In this way, poverty reduction strategies that exhibit these characteristics (such as the integration of environmental, economic and social considerations) can be considered NSSDs.

As a consequence, it is not easy to quantify how many NSSDs are in place because they are identified by characteristics not labels.

Committee Mandates

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the mandate of the European Development Fund Committee is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55383]

Clare Short: The European Development Fund Committee (EDF) examines community aid for development co-operation in the ACP countries and the overseas countries and territories (OCT). EU-ACP co-operation is now governed by the Cotonou Agreement, signed in June 2000. The Cotonou Agreement's main objectives are the reduction and eventual eradication of poverty and the gradual integration of ACP countries into the global economy, while adhering to the aims of sustainable development.

Article 21 of the Cotonou Agreement establishes the role of the EDF Committee. The Committee's tasks cover:

(a) programming of community aid and programming reviews in particular focusing on country and regional strategies, including identification of projects and programmes;

(b) participation in the decision-making process relating to financing from the European Development Fund; and

(c) monitoring the implementation of community aid, including sectoral aspects, cross-cutting issues, and the functioning of field-level co-ordination.

The Committee also examines the consistency and complementarity between EC aid and aid from the member states. In order to ensure transparency and consistency between co-operation operations and improve complementarity between community actions and member states' own bilateral programmes.

In the past 12 months the Committee has met nine times. The United Kingdom is represented by officials from the Department for International Development. Travel costs for DFID officials to attend meetings of the Committee are met by the European Commission. Other costs incurred for attending this Committee totalled £2,800 in the past 12 months.

Together with member states, the commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February 2002 (Com (2001) 783 Final).

As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the mandate of the Advisory Committee on the Special System of Assistance to traditional ACP Suppliers of Bananas is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55382]

Clare Short: Council Regulation (EC) No. 856/1999 establishes a special framework of assistance (SFA) for traditional ACP suppliers of bananas. It was adopted on 22 April 1999. The Regulation provides for financial and technical assistance to 12 ACP countries, taking account of changes in the marketing arrangements for bananas in Europe following the amendments to the import regime introduced on 1 January 1999.

A Commission decision fixing the amounts available in 1999 under the special framework of assistance for a total of 45 million euro was published on 30 September 1999. A second Commission decision was made on 18 July 2000 for the 2000 budget line (44.5 million euro).

The overall objective of this programme of assistance is to improve competitiveness of traditional ACP banana production. The Council Regulation aims to achieve this goal by funding projects designed to increase banana productivity. Funding is also available for diversification

where no opportunities for sustainable increase in banana production exists. The method for calculating eligibility for funds is based upon a competitivity gap formula.

Commission Regulation (EC) No. 1609/1999 laying down the detailed rules for the implementation of the Council Regulation was adopted on 22 July 1999. Article 6 of this regulation states that the Commission will be assisted by the geographically determined committee competent for development. This role is taken by the European Development Fund Committee (EDF) sitting as the Advisory Committee on Special Systems of Assistance to traditional ACP suppliers of bananas.

In the past 12 months this committee has met once. The United Kingdom is represented by officials from the Department for International Development. As matters for consideration of this committee are always scheduled within an existing EDF Committee meeting, no additional charge to public funds is incurred in connection with attending this committee.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February 2002 (Com (2001) 783 Final).

As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the mandate of the Committee on Food Security and Food Aid is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55380]

Clare Short: Council Regulation (EC) No. 1292/96 of 27 June 1996 establishes the framework for European Community food aid policy, management and food aid operations. Article 26 of the regulation states that the Commission shall be assisted by a Food and Security and Food Aid Committee composed of representatives of the member states chaired by a representative of the Commission.

The committee is responsible for examining any implications for recipient countries of proposals to commit funds for food security, analysis and monitoring food security policies and examining proposals for joint initiatives with other Community instruments.

In the past 12 months the committee has met three times. The United Kingdom is represented by officials from the Department for International Development. Travel costs for DFID officials to attend meetings of the committee are met by the European Commission. Other costs incurred for attending this committee totalled £420 in the past 12 months.

The European Community's budget for food security and food aid operations in 2001 was 455 million euros and for 2002 has been set at 435 million euros. The United Kingdom's share of this is approximately 18 per cent. This figure includes the United Kingdom's mandatory contribution of £19 million under the terms of the 1999 Food Aid Convention.

Food security and food aid operations are of three main types; dealing with immediate food shortages, longer term operations to support food security and operations to improve early warning systems and storage programmes. Areas to have recently experienced severe food shortages include Ecuador, DPR Korea, Georgia, West Bank and Gaza, Burkina Faso and Afghanistan.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February 2002 (Com(2201) 783 Final.

As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the mandate of the Committee on Implementation of Humanitarian Aid Operations is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55350]

Clare Short: The European Union's mandate to The European Community Humanitarian Organisation (as set out in Regulation (CE) No. 1257/96) is to provide emergency assistance and relief to the victims of natural disasters or armed conflict outside the European Union.

The Humanitarian Aid Committee (HAC) meets on average once a month, excluding August (and often December). In addition to this, each presidency usually holds an informal HAC to discuss issues of substance in more detail. Including both formal and informal HACs there have been 12 meetings over the last 12 months. The UK is represented by officials from the Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department, DFID. The annual cost to public funds of the Committee's work is approximately £5,000.

Items due for discussion at the next HAC on 23 May include the Global Plan 2002 for Sahrawi Refugees in Algeria, a report on ECHO's recent evaluation of UNHCR activities, a report on the recent ECHO Mission to

Zimbabwe, and the Commission's non-paper on the interplay between Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid in crisis situations.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February 2002 (Com (2001) 783 Final. As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the mandate of the Committee on Financial and Technical Assistance and Economic Co-Operation with Developing Countries in Asia and Latin America is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55385]

Clare Short: Council Regulation (EC) No. 443/92 25 February 1992 establishes the framework for European Community financial and technical assistance, and economic co-operation with the countries of Asia and Latin America. Article 15 of the regulation states that the Commission shall be assisted by a committee composed of representatives of the member states chaired by a representative of the Commission.

The committee considers and delivers an opinion, by qualified majority voting, on development assistance financing proposals for country and regional strategies, projects and programmes in Asia and Latin America.

In the past 12 months the committee has met 11 times. The United Kingdom is represented by officials from the Department for International Development. Travel costs for DFID officials to attend meetings of the committee are met by the European Commission. Other costs incurred for attending this committee totalled £1,800 in the past 12 months.

EU development co-operation assistance in Asian has been focused on direct poverty reduction measures, for example through support for rural development, infrastructure and institutional capacity building. The environment sector has also received support with substantial programmes devoted to areas such as forest protection, biodiversity and environmental technology. The health and education sectors also feature significantly in EC efforts aimed at poverty reduction. Priority is given to the poorest populations, and to the poorer areas of developing countries, with a view to supporting economic activities that lead to sustainable development.

Together with the member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February 2002 (Com (2001) 783 Final.

As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the mandate of the MED Committee Financial and Technical co-operation between the Community and Mediterranean non-member countries is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55386]

Clare Short: Council Regulation (EC) No. 2698/2000 of 27 November 2000 amended an existing regulation setting out the terms of financial and technical measures to promote reform of economic and social structures in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Article 11 of the regulation establishes the roles of a management committee composed of representatives of the member states, the European Bank (EIB), chaired by a representative of the Commission.

The priorities for MEDA resources are support for economic transition with the aim of wider implementation of free trade through increasing competitiveness with a view to achieving sustainable economic growth, particularly through development of the private sector; support to economic transition; and strengthening the socio-economic balance: the aim is to alleviate the short-term costs of economic transition through appropriate measures in the fields of social policy.

The committee considers and delivers an opinion, by qualified majority voting, on development assistance financing proposals for country and regional strategies, projects and programmes in the MED region.

In the past 12 months the committee has met eight times. The United Kingdom is represented by officials from the Department for International Development. Travel costs for DFID officials to attend meetings of the committee are met by the European Commission. Other costs incurred for attending this committee totalled £1,260 in the past 12 months.

Together with the member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February 2002 (Com (2001) 783 Final.

As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the mandate of the Committee on aid for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the former Yugoslavia Republic of Macedonia (CAROS) is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55390]

Clare Short: The mandate of the CARDS Committee is to oversee the implementation of Council Regulation 2666/2000 of 5 December 2000, which established CARDS. It determines the strategy framework for CARDS, and approves annual and multi-annual allocations to country and regional programmes.

The committee has met eight times in the last year. The UK is represented by the Department for International Development (DFID) and the UK Permanent Representation to the European Commission.

The annual cost to public funds of the committee's work principally comprises the work of DFID officials in assessing and discussing with the EC strategy and programme proposals, as well as the costs of attendance at meetings of the committee. The CARDS budget for 2001-06 is euro 4.65 billion, of which the UK's share is 18.8 per cent., or approximately £540 million. We do not keep records to show the proportion of staff time committed to CARDS.

CARDS programmes or work related to them are subject to scrutiny by Select Committees of Parliament. Under Council Decision 1999/468/EC the EC has undertaken to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first such report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Commission Document 5685/02). We have encouraged the EC to make available on its website a record of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions.

Timber (Departmental Refurbishment)

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if he will place in the Library certificates showing that timber used for the doors, doorframes and window frames in the refurbishment of her Department's buildings came from a certified, sustainable source. [55260]

Clare Short: Timber for the doors and doorframes (no wooden window frames were fitted) were supplied by Shadbolt and Sons. Shadbolts are founder members of the WWF 1995+ group, which is one of the groups listed under the current DEFRA guidance "Greening Government Operations—Green Guide for Buyers, Action Sheet on Wood". The group has the target to source all its timbers from sources with certified sustainable management, and works closely with the Forest Stewardship Council. DFID's requirement followed the BREEAM guidelines at the time, that softwood and temperate hardwoods were to be from sustainable sources, but certificates were not requested. The Sapele veneers used in this project were not certified as they came from existing stocks obtained in 1983, and were supplied with the consent of WWF.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Census Information

Mr. John Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, (1) pursuant to the answer given by the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 207W, what her estimate is of the number of History National Curriculum (Key Stages 2 to 5) schools with internet access to the website at http://www.learningcurve.pro.gov.uk/FocusOn/census/; [55911]

(2) pursuant to the answer given by the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 207W, on census information, what action she has taken to protect the interests of History National Curriculum (Key Stages 2 to 5) pupils and teachers, following the provision of inaccurate information on the website at http://www.learningcurve.pro.gov.uk/FocusOn/census/; and what action has been taken to ensure that recent amendments to the website meet the schools' requirements for information from the Public Record Office. [55912]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We have supported £657 million of expenditure on ICT by schools between 1998 and 2002, with a further £710 million to follow between 2002 and 2004. This funding is intended to help schools to achieve the objectives agreed with their local education authority and set out in their Information and Communication Technology (ICT) development plan. We would expect these plans to address measures for connecting to the internet, so that schools can access the wealth of cultural, scientific and intellectual material to be found on the internet. The percentage of schools with internet connection was published in the Statistics of Education—Survey of Information and Communications Technology in Schools 2001; 97 per cent. of schools are connected to the internet.

Producers of educational content are encouraged to link their resources to the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) portal. The sites on the NGfL portal are required to conform to a set of ground rules and a code of conduct. However, it is the responsibility of the site developers to ensure that their content is accurate. As with other forms of information media, the decision on which sites to use lies with schools.

Deaf Young People (Education)

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many deaf children were taught

(a) with British sign language and *(b)* without access to British sign language in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [56493]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Department does not collect this information centrally. However, an interim report from the National Evaluation of Support Options for Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Children in 1999 suggests the following percentages of deaf children, with average hearing loss, born between 1980 and 1994 used British sign language within their education programmes:

	Percentage
Children with moderate deafness	2
Children with severe deafness	5
Children with profound deafness	
Without a cochlear implant	20
With a cochlear implant	5

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many and what percentage of profoundly deaf young people achieved *(a)* five A to C GCSE grades and *(b)* five A to G GCSE grades, broken down by local authority in the last four years. [56492]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Department currently does not collect this information centrally, though we shall shortly be consulting on whether and how data on different types of special educational needs could be collected. Subject to the outcome of this consultation, the data requested might be collected from January 2004.

Learning Partnerships

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will make a statement on the future of learning partnerships. [57610]

Margaret Hodge: In November 2001 the Government launched a consultation on the future role of learning partnerships. In the light of that consultation, I wrote to chairs of learning partnerships on 29 April 2002 setting out our future vision for partnerships and new funding and support arrangements. The Government believe learning partnerships have a key role in promoting provider collaboration to deliver better lifelong learning in local areas, and in working with a wide range of partners to maximise the contribution of learning to local regeneration. The Government also wish to see better links between learning partnerships and the Learning and Skills Council. From April 2003 funding for learning partnerships, currently channelled through Government Offices, will be directed through the Learning and Skills Council. I have placed a copy of my letter to chairs in the Libraries.

Teachers (Buckinghamshire)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many teachers were in service in Buckinghamshire in *(a)* January 2001 and *(b)* January 2002. [55690]

Mr. Timms: There were 4,020 full-time equivalent[1] teachers in service in the maintained schools sector in Buckinghamshire in January 2001.

Data for January 2002 are not yet available at local education authority level. The number of all-time equivalent teachers in England increased by 9,400 between January 2001 and January 2002, the largest increase since the 1970s.

Information on teachers in service in January 2002 by local education authority will be published in the Teachers in England statistical volume in December 2002.

[1] Part-time teachers have been converted to an estimate of their full-time equivalence and added to full-time numbers.

Ministerial Training

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much has been spent by her Department on training by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52739]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* This Department has not delivered training by RADA.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much has been spent by his Department on training in leadership skills for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52713]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* The Department for Education and Skills are only able to provide information for the last three years. During that period the Learning Academy spent the following amounts on leadership training for officials:

	£
1999–2000	40,900
2000–01	42,346
2001–02	75,000

Training was also provided by parts of the Department but we are unable to identify the costs for leadership.

Ministers are also able to take advantage of the programme for Ministers organised by the Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) in the Cabinet Office.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much has been spent by her Department on voice coaching for Ministers and officials in each of the last five years. [52700]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 26 April 2002]:* Ministers in this Department are able to take advantage of the programmes for Ministers organised by the Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) in the Cabinet Office.

In addition the Department has provided presentation skills training for officials if their job requires it but not voice training. We are unable to provide figures as our records are not broken down into that amount of detail.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans she has to make education maintenance allowances available to young people in Warrington, North; and if she will make a statement. [56679]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We will be taking decisions on any future extension of the scheme on the basis of the rigorous evaluation currently being conducted.

Rural Awareness

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when her Department will introduce measures to raise rural awareness through staff *(a)* training, *(b)* development and *(c)* secondments as part of overall rural proofing measures as set out in the Countryside Agency's report, Rural Proofing in 2001–02. [54416]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs on 9 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 274W.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Parthenon Marbles

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions she has had with the Government of Greece concerning the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Athens. [53822]

Tessa Jowell: I received a letter from Professor Evangelos Venizelos, Minister of Culture of Greece on 21 June 2001, and I replied to him on 15 July 2001. I have had no discussions with the Government of Greece on this matter.

European Capital of Culture

Kevin Brennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will announce the name of the person chosen to be Chairman of the European Capital of Culture 2008 Advisory Panel. [55454]

Mr. Caborn: On 8 May my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced the appointment of Sir Jeremy Isaacs, the former chief executive of Channel Four and general director of the Royal Opera House, as the chairman of the European Capital of Culture 2008 Advisory Panel.

The broadcaster Sue MacGregor and Judith Mayhew, Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee at the Corporation of London, will be deputy chairs. Further appointments to the panel will be announced shortly.

National Lottery

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the effect of the current allocation process for lottery funds on the accumulation of unspent funds; and if she will make a statement. [56141]

Mr. Caborn: The National Lottery has raised approximately £12.65 billion for good causes since its launch in November 1994, around £9.1 billion of which has been spent by the National Lottery distributing bodies. This leaves a balance of about £3.55 billion which distributors have not yet drawn down from the National Lottery Distribution Fund, although at the end of March 2002 distributors' total commitments stood at over £4.12 billion, some £570 million more than the balance held in the fund.

Government accounting rules, and the financial directions issued to the distributing bodies by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, prevent distributors from drawing down money from the Distribution Fund before it is needed to cover expenditure incurred by grant recipients. We will, however, examine how the financial directions might be modified to allow distributors a greater flexibility in managing the funds allocated to them, to enable more funds to be committed and to allow funds which are already committed to be transferred more quickly to grant recipients.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what factors underlay the decision to reject the recommendation of the Rothschild Commission on Gambling that a charitable foundation would be the most appropriate and effective system for allocating Lottery money; and if she will make a statement. [56142]

Mr. Caborn: Following publication of a White Paper on the National Lottery in 1992 and the consultation which followed it was concluded that establishing the Lottery as a charity would blur the lines of accountability, and that under charity law many of the good causes beneficiaries which were not charities would not be eligible for funding.

Given the substantial sums of money involved—far in excess of those estimated by the Rothschild Commission– separate distributing bodies for each of the good causes were considered more appropriate, using existing bodies where possible so as not to duplicate expertise or run counter to existing strategies.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make it her policy to ensure that all young people aged seven to 21 years have the opportunity to participate in arts and sports through Government or Lottery funded programmes; and if she will make a statement. [56143]

Mr. Caborn: One of the Department's four strategic priorities is to enhance access to a fuller cultural and sporting life for children and young people. To meet this aim DCMS is working closely with DfES and Lottery distributors to deliver a number of key initiatives, including: a sporting entitlement to ensure that all children have access to two hours a week of high quality school sport and physical education; the school sports co-ordinator programme, specialist sports colleges and the New Opportunities Fund Sport and PE in School Programme to improve sports provision in schools; Creative Partnerships, a new initiative linking schools with cultural organisations which is being established in 16 deprived areas across England; Space for Sport and Arts which will improve facilities in primary schools in deprived areas; and the music entitlement which will give all primary school pupils the opportunity to learn a musical instrument.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the impact of the underspend of Lottery money for good causes on long-term sales of tickets; and if she will make a statement. [56140]

Mr. Caborn: No specific assessment has been made. However, the Government regard it as important that the public should have confidence that Lottery funding is

bringing the maximum benefit to good causes, and have asked the distributors to take steps to transfer committed funds to grant recipients as quickly as possible.

Crystal Palace Sports Stadium

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on Sport England's plans in respect of Crystal Palace sports stadium, with special reference to the financial implications of surrendering its lease. [57088]

Mr. Caborn: Sport England has conducted a strategic review of all its national centres to ensure that they, and the resources required to run them, are utilised to the best effect. Sport England will shortly be meeting the London borough of Bromley, which owns the freehold of the Crystal Palace centre, to discuss a number of issues including the future development of the centre. I understand that no firm decisions have yet been taken in respect of the centre's future.

Anglo-Italian Meetings

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on how many occasions in the last six months members of her Department have met their Italian counterparts; and what subjects were discussed. [56894]

Mr. Caborn: I can confirm that neither Ministers nor officials have taken part in any bilateral meetings with their Italian counterparts during the last six months.

However, DCMS Ministers and officials regularly meet their counterparts from European Union member states, including Italy, at a wide range of EU meetings. These include formal and informal meetings of the Council of Ministers, working groups, committees and meetings on specific issues such as sport, tourism, cultural and audiovisual policy. We also meet in other forums, such as the Council of Europe, the World Anti-Doping Agency and UNESCO.

DEFENCE

Medical Officers (Reservists)

Paul Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether medical officers from the reserve forces are to be called out for mobilised service in support of deployed operations; and if he will make a statement. [57611]

Dr. Moonie: The Government have authorised the compulsory call out of anaesthetists, general surgeons and orthopaedic surgeons from the volunteer reserve forces to support military operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan. Initially we plan to call out five consultant anaesthetists and two consultant orthopaedic surgeons to report in mid-June and four consultant general surgeons to report in mid-July. Each individual will be mobilised for a period of no more than three months, which allows a little over two months deployment in an operational theatre with the balance comprising pre-deployment training and post-tour leave. We expect to have to continue using similar, or possibly slightly higher, numbers until next spring. The requirement will be reviewed regularly to ensure that the numbers called out are the minimum required to support operations.

Data Protection Act

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library copies of each version of the internal guidance which have been drawn up by his Department since 1 January 1999 to assist staff in his Department to answer subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 1998. [53386]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary for the Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Wills) gave on 25 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 446W to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe).

Warships

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what further plans he has to place warships in extended readiness or on standby in the next 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [56192]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, columns 963–64W and to the answer I gave on 10 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 14W to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray).

On current plans no further warships will be placed at extended readiness during the next 12 months.

Army (Foreign Nationals)

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many foreign nationals left the British Army in each of the last 10 years broken down by nationality; and what their average length of service was. [55446]

Mr. Ingram: The tables show officer and soldier exits. Nationality at birth is not available on flow data before 1997 so only the last six financial years have been shown. These figures represent those individuals who left the British Army. Calculations have been made using the mean length of service of those personnel at the time they left and are only produced for populations of 10 or more.

Army officers and ODs losses: nationality (at birth) by date of flow

Nationality (at birth)	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
America	—	—	—	—	—	1
Australia	2	6	6	5	3	3
Canada	1	5	1	4	2	4
Denmark	—	1	—	—	1	—
Egypt	—	—	1	—	—	1
France	—	—	—	—	1	—
Germany	—	—	2	2	—	—
Ghana	—	1	—	—	—	—
Gibraltar	—	—	1	—	—	—

Army officers and ODs losses: nationality (at birth) by date of flow

Nationality (at birth)	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Guyana	—	—	—	—	—	1
Hong Kong	—	—	—	—	1	—
India	2	—	—	3	1	—
Iraq	—	1	—	—	—	—
Jordan	—	—	1	1	—	—
Kenya	—	1	1	1	—	—
Malaysia	—	1	1	1	—	2
Malta GC	2	2	4	3	2	2
Morocco	—	—	—	—	1	—
Nepal[1,2]	—	1	—	—	—	—
Netherlands	1	—	—	—	—	—
New Zealand	3	2	5	3	1	—
New Zealand islands	—	—	—	—	2	—
Nigeria	1	—	—	—	—	1
Pakistan	1	—	1	—	—	—
Portugal	—	—	—	—	1	—
Republic of Ireland	3	8	4	5	5	6
Rhodesia	1	2	1	3	3	1
South Africa	3	—	1	4	6	4
Spain	—	—	—	1	—	—
Sri Lanka	1	—	—	—	—	—
Sweden	—	—	1	—	—	—
Tanzania	—	—	1	—	—	—
Trinidad and Tobago	1	—	—	—	—	—
Zimbabwe	—	—	—	2	1	1
Grand Total	22	31	32	38	31	27
Gurkhas	n/a	21	23	18	15	13

[1] See also Gurkhas
[2] The Nepalese officer shown was a member of UK Regular Forces. Gurkha officers that left have been shown separately.

Mean length of service on exit for officers, by nationality at birth

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Gurkhas	—	—	26.00	25.48	27.08	25.38

Note:
All other nationalities: the calculation of mean length of service would not be meaningful, i.e. each outflow by nationality and year is less than 10.

Army ranks losses: nationality (at birth) by date of flow

Nationality (at birth)	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
America	3	1	3	2	2	1
American overseas	—	1	—	—	—	—
Australia	18	20	17	13	20	16
Austria	—	—	—	—	1	—
Bahama islands	—	—	—	1	—	—
Bangladesh	1	—	1	—	2	—
Barbados	1	—	2	—	2	3
Barbuda (Leeward islands)	1	—	—	—	—	—
Belgium	1	—	—	—	—	—
Belize	1	1	—	1	2	1
Brazil	—	2	—	—	—	—
Britain/Singapore	—	—	1	—	—	1
Britcommw/Brit Com	—	2	—	2	1	—
Brunei	—	—	—	1	—	—
Canada	10	9	11	16	13	10
Colombia	—	1	—	—	—	—
Cyprus	1	1	—	—	—	—
Denmark	—	—	2	1	—	1
Dominica (Windward islands)	—	—	—	1	—	—
Dominican Republic	—	—	—	—	—	1
Falkland Islands	—	—	—	1	—	—
Fiji	1	1	1	4	15	15
France	1	—	2	—	—	—
Gambia	—	—	—	—	1	—
Germany	3	3	4	2	7	5
Ghana	—	1	—	—	—	2
Gibraltar	—	—	—	1	1	—
Greece	1	—	1	—	—	—
Grenada (Windward islands)	—	—	—	1	—	2
Guyana	—	—	2	1	1	2
Honduras	—	—	—	—	—	1

Army ranks losses: nationality (at birth) by date of flow

Nationality (at birth)	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Hong Kong	1	1	1	3	1	2
Hungary	—	1	—	—	—	—
India	1	1	—	3	1	3
Iran	—	—	1	—	—	1
Iraq	—	—	—	2	—	—
Italy	1	—	—	1	—	—
Jamaica	7	6	5	11	8	18
Kenya	—	1	—	—	3	1
Kiribati	—	—	—	—	1	—
Korea south	—	1	—	—	—	—
Lebanon	2	—	—	—	—	—
Malaysia	—	—	1	—	1	—
Malta GC	2	1	1	3	2	—
Mauritania	—	—	—	1	—	—
Mauritius	—	1	—	—	—	1
Monserrat (Leeward islands)	—	—	—	1	—	1
Morocco	—	—	1	—	—	—
Nepal[1]	—	—	—	—	—	—
Netherlands	—	1	1	—	—	1
New Zealand	9	4	9	5	7	9
New Zealand islands	1	1	1	1	3	2
Nigeria	—	—	1	1	2	—
Pakistan	—	—	1	—	4	3
Pakistan West	—	—	—	—	1	1
Philippines	—	—	—	—	1	—
Poland	—	1	2	1	—	—
Portugal	—	1	—	—	1	1
Republic of Ireland	44	34	37	42	35	41
Rhodesia	3	4	5	4	—	2
Salvador	1	—	—	—	1	—
Seychelles	—	—	—	1	—	—
Sierra Leone	—	—	—	1	3	2
Somalia	—	—	—	—	1	—
South Africa	1	11	21	19	21	26
Spain	—	1	—	—	2	—
Sri Lanka	—	—	—	1	—	—
St. Helena	1	—	2	2	4	1
St. Lucia Island	—	—	—	—	3	1
St. Vincent Island	1	—	—	—	7	14
Sudan	—	1	—	—	—	—
Sweden	—	—	—	—	1	—
Switzerland	—	—	—	—	1	—
Tanzania	—	—	—	—	—	1
Thailand	—	—	1	—	—	—
Trinidad and Tobago	—	—	1	2	2	4
Turkey	—	1	—	—	—	—
Uganda	—	—	—	1	—	1
West Indies—British	1	2	—	1	—	—
Zambia	—	—	1	1	—	2
Zimbabwe	1	1	1	11	7	14
Stateless	—	—	—	—	1	—
Grand Total	120	119	141	167	193	214
Gurkhas	n/a	177	217	149	91	209

[1] See also Gurkhas

Mean length of service on exit for soldiers, by nationality at birth

	Financial years					
Nationality (at birth)	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Australia	5.39	5.40	5.44	4.81	5.60	4.50
Canada	2.90	—	5.77	5.81	5.81	6.50
Fiji	—	—	—	—	0.50	1.83
Jamaica	—	—	—	12.59	—	3.06
Republic of Ireland	5.75	8.62	9.14	10.14	6.04	7.63
South Africa	—	7.41	1.64	5.34	2.60	2.08
St. Vincent Island	—	—	—	—	—	0.50
Zimbabwe	—	—	—	0.86	—	2.50
Gurkhas	—	—	16.07	16.21	16.87	17.12

Notes:

1. Mean length of service has only been calculated for those nationalities where 10 or more soldiers left in any one year.
2. When outflow by nationality and year is less than 10 the calculation of mean length of service would not be meaningful.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many foreign nationals were recruited to serve in the British Army in each of the last 10 years, broken down by country from which recruited. [55445]

Mr. Ingram: The tables show officer and soldier intakes. Nationality at birth is not available on intake data before 1997 so only the last five financial years have been shown. These figures represent those individuals who joined training in the British Army. The actual number 'recruited' could be slightly higher as some decide not to join. This figure is not available from the individual record of service.

Officers intake by nationality (at birth) financial year 1997–98 to 2001–02

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02	Total
America	—	1	—	1	—	2
Australia	4	5	2	8	7	26
Austria	—	1	1	—	1	3
Bangladesh	—	1	—	—	—	1
Barbados	—	—	—	1	—	1
Belgium	—	1	—	—	—	1
Bermuda	—	1	—	—	—	1
Canada	4	1	2	3	—	10
Denmark	—	—	1	—	—	1
Fiji	—	—	—	1	2	3
France	—	—	1	—	—	1
Germany	1	—	—	—	—	1
Gibraltar	—	—	1	—	—	1
Guyana	1	—	—	—	—	1
Hong Kong	—	—	2	—	—	2
India	1	—	2	—	1	5
Iran	1	—	—	—	—	1
Italy	—	—	1	—	—	1
Jamaica	1	—	—	—	—	1
Jordan	1	—	—	—	—	1
Kenya	—	1	1	1	—	3
Korea South	—	—	—	1	—	1
Lebanon	—	—	—	—	1	1
Malaysia	—	1	—	2	1	4
Malta GC	—	2	2	—	—	4
Morocco	—	—	1	—	—	1
Nepal[1]	—	—	—	—	1	1
Netherlands	—	—	—	—	1	1
New Zealand	1	3	3	2	3	12
New Zealand Islands	—	1	2	1	—	4
Nigeria	—	—	—	2	1	3
Pakistan	—	—	1	—	—	1
Republic of Ireland	3	3	3	3	4	16
Rhodesia	—	—	2	—	1	3
Sierra Leone	—	—	2	—	—	2
Singapore	—	—	—	1	—	1
South Africa	2	2	9	7	7	27
Spain	—	1	—	1	1	3
Sri Lanka	—	1	—	—	—	1
Switzerland	—	—	—	—	1	1
Trinidad and Tobago	—	—	—	—	1	1
Zimbabwe	2	5	8	1	2	18
Stateless	—	1	—	—	—	1
Total	22	33	47	36	36	174

[1] The Nepalese officer shown is a member of UK regular forces. No Gurkha officers are shown as being recruited because they are all promoted from within the ranks.

Soldier intake by nationality (at birth) financial year 1997–98 to 2001–02

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02	Total
America	3	—	—	—	1	4
American overseas	1	—	—	—	—	1
Antigua (Leeward Islands)	—	—	—	1	1	2
Australia	10	17	17	14	8	66
Austria	1	—	—	1	—	2
Bangladesh	1	1	3	—	4	9
Barbados	—	—	—	4	2	6
Belize	1	3	2	2	—	8
Bermuda	—	1	—	—	—	1
Botswana	1	—	1	—	—	2
Brazil	2	—	2	—	—	4

Soldier intake by nationality (at birth) financial year 1997–98 to 2001–02

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*Total*
Bulgaria	—	—	—	—	1	1
Cameroon Republic	—	—	—	—	1	1
Canada	12	20	15	9	15	71
Congo	—	1	—	—	—	1
Denmark	—	1	—	—	1	2
Dominica (Windward Islands)	—	—	—	—	1	1
Dominican Republic	—	—	—	2	1	3
Fiji	1	16	315	263	485	1,080
France	1	2	2	—	2	7
Gambia	—	2	1	4	10	17
Germany	7	8	7	6	4	32
Ghana	—	1	—	15	80	96
Gibraltar	1	—	1	—	—	2
Grenada (Windward Islands)	—	—	2	6	8	16
Guyana	—	2	2	2	1	7
Honduras	1	—	1	1	—	3
Hong Kong	—	1	2	2	1	6
India	1	2	2	3	5	13
Iran	1	—	—	—	1	2
Italy	1	2	1	—	1	5
Jamaica	2	9	15	49	182	257
Kenya	1	1	2	9	9	22
Libya	—	—	—	1	—	1
Malawi	—	—	1	—	4	5
Malta GC	1	1	2	1	—	5
Mauritania	—	—	1	—	1	2
Mauritius	1	1	—	3	3	8
Mexico	—	1	—	1	—	2
Monserrat (Leeward Islands)	—	—	4	1	1	6
Namibia (formerly WS Africa)	—	—	1	1	—	2
Nepal (see Gurkhas)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Netherlands	—	—	2	—	2	4
New Zealand	5	7	3	3	—	18
New Zealand Islands	1	2	—	9	6	18
Nigeria	—	—	—	6	10	16
Pacific Islands	—	—	—	1	1	2
Pakistan	—	1	—	4	3	8
Pakistan West	—	1	—	—	—	1
Papua	—	—	1	—	—	1
Philippines	1	1	2	2	2	8
Poland	1	—	—	—	—	1
Portugal	—	—	—	1	—	1
Republic of Ireland	43	27	23	23	8	124
Rhodesia	3	6	—	—	—	9
Romania	—	1	—	—	2	3
Seychelles	—	1	—	—	1	2
Sierra Leone	2	1	2	5	2	12
Singapore	—	—	—	—	1	1
Somalia	1	—	1	1	—	3
South Africa	15	39	53	69	124	300
Spain	—	1	1	—	1	3
Sri Lanka	—	—	—	1	1	2
St. Helena	1	12	9	8	—	30
St. Lucia Island	—	1	2	4	15	22
St. Vincent Island	—	—	—	179	5	184
Sudan	1	—	—	—	—	1
Tanzania	—	—	—	—	1	1
Thailand	1	1	2	—	3	7
Tongan Islands	—	1	—	—	2	3
Trinidad and Tobago	—	2	4	15	12	33
Turkey	1	1	—	—	—	2
Uganda	—	—	—	1	1	2
Vietnam South	—	—	—	1	—	1
Western Samoa	—	—	—	2	—	2
Yemen	1	—	—	—	—	1
Zambia	1	—	—	3	5	9
Zimbabwe	2	15	20	39	124	200
Stateless	—	—	1	—	—	1
Total	131	214	528	778	1,166	2,817
Gurkhas	181	230	229	230	230	1,100

Throckmorton Airfield

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what value he estimates attaches to the Throckmorton airfield within QinetiQ's property portfolio *(a)* as currently developed, *(b)* with an asylum accommodation centre on the airfield and *(c)* with planning permission for a science park. [57085]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 5 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 856W. Given that the site now belongs to QinetiQ plc, the value of the site, now and in the future, forms part of the company's commercial planning process. I am therefore withholding the information requested under Exemption 13 of the code of practice on access to Government information which relates to the maintenance of commercial confidences.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the ownership of land at Throckmorton airfield; and what plans his Department has for the disposal of this land *(a)* to the Home Office or its agencies and *(b)* through the privatisation of Qinetiq; [31735]

(2) what account was taken of the land and property at Throckmorton used by QinetiQ in the preparation for the privatisation of the agency; and if he will make a statement; [31736]

(3) what impact the construction of the proposed asylum accommodation centre at Throckmorton would have on *(a)* the activities of QinetiQ and *(b)* the other defence-related activities at the airfield. [31726]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 17 July 2001, *Official Report*, column 142W. Most of the Throckmorton site, formerly known as the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) Pershore, is now owned by QinetiQ. The remainder of the site, used last year to deal with some of the consequences of the foot and mouth outbreak, is in the final stages of being transferred to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

As part of the PPP process, all activities carried out by DERA were reviewed, and those which did not need to be retained within Government were transferred to QinetiQ on 1 July 2001, including those carried out at Pershore. Legally enforceable safeguards are in place to ensure that QinetiQ continue to provide key strategic facilities and services required by the Ministry of Defence. Against this background the company is free to explore other business opportunities.

The future provision of an accommodation centre for asylum seekers is the responsibility of the Home Office, and although QinetiQ's site at Pershore has been identified as a potential site, a final decision has yet to be made. Subject to consultation, with QinetiQ as landowner, the local planning authorities, and the local community, the final decision with regard to siting one of these centres at Pershore rests with the Home Secretary.

Libya

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what basis the decision was made to include Libya as one of the four main countries of concern to the UK in her Department's memorandum on the Ballistic Missile Threat; what activities of Libya are of concern to the UK; and if he will make a statement. [52266]

Mr. Hoon: Although we currently assess there is no significant ballistic missile threat to the United Kingdom from Libya, Libya continues to have an active programme for the development of long-range ballistic missiles. We believe that Libya is also pursuing programmes for the development of weapons of mass destruction.

Strategic Defence Review

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which medical elements of the Strategic Defence Review have not been implemented; and if he will make a statement. [53871]

Dr. Moonie: The main medical elements of the Strategic Defence Review have either been completed or remain in the Defence programme, although some may be subject to change in the light of subsequent developments.

Mine Counter-measures Vessels

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to withdraw mine counter-measures vessels from service; and if he will make a statement. [56193]

Mr. Ingram: On current plans the present total of 22 Sandown and Hunt class minehunters will be maintained in service with the Royal Navy.

Naval Vessels

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many crew are serving on HMS Fearless. [56702]

Mr. Ingram: There are currently 490 crew serving on HMS Fearless.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what maintenance work is being carried out on HMS Monmouth. [56703]

Mr. Ingram: HMS Monmouth is currently undergoing a planned refit at Rosyth dockyard, involving necessary equipment refurbishment and enhancements to her operational and support systems. This will include enhanced aviation capability, to accommodate the Merlin helicopter, and installation of a new command support system and anti-air warfare training system. Other enhancements will also be made to her communications, administration and waste disposal systems.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the planned refits are for *(a)* HMS Invincible, *(b)* HMS Illustrious and *(c)* HMS Ark Royal before the end of their service lives. [56701]

Mr. Ingram: HMS Ark Royal completed her last planned refit in November 2001. The last planned refit for HMS Invincible commenced in September 2001 and is expected to complete and return to service in the first half of 2003. That for HMS Illustrious will commence this autumn and is expected to complete in autumn 2004. The vessels will, however, continue to undergo routine maintenance and shorter docking periods for the remainder of their service lives.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if HMS Sheffield will have further refits before the end of her service life. [56700]

Mr. Ingram: On current plans HMS Sheffield has no further scheduled refits though she is programmed to undertake a docking period in early 2004.

Army Pay and Conditions

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the compatibility of the pay and conditions of the Royal Gibraltar Regiment and other regiments in the British Army, excluding the Gurkhas; and if he will make a statement. [56896]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Gibraltar Regiment is a force raised in Gibraltar for service in Gibraltar. Its officers hold a Governor's Commission rather than a Queen's Commission. The Regiment has close links with the British Army, and occasionally officers and soldiers are attached for a period of time to British Army units.

Members of the permanent cadre of the Royal Gibraltar Regiment and the Volunteer Reserve receive the same rates of pay as their counterparts in the Regular Army and the Territorial Army, with the exception that they receive lower rates of X factor, ie 5 per cent. and 2.5 per cent. respectively, instead of 13 per cent. and 5 per cent. (the X factor is the additional element added to basic pay to reflect the differences between conditions of service in the Army and United Kingdom civilian life). The lower levels of X factor for the Regiment reflects the reduced liability for service of its members. Members of the Royal Gibraltar Regiment may also be eligible for United Kingdom service allowances provided they meet the relevant criteria.

Temporary Staff

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost to his Department was of employing staff in *(a)* London and *(b)* the south-east from employment agencies in each year since 1997. [56509]

Dr. Moonie: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Agency staff are generally used as an interim measure to fill posts which cannot be filled conventionally in the required time scale.

Sea Harrier Decommissioning

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what guidance is given to serving officers on the submission of letters to newspapers for publication; if the letter from Flight Lieutenant D. Holland RAF and Lieutenant James Hamblin RN to *The Times*, published on 13 May was approved by commanding officers; and if he will make a statement. [56882]

Mr. Ingram: Inquiries have revealed that there are no officers with these names in the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. The authorship of this letter is therefore unknown. We have informed *The Times* accordingly. Queen's Regulations provide guidance to service personnel on publication of views and the requirement to seek permission beforehand. Had the letter been authentic, these procedures would have needed to be followed.

Gurkhas

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Gurkhas were recruited to serve in the British Army in each of the last 10 years; and how many are serving. [55461]

Mr. Ingram: As at 1 April 2002, there are 3,449 trained Gurkhas serving in the British Army. Details of the number recruited in each of the last 10 years are shown in the following table:

	Number of recruits
1993	152
1994	152
1995	152
1996	159
1997	159
1998	181
1999	230
2000	229
2001	230
2002	230

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what decisions she has made about the membership of the boards of the regional development agencies outside London. [57319]

Alan Johnson: The first terms of office of Jonathan Porritt (SW RDA), John Ashcroft (Yorkshire Forward) and Bryan Carr and Ron Whittaker (EMDA) ended this year. Following consultation with RDA chairmen and key national and regional players, I have decided to re-appoint each of them to their respective board for a second term of three years. Biographies of these board members are set out. The next round of new appointments will begin in June.

Bryan Carr (EMDA)

Bryan Carr is currently Chairman of Lincolnshire Electronics Company, Castlet, vice-chairman of Governor's for Monks Dyke Technology College in Lincolnshire and also chairman of Transline Ltd., Lincolnshire.

Dr. Ron Whittaker (EMDA)

Ron Whittaker is chief executive of SATRA Technology Centre, Kettering. He is on the Technical Committee of the British Apparel and Textiles Confederation and a member of the East Midlands Clothing and Textiles Partnership. He is also vice-chairman of a community primary school in Kettering and Technology Governor for a voluntary aided secondary school, also in Kettering. Ron is a council member for East Midlands Council of CBI. He is not involved in any political activity and holds no other ministerial appointments.

John Ashcroft (Yorkshire Forward)

John Ashcroft has a lead role on Business Birth Rate, innovation and technology transfer and a support role for the North Yorkshire sub-region. John is a director of Datalion Ltd. and a trustee director of The Earth Centre. He is a non-executive director of British Smaller Technology Companies VCT1 and VCT2 plc,

KMP Associates Ltd., Shopcreator plc, South Yorkshire Investment Fund Ltd. and Cozart Bioscience Ltd. He is also a board member of North Yorkshire Learning Skills Council (unpaid) and executive chairman of Cambridge Cognition Ltd. He is not involved in any political activity and holds no other ministerial appointments.

Jonathan Porritt CBE (SW RDA)

Jonathan Porritt is a co-founder and programme director of Forum for the Future, a charity which offers a solutions-oriented approach to today's environmental and social problems, developing strategic partnerships across different sectors. He is a leading writer, broadcaster and commentator on sustainable development, and his most recent book is 'Playing Safe: Science and the Environment' (Thames and Hudson 2000). He is also chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, co-director of The Prince of Wales Business and Environment Programme, and a vice-president of the Socialist Environment Resources Association (SERA). He is not involved in any political activity and holds no other ministerial appointments.

ISA Fees

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to which Government Department, and to which account, the ISA's fees and retained interest are credited. [55010]

Miss Melanie Johnson: ISA fees are credited to the Department of Trade and Industry's account at the Bank of England. Pursuant to the provisions of section 405 of the Insolvency Act 1986 surplus interest is paid to the Consolidated Fund.

Office of Fair Trading

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to review the working of the Office of Fair Trading; and if she will make a statement. [54661]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 8 May 2002]:* Under the Enterprise Bill we are creating a new statutory framework for the Office of Fair Trading (OFT), including creating a board, and requiring the OFT to publish an annual plan and annual report.

Export Licences (Israel)

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* Standard Individual Export Licences and *(b)* Open Individual Export Licences have been issued for exports to Israel in each month since January 2001. [55794]

Nigel Griffiths: The number of Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) issued to end users in Israel in each month since January 2001 was as follows:

Month/year	*Number of SIELs*	*Number of OIELs*
January 2001	0	0
February 2001	46	0
March 2001	26	2
April 2001	25	3
May 2001	0	1
June 2001	0	0
July 2001	81	2
August 2001	17	4
September 2001	16	5
October 2001	25	5
November 2001	25	1
December 2001	15	0
January 2002	13	1
February 2002	15	3
March 2002	20	1
April 2002	5	1

All export licence applications to Israel are assessed on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing criteria in light of the circumstances prevailing at the time. This means that we will not issue export licences where to do so would be in contravention of the Consolidated Criteria, including where there is a clear risk that the items might be used in internal repression, international aggression, adversely affect regional stability or prolong internal conflict.

Newspaper Distribution

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on *(a)* competition and *(b)* regulation in the newspaper distribution industry. [57107]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Responsibility for monitoring the newspaper distribution market and investigating allegations of anti-competitive behaviour lies with the Director General of Fair Trading.

The Office of Fair Trading is currently reviewing the Code of Practice on the supply of national newspapers, introduced following the 1993 monopoly report on newspaper distribution in England and Wales. It is also examining other issues affecting the industry including exclusive distribution and carriage charges.

Manufacturing Strategy

Linda Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the Government's manufacturing strategy. [57848]

Ms Hewitt: In our first term, our priority was to establish a platform of macro economic stability. That we have achieved. We now need to build upon this foundation to improve the productivity and competitiveness of our economy.

As part of this programme, I am publishing today a report setting out the Government's strategy for the manufacturing sector; a report by the Automotive Innovation and Growth Team; and a Value-Added Scoreboard. Copies of each publication are being placed in the Libraries of the House. I have also established a new Innovation and Growth Team, on the aerospace industry.

UK manufacturing matters. It creates a fifth of our national output, employs 4 million people and produces the majority of our exports. It supports well paid jobs in all regions. It can make a very substantial contribution to improvements in our economy's productivity. The success of United Kingdom manufacturing is crucial to our country's prosperity, now and in the future.

I recognise that the sector has been facing difficult conditions. There is intense competition in every market, compounded within the euro zone by the persistent weakness of that currency. In recent times, manufacturers

around the world have all faced very difficult trading conditions, as a result of the global downturn in manufacturing.

Looking to the future, however, the potential of the sector is strong. The United Kingdom is part of the world's largest single market as well as being one of the world's most open trading nations. This brings extra competition, but also extra opportunity. Recent surveys of industrial confidence have been positive, and there is evidence of improved global conditions.

Manufacturing strategy

Many UK manufacturers are world leaders. We excel in sectors such as car manufacturing, aerospace, pharmaceuticals, the electronics industry and food production. But despite its many strengths, UK manufacturing also suffers from long-standing weaknesses—lower levels of skill, investment, R and D and innovation—that contribute to lower levels of productivity than in France, Germany and the US.

The document I am publishing sets out the Government's strategy for helping manufacturing companies fulfil their potential in the UK, moving up the value chain to high skilled, knowledge intensive operations. The strategy builds on the TUC/CBI work on productivity, the dialogue at the manufacturing summit I hosted last December, and a careful analysis of the evidence.

A first requirement is that Government must create a sound market-oriented, stable business environment. But this is not enough. We must also encourage companies to innovate, to invest, to improve skills and use best business practice. On this basis we identify seven manufacturing pillars for our strategy:

Macro-economic stability

Investment

Innovation

Best practice

Raising skills and education levels

Modern infrastructure

The right market framework.

Within each pillar, there are objectives and actions for Government and industry to develop. The strategy is neither a hard and fast prescription, nor a formula for instant initiatives. Instead, we offer it as the basis for continuing to develop a robust partnership with management, employees and their unions—a manufacturing partnership based on best practice that must be effective at the national, regional and sectoral level.

AIGT report

The Automotive Innovation and Growth Team report that I am also publishing today provides an excellent example of Government working in partnership with industry to produce a practical strategy which will bring real benefits to a critical manufacturing sector.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is discussing the strategy later this afternoon with Sir Ian Gibson, Chairman of the AIGT, and other senior automotive leaders. I am delighted to accept the recommendations of the report and to confirm that the Government are committed to delivering on the report's conclusions in partnership with the automotive industry. Government funding of around £45 million will be invested over five years to implement the recommendations to establish an Automotive Academy, Supply Chain Groups, and two automotive centres of excellence.

Value-Added Scoreboard

I am also publishing today the first ever company wealth creation league table—the Value-Added Scoreboard, which measures value added, that is sales less the cost of bought-in materials, components and services. It provides a unique tool which enables all companies, including those not currently in the Scoreboard, easily to calculate their value added from their annual report and benchmark themselves against UK and European companies in their sector that are in the Scoreboard.

The Scoreboard, put together by the DTI Innovation Group, contains real success stories of British manufacturing and other sectors and will help companies to learn from the record of Britain's and Europe's most successful businesses. There are five UK companies in the top 15 wealth creators in Europe—Shell, BP, HSBC, GlaxoSmithKline and BT—and 24 in the top 100, all highly successful companies that create high value added for the UK economy.

Next steps

The work of the Automotive Innovation and Growth Team, and our response to its report, underlines our commitment to effective action to support manufacturing.

Three other innovation and growth teams have already been established, in the chemicals, environmental equipment, and software sectors. In the textiles and clothing sector, we are implementing the recommendations of the Industry Strategy Group. The aerospace industry in the UK has been very successful, but it is facing increasing competition from other parts of the world. I am, therefore, delighted to be able to announce today the formation of an innovation and growth team for the sector, led by Sir Richard Evans of BAE Systems.

On the wider aspects of our manufacturing strategy:

We will work with industry to develop firmer benchmarks against which to measure and report on progress, in order to focus our activities more effectively,

We will publish competitiveness studies on a sectoral basis to provide a basis for further action to improve productivity and performance,

The English regional development agencies have been asked to reflect the importance of manufacturing in their regional economic strategies and plans.

Our aim is to deepen and broaden the consensus around the actions required to achieve manufacturing success in the UK. In partnership with industry and other stakeholders, we are determined to deliver results.

Export Licences

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the target date is for her Department in responding to export licence applications; and if she will make a statement. [55717]

Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 13 May 2002]:* The aim is to provide a response to 70 per cent. of cases within 20 working days, except in special circumstances. Details of performance in processing Standard Individual Export Licence applications against the target is published in the

Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls, copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.

The Government are committed to processing all export licence applications as quickly as possible consistent with our determination to manage the transfer of all goods and technology controlled for strategic reasons in a responsible manner.

Rotherham Rugby Club

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will direct the Office of Fair Trading to examine *(a)* the reasons why Rotherham RFU club has been denied access to the Zurich Premier League, *(b)* the head leases and ownership clauses of the current members of the English Rugby Limited and *(c)* whether England Rugby Limited is a cartel. [56517]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Under UK competition legislation the Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring markets and investigating allegations of anti-competitive behaviour. Any evidence of anti-competitive behaviour should be sent directly to the Office of Fair Trading.

Temporary Workers

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to her answer of 30 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 739W, on temporary workers, whether all parties who submitted responses to the original consultation have been included as consultees in the short consultation exercise to which she refers. [56528]

Alan Johnson: In the next consultation exercise on the draft Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations, I will be consulting all those who responded to the last consultation exercise, anybody else who has asked to be included in the consultation and other major interested bodies. I will place copies of the consultation document in the Libraries of the House and in addition on the DTI website.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Anglo-Italian Meetings

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions on how many occasions in the last six months *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have met their Italian counterparts; and what subjects were discussed. [56889]

Dr. Whitehead: Officials met in April in preparation for a ministerial meeting in July 2002 to discuss the business of the EU Transport Council.

Temporary Staff

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the cost to his Department was of employing staff in *(a)* London and *(b)* the south east from employment agencies in each year since 1997. [56507]

Dr. Whitehead: This information is not held centrally and is therefore not available.

Press Office

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many members of his Department's press office are *(a)* under investigation and *(b)* suspended; and if he will make a statement. [55976]

Mr. Byers: Staffing and disciplinary matters are handled within the Department in accordance with the DTLR staff handbook. Within that framework personnel matters relating to individuals are a confidential matter between them and the Department.

Committee Mandates

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Advisory Committee on access for Community air carriers to intra-Community air routes is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [56828]

Mr. Jamieson: The Advisory Committee on access for Community air carriers to intra-Community air routes is established under the provisions of Article 11 of the Regulation (EEC) 2408/92. The remit of the committee is to advise the Commission on the application of the regulation and Articles 9 and 10 in particular on limiting traffic rights and capacity. The UK would normally be represented on the committee by an official from my Department. The committee has not met in the last 12 months and there has been no cost to public funds. There are no matters currently under its consideration.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

> "simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee on application of the legislation on access to the ground handling market at Community airports is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [56831]

Mr. Jamieson: This advisory committee was established under Article 10 of the ground handling directive, whose purpose is to open up ground handling to competition at European airports in the interests of airlines. The mandate of the committee is to advise the European Commission when member states apply for exemptions from the directive. The committee is normally attended by two officials, but it has not met during the last 12 months. Since the committee was established in 1996, the average annual salary and travel and subsistence cost incurred by the Department has been approximately £1,200. There are no cases currently being considered by the committee.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February 2002 (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review progress, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee on the transfer of ships from one register to another within the Community is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [56836]

Mr. Jamieson: The committee dealing with the transfer of ships from one register to another within the Community is established under the provisions of Article 6 of Council Regulation (EEC) 613/91. The committee is composed of representatives of member states and is chaired by the European Commission. The remit of the committee is to assist the Commission in implementing and interpreting the regulation with a view to achieving the objective of facilitating the transfer of ships within the Community while ensuring that standards of maritime safety and environmental protection are not reduced. The committee has not met in the last 12 months. The UK is represented by officials from my Department and the annual cost of its work to public funds is currently nil. There are no items currently under the committee's consideration.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee on the harmonisation of technical requirements and administrative procedures in the field of civil aviation is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [56830]

Mr. Jamieson: The Committee on the harmonisation of technical requirements and administrative procedures in the field of civil aviation is established under the provisions of Article 12 of Council Regulation (EEC) 3922/91. The primary remit of the committee is to assist the Commission in making the amendments necessitated by scientific and technical progress to the common technical requirements and administrative procedures listed in Annexe II or adopted by the Council in accordance with Article 4 of the regulation. The Safety Regulation Group of the Civil Aviation Authority represents the UK on the committee. The committee has not met in the last 12 months and there has been no cost to public funds. There are no matters currently under its consideration.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com(2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Advisory Committee on unfair pricing practices in marine transport is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [56832]

Mr. Jamieson: The Advisory Committee on unfair pricing practices in marine transport is established under the provisions of Article 6 of Council Regulation (EEC) 4057/86. The committee is composed of representatives of member states and is chaired by the European Commission. The remit of the committee is to assist the

Commission in establishing the existence of unfair pricing practices and the amount thereof; the existence and extent of injury; the causal link between unfair pricing practices and injury; and the appropriate measures to prevent or remedy the injury caused by unfair pricing practices and the ways and means for putting such measures into effect. The committee has not met in the last 12 months. The UK is represented by officials from my Department and the annual cost of its work to public funds is currently nil. There are no items currently under the committee's consideration.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com(2001)783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Advisory Committee on the definition and use of comparative technical and operating standards and specifications for the procurement of air traffic management equipment and systems is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [56829]

Mr. Jamieson: The Committee on the definition and use of comparative technical and operating standards and specifications for the procurement of air traffic management equipment and systems is established under the provisions of Article 6 of Council Directive 93/65 EEC. The remit of the committee is to assist the Commission in laying down the procedures for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission, to make certain Eurocontrol standards mandatory at Community level. The committee meets only rarely and there has been no cost to public funds in the last 12 months. There are no matters currently under its consideration.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com(2001)783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee for the adaptation to technical progress of recording equipment in road transport (tachographs) is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55677]

Mr. Jamieson: The Committee for Adaptation to Technical Progress (CATP) is established under Article 18 of Regulation (EEC) 3821/85. The committee is composed of representatives of member states and is chaired by the European Commission. The remit of the committee is to consider and approve technical amendments to the tachograph—the instrument of drivers' hours enforcement. The committee has met once in the last 12 months. The last work carried out by the Committee was in connection with the specification for digital tachographs. There are currently no plans for further meetings. The UK is represented by officials from my Department and the annual cost of its work to public funds is about £1,000.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com(2001)783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the committee for a transparent system of harmonised rules for restrictions on heavy goods vehicles involved in international transport on designated roads is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55674]

Mr. Jamieson: No such committee exists. In May 1998 the European Commission published a proposal for a Council directive on a transparent system of rules for driving restrictions on heavy goods vehicles involved in international transport on designated roads. The proposal made provision for an advisory committee composed of representatives of the member states and chaired by the Commission. The proposed directive was never adopted.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Advisory Committee on Transport is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55645]

Mr. Jamieson: This committee was established under the provisions of Council Decision 78/174/EEC of 20 February 1978 instituting a consultation procedure and setting up a committee in the field of transport infrastructure. But the Council Decision was repealed by decision No. 1692/96/EC of 23 July 1996 on Community guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network. And the committee established under the 1978 Decision has been replaced by the committee provided for under Article 18 of the 1996 Decision.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee on implementation of Protocol 9 to the Act of Accession of Austria concerning transport by road and rail and combined transport (Ecopoints) is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55676]

Mr. Jamieson: The Ecopoint system governs the transit through Austria by EU heavy goods vehicles. The Ecopoints Management Committee is established under the provisions of Article 16 of Protocol No. 9 of the Austrian Act of Accession and Article 4 of the Council Decision 1992/577/EEC. The committee is composed of representatives of member states and is chaired by the European Commission. The remit of the committee is to consider—and where appropriate, to vote upon—measures proposed by the Commission concerning the administration of the Ecopoint regime. The committee has met four times in the last twelve months. The UK is represented by officials from my Department and the annual cost of its work to public funds is about £2,000. The committee is currently considering whether the 108 per cent. penalty clause needs to be invoked in 2002, the categories of transport operations that should be exempted from the regime and improved procedures for dealing with infringements.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

> "simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the EU-Switzerland Transport Committee (rail and road) is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55644]

Mr. Jamieson: The committee in question did not meet in the last 12 months. It was established by the EU Switzerland Transit Agreement of 1992. However, the Transit Agreement has been superseded by the new EU Switzerland Agreement which is due to enter into force on 1 June 2002. That agreement provides for the establishment of a Joint Management (Transport) Committee, the function of which will be to ensure proper implementation of the agreement. No date has been set for its inaugural meeting. It will operate in accordance with the EU rules on comitology.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Advisory Committee for the application of uniform principles on costing for railway undertakings is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55681]

Mr. Jamieson: I have not been able to identify the Advisory Committee in question from the information provided by the hon. Member.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee on the driving licence is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55673]

Mr. Jamieson: The Committee on the driving licence is mandated under Article 1.2 of Council directive 97/26/EEC amending directive 91/439/EEC on driving licences. Its mandate extends considering possible changes in driving licence arrangements in the light of scientific and technical progress.

The committee has met once in the past 12 months. The UK is represented on the committee by an official of my Department, at a cost to public funds in the past 12 months of less than £1,000.

The committee is currently considering a number of scientific studies undertaken by the Commission into such aspects as drivers' vision and vehicle adaptations for disabled drivers.

If, as a result of the committee's work, some new legislative proposal emerged with significant implications for the UK, we would inform the Scrutiny Committees.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Advisory Committee for the harmonisation and comparability of the accounting and annual accounts of railway undertakings is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55680]

Mr. Jamieson: The Council Decision of 13 May 1965 (OJ No88, 24.5.1965, pl473), which established this committee, is no longer in force. The committee has not met in the last twelve months.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the mandate of the Committee for the adaptation to technical progress of roadworthiness tests of vehicles is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55675]

Mr. Jamieson: The Committee for the Adaptation to Technical Progress of Roadworthiness of Vehicles is mandated to approve technical amendments to the European Union Directive which prescribes the content of "MOT" tests across Europe. It has met once in the past 12 months when it was attended by two staff from my Department, a cost of less than £1,000. If, as a result of the committee's work, some new proposal emerged with significant implications for the UK we would inform the Scrutiny Committees.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Green Transport

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what measures he has introduced to support environmentally friendly transport, with particular reference to rural areas. [55128]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government have introduced a range of measures to encourage environmentally friendly transport. These include lower fuel duties for cleaner fuels; reduced vehicle excise duty and lower company car tax for cars that emit less CO2; and grants under the 'TransportAction' programme to help car owners, hauliers and transport operators to buy or convert vehicles to run on cleaner fuels such as LPG and natural gas.

In February the DTI announced its 'LPG Boost' to the TransportAction programme, an initiative to increase the number of LPG converters in rural areas and further raise awareness of this cleaner fuel.

Public Service Vehicles

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has *(a)* to update the Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) Regulations 1990 and *(b)* to issue guidance to the operators of public service vehicles in relation to the reasonable precautions to be taken to ensure safety of passengers after they have entered a vehicle but before they have become seated. [56844]

Mr. Jamieson: The Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) Regulations 1990 are currently being amended to reflect the introduction of regulated buses and coaches under the Disability Discrimination Act. The changes apply to the use of equipment fitted to the vehicle such as ramps and lifts, additional duties towards disabled people carried in the vehicle and to the carriage of assistance dogs. The amending regulations will be laid shortly, and will apply to regulated buses and coaches from September.

As explained in my written answer to the hon. Member on 8 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 220W, bus drivers and conductors (where present) are already required to take all reasonable precautions to ensure the safety of passengers who are on, or who are entering or leaving, the vehicle. This regulation is long-established and well understood and we see no need to issue guidance to operators.

London Underground

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the maximum annual bonus is that he estimates will be

achievable under each of the three PPP contracts; and what the maximum annual penalty is that can be levied on each of the three PPP consortia. [56212]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* London Underground is responsible for the PPP contracts for the modernisation of the underground's infrastructure. Under these contracts, the performance of the private sector infrastructure companies will be measured in terms of the capacity, reliability and ambience of the travelling environment they deliver on the tube network. Payments will increase as performance improves.

There is no cap on the maximum annual penalty that can be levied under the tube modernisation contracts. Indeed, if performance deteriorates below set levels, the rate at which the contractor is penalised increases. Ultimately, poor performance could result in the contractor defaulting on the contract.

Railways

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how much the Strategic Rail Authority has spent *(a)* on its own account and *(b)* in grants to organisations on feasibility studies into the possible re-opening of closed railway lines; and if he will make a statement. [55442]

Mr. Jamieson: The table indicates how much the Strategic Rail Authority has spent, or committed to spend, on feasibility studies into the re-opening of closed lines.

Project	*Approximate cost (£)*
West Midlands Capacity Study	100,000
East Coast Main Line-related routes	1,000,000
East London Line Extension	4,000,000
Matlock to Buxton	190,000

The authority is considering giving support to a number of other schemes.

Disabled Access (Railway Stations)

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what cost estimates have been prepared by the Strategic Rail Authority in relation to ensuring that all stations conform with the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 by 2004. [55202]

Mr. Jamieson: Station operators are responsible for ensuring that their stations meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Rail Safety

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will publish the draft legislation to take forward the recommendations of Lord Cullen's inquiry into rail safety. [57146]

Mr. Byers: The only recommendations which are likely to require primary legislation are those concerning the Rail Accident Investigation Branch and the Rail Industry Safety Body. In the case of the Rail Industry Safety Body, however, the Rail Regulator may be able to establish this through licence changes, in which case primary legislation will not be needed. We will publish proposals for any legislation that is required in the current Session.

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many people died as a result of railway crashes in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [57122]

Mr. Jamieson: Information held by the Health and Safety Executive on the number of train incident fatalities each year since 1997 is contained in the table.

	Passengers	*Railway staff*	*Other people*[1]	*Totals*
2001–02	0	0	5	5
2000–01	10	4	3	17
1999–2000	29	2	2	33
1998–99	0	0	3	3
1997–98	7	0	3	10

[1] Pedestrians, car drivers, cyclists

Road Accidents

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (1) how many people died as a result of road crashes which occurred on *(a)* 10 January, *(b)* 10 February, *(c)* 10 March and *(d)* 10 April; [57118]

(2) on how many days in the last 12 months the number of people killed in road crashes totalled *(a)* seven and *(b)* more than seven; and what the highest number was on a single day; [57117]

(3) how many people died as a result of road crashes in each of the last five years for which figures are available; [57120]

(4) what the average number of people who died each day as a result of road crashes in the last 12 months for which figures are available is; [57119]

(5) how many people died as a result of road crashes which occurred on 10 May. [57116]

Mr. Jamieson: Numbers killed in road accidents in Great Britain in each of the last five years for which figures are available:

	Killed
1996	3,598
1997	3,599
1998	3,421
1999	3,423
2000	3,409

In 2000 the average number of people who died each day as a result of road crashes in Great Britain was nine.

The numbers of people who died in 2000 as a result of road crashes in Great Britain which occurred on the dates requested are as follows:

10 January: 8

10 February: 9

10 March: 13

10 April: 16

10 May: 16.

There were 41 days in 2000 when exactly seven people were killed in road crashes. In addition, there were 239 days when the number of people killed in road crashes was greater than seven. In 2000, the highest number of road deaths on a single day was 22.

Motorways

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if the impact of noise on schools is part of the criteria used to consider noise reduction programmes on motorways. [57097]

Mr. Jamieson: Following consultation on establishing priorities for the resurfacing of concrete trunk roads, one of the agreed criteria is to give priority to those sites where treatment would benefit the greatest number of people. Although not mentioned specifically, schools are generally found in areas of high population density, which would be given priority under the agreed criteria.

Number Plates

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many refusals of transfer of cherished plates have been made, and on what basis refusals were made, in the latest year for which figures are available. [56877]

Mr. Jamieson: No information is kept on the number of cherished transfer applications that are refused. This information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many cherished number plates were transferred and how much was received by the Government for transfer of cherished plates in the last year for which figures are available. [56876]

Mr. Jamieson: The number of cherished transfer applications processed in the UK in financial year 2000–01 was some 259,400. The total fees from those transactions was some £21.4 million.

Vehicle Licensing and Registration

Paul Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what targets he has set for the *(a)* Drivers' Standards Agency, *(b)* Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, *(c)* Vehicle Certification Agency and *(d)* Vehicle Inspectorate for 2002–03. [57677]

Mr. Jamieson: I have set the following key targets for the agencies:

The key targets for the Driving Standards Agency are:

Contribute to a 40 per cent. reduction in riders and drivers killed or seriously injured in road accidents in the age group up to age 24 years by 2010, compared with the average for 1994–98.

Further expand and develop our programme of pre-driver education to deliver 4,500 presentations to 17 to 19-year-olds in schools, colleges and other institutions, such as the Ministry of Defence, subject to continued funding by DTLR.

90 per cent. of all customers to be satisfied with the overall level of service received from the agency.

95 per cent. of all candidates to have obtained a theory test appointment at their preferred test centre within two weeks of their preferred date.

The national average practical car test waiting time will be no more than six weeks.

Keep 99.5 per cent. of practical test appointments that are in place two days prior to the test appointment.

Following routing by call handling system, 90 per cent. of calls to theory test and practical test booking offices will be answered by a human voice in no more than 20 seconds.

Introduce a mandatory development route for all new managers in DSA. Review skill levels of existing managers against this new training framework, ensuring that 50 per cent. of all managers have completed this assessment by March 2003.

Use examiner resource efficiently by achieving an average examiner utilisation for car practical tests of 80 per cent.

Reduce sick absence to 5 per cent. by December 2002.

Achieve a 2.6 per cent. return on capital employed in 2002–03.

Increase the basket of fees by 1.7 per cent. within the cumulative RPI target.

The key targets for the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency are:

To achieve a 2.5 per cent. efficiency gain.

To complete 95 per cent. of new vehicle registrations and changes to a registration document transactions in 12 days.

To complete 95 per cent. of vehicle excise duty (VED) refunds in 30 working days.

To complete 95 per cent. of ordinary driving licence transactions in 10 working days.

To complete 95 per cent. of vocational and provisional driving licence transactions in eight working days.

To complete 95 per cent. of cherished transfer transactions in seven working days.

To deliver 95 per cent. of written replies to queries in seven working days.

To answer 95 per cent. of telephone calls in 30 seconds.

To answer 95 per cent. of e-mail inquiries within three working days.

To have lines available to the call centre during 96 per cent. of working hours.

To produce 97.5 per cent. of new vehicle registration documents, changes to registration documents and driving licences without agency induced errors.

To complete 720,00 VED enforcement cases.

The key targets for the Vehicle Certification Agency are:

To achieve at least break even on the operating surplus.

To have at least 98 per cent. of approval certificates issued error free.

To achieve a score of at least 18 on the quality and service matrix.

To ensure that the figure for average debtor days is 60 calendar days or less.

To ensure that invoices for Management System Certification work are issued within an average of 25 working days after completion of the chargeable work.

To establish by March 2003 a new, regularly monitored customer satisfaction index with a benchmark score.

The key targets for the Vehicle Inspectorate are:

To deliver against an effectiveness and quality improvement programme.

To deliver effective road safety and environmental standards activity as agreed with DTLR.

To deliver initiatives across VI and DVO to provide a seamless service to customers.

To break even year on year and achieve a 6 per cent. real rate of return on capital, over the period 1 April 1998 to 31 March 2003.

To increase value for money.

To improve performance management across the business.

To secure the long term development of the organisation.

These key targets are under-pinned by further detailed delivery targets.

Bus Services

Clive Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on the role of bus services in the delivery of the Government plans for transport in London. [55816]

Ms Keeble: The Government's 10-year plan for transport makes clear that we share with the Mayor of London a broad approach to improving transport in London which includes delivering increased public transport capacity and efficiency. The plan envisages the delivery of high quality standards on all major bus corridors, improved bus frequencies and other service enhancements. The Mayor's Transport Strategy and Transport for London's Business Plan contain specific proposals for such improvements and Transport for London are in the process of delivering them.

Councillors

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he intends to make regulations under the Local Government Act 2000 in relation to handling at local level any allegations that councillors have breached codes of conduct. [57831]

Mr. Raynsford: I intend to publish very shortly a consultation paper with a proposed framework for handling at local level allegations of breaches of the code of conduct. The framework will help to promote high standards of conduct among local councillors, and will provide sensible and efficient procedures for resolving any allegations of misconduct.

Copies of the consultation paper will be sent to local authorities, and will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Pathfinder Project

Mr. Neil Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what support is being made available to the low demand pathfinder project announced on 10 April. [57612]

Mr. Byers: I am today announcing that we are to invest £25 million in the nine low demand pathfinder projects. This investment is being financed from the Capital Modernisation Fund.

The funding will be made available in shares of £2.66 million to each pathfinder project with £1 million used for collective monitoring and evaluation of projects. This will enable each pathfinder to start early the process of preparing the strategic plan that will inform current and future investment in the pathfinder area. The strategic plan will include proposals for action for a 10 to 15-year period designed to transform the area. It will also be essential to see evidence that other non-housing spend is being brought to bear to ensure that a comprehensive and coherent approach is being taken to renewal.

The Government are determined to tackle the problem of low demand. This investment will speed up the necessary preparatory work, facilitate establishing local delivery vehicles and allow urgent action to be taken.

Fire Service

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if the new national procurement for radio systems in the fire service will replace the regionally based system of procurement. [57099]

Dr. Whitehead: Yes. Statutory responsibility for equipping fire brigades rests with local fire authorities but it is the intention that the new national procurement of replacement wide area radio systems should be in place of existing regional procurements.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if the national procurement for radio systems in the fire service will provide funding for infrastructure and terminal equipment and through life support; and what funding is available for the system. [57098]

Dr. Whitehead: On 7 May I announced the procurement of a national radio communications system for the fire service in England and Wales, for which the Government are prepared to manage, support and fully fund a new national competition. The costs of the procurement exercise will depend on the response of the market. We are discussing the implications of the new strategy with fire service interests.

Health and Safety Executive

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many staff were employed in the Health and Safety Executive at 1 April; and what proportion of those staff have clinical contact with NHS patients. [56865]

Dr. Whitehead: At 1 April 2002 the Health and Safety Executive employed 4,099 staff; none of whom would normally have clinical contact with NHS patients.

Flood Plains

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans he has to revise planning guidance in relation to flood plains to conform with the recent findings of the UK climate impacts programme. [57143]

Ms Keeble: The Government will review Planning Policy Guidance Note 25 "Development and flood risk" in 2004, three years after its publication, in the light of further evidence then available on climate change and emerging experience of its implementation and effectiveness.

As was indicated in PPG 25, planning authorities and the Environment Agency are expected to take account of the potential effects reported by the UK climate impacts programme. The implications of the UKCIP2002 scenarios in respect of flooding are expected to be available this summer.

Rural Population

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will estimate the proportion of the population increase projected by his

Department that relates to rural areas; and how many additional households are expected to be formed by 2016. [56973]

Ms Keeble: The latest sub-national projections for England are the 1996-based projections prepared by the Office for National Statistics. Between 1996 and 2016 the population in those local authorities categorised by my Department as "deep rural" or "mixed rural" is projected to rise by 38 per cent. of the national increase. Over the same time period, the number of households in these local authorities is projected to rise by 0.88 million. This is 28 per cent. of the projected national increase.

Starter Home Initiative

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many key workers will receive financial support from the Starter Home Initiative; and how much will be allocated to key workers in rural areas. [56976]

Ms Keeble: We are providing £250 million for the Starter Home Initiative (SHI) which aims to help around 10,000 key workers into home ownership. £230 million SHI funding was allocated to local scheme providers in September 2001 following a competitive bidding process. This included some £8.7 million allocated to schemes that proposed to help key workers to buy homes in small rural settlements with a population of 3,000 or less. We expect to announce the allocation of the remaining £20 million SHI funding to successful bidders later this month.

Emergency Services

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 903W, on emergency calls services, how many subscribers on each BT exchange lost their service on Thursday 25 April, and for what period of time; what contingency plans are agreed with the Hampshire police for the breakdown of services to notify police control room; if he will place such plans in the Library; which police stations were closed for the duration of the breakdown; what the source was of his information that callers on the Isle of Wight would have been able to make 999 calls; who informed *(a)* the police and *(b)* BT of the breakdown; and who was responsible for notifying members of the public of the arrangements in place for 999 calls during the breakdown period. [56500]

Dr. Whitehead: 77 sub-sections on the Southampton exchange were affected. Service to 80 per cent. of customers was restored by midnight and to the remainder by 3.55 am.

Contingency arrangements are set out in the code of practice for the public emergency call service between public network operators and the emergency services and the brochure "Loss of Access to BT's Public 999 Services". Copies of these two documents have been placed in the Library.

I understand from the Hampshire and Isle of Wight police that instructions were issued for all police stations to remain open or to reopen but in the case of Cowes, which shuts at 6 pm, it was not possible to reopen before 9.30 pm. It remained open until 2 am.

British Telecommunications have assured me that callers in the Isle of Wight would have been able to make 999 calls. The Hampshire and Isle of Wight police and BT were aware of the breakdown at the same time and made contact with each other.

It is the responsibility of the local emergency services, including the police, to ensure that they have contingency arrangements in place including arrangements to notify the public. These contingency arrangements will be reviewed in the light of the experience gained on 25 April in Southampton.

Social Housing

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what information his Department has collated on the number of ex-local authority tenants who have exercised the right-to-buy after their tenancy has been transferred to a registered social landlord; and if he will make arrangements for this to be published on a regular basis. [56604]

Ms Keeble: Figures on Preserved Right-to-Buy (PRTB) sales have been collected by the Housing Corporation since 1 April 2001 through their CORE system (continuous recording of lettings and sales). The results are published every six months in the CORE sales bulletins which are deposited in the House of Commons Library. 1,356 such sales were completed in the first six months of operation.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what information his Department has collated on levels of under-occupancy in social housing in London. [56601]

Ms Keeble: Based on the 'bedroom standard', which is a well established statistical measure of under-occupancy/overcrowding, the information requested (plus the equivalent information for England) is provided in the following table:

Households in London in the social rented sector above the bedroom standard[1]; 1998–99 to 2000–01[2]

Per cent.

	One bedroom above the standard	*Two or more bedrooms above the standard*	*Total*
London	20	8	28
England	30	12	42

[1] Bedroom standard is an indicator of expected occupation density. A notional number of bedrooms are allocated to each household in accordance with its age/sex/marital status composition and the relationship of the members to each other. This is then compared with the actual number of bedrooms (including bedsitters) available for the sole use of the household.

[2] Survey of English Housing results for three survey years 1998–99, 1999–2000, 2000–01, have been combined to give reliable estimates for London since the sample size in a single year would be insufficient.

Source:
Survey of English Housing, DTLR

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what information his Department has collated on the range of initiatives, apart from the cash incentive scheme and

HOMEBUY, local authorities and registered social landlords in London offer to encourage tenants to relinquish a tenancy on move from an under-occupied property to more suitably sized accommodation. [56602]

Ms Keeble: My Department published research and good practice guidance on underoccupation in social housing in April 2001 entitled "Managing under-occupation: A guide to good practice in social housing". The research identified and evaluated the initiatives being adopted by social landlords in England to assist under-occupiers to move to a smaller home when they want to. The research showed that social landlords in London and the south-east who are short of family sized homes are the most energetic in trying to reduce under-occupation.

Social landlords employ a range of positive incentives from helping with the move (removal arrangements and expenses) to some form of cash payment or improvements to the property (eg redecorating, kitchen or bathroom refit, improved heating, double glazing etc.). The research showed that a combination of positive inducements and the personal approach was the most effective for encouraging moves. Specialist staff who engage with tenants on a one to one basis, discussing their requirements in detail, explaining what help and properties are available can be particularly effective at facilitating moves.

Copies of the guidance were placed in the Libraries of the House.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what guidance his Department has issued to local authorities and the Housing Corporation since 1 May 1997 on offering tenants incentives, apart from the cash incentive scheme and HOMEBUY, to relinquish a tenancy on move from an under-occupied property to more suitably sized accommodation. [56603]

Ms Keeble: My Department published good practice guidance on managing under-occupation in social housing in April 2001 entitled "Managing under-occupation: A guide to good practice in social housing". The guidance was widely disseminated to LAs, RSLs and other key stakeholders such as the Housing Corporation. The guidance provides good practice for those social landlords who are looking to increase the supply of family sized relets by assisting under-occupiers to move to a smaller property when they want to.

The guidance recognised that under-occupation is not necessarily a bad thing and in areas of low demand under-occupation strategies can be counter-productive. The primary concern for authorities must always be to ask "are we making the very best use of our stock" which requires looking at the problem in the wider context of Government policies on social exclusion and on building mixed and sustainable communities.

Copies of the guidance were placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 30 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 1162W, on social housing, how many homes were transferred from local authority ownership under *(a)* the right-to-buy scheme and *(b)* registered social landlords in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997, (iii) 1998, (iv) 1999, (v) 2000, (vi) 2001 and (vii) 2002. [57029]

Ms Keeble: The number of local authority dwellings in rural areas transferred from local authority ownership under the right to buy scheme and to registered social landlords (as reported by local authorities) in each of the years 1995–96 to 2000–01 is as follows.

Number of sales and transfers in rural areas

	Right to buy scheme	*To RSLs*
1995–96	6,517	18,548
1996–97	6,399	10,739
1997–98	7,680	7,660
1998–99	6,754	26,441
1999–2000	8,925	15,452
2000–01	6,808	28,730

Note:
Figures for 2001–02 are not yet available
Source:
DTLR P1(B) housing returns (quarterly)

Housing

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he expects to *(a)* receive and *(b)* publish the research which he has commissioned into shared ownership schemes for housing. [56151]

Ms Keeble: My Department received on 7 May the draft report of research we commissioned last year to look at the operation and effectiveness of the existing low cost home ownership schemes, including shared ownership. The findings, which will help inform the future direction of the low cost home ownership programme, are now being considered. We expect to publish the report by September 2002.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 26 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 1162W, on affordable housing, if he will provide the figures for 2001–02. [57027]

Ms Keeble: Figures for 2001–02 are not yet available.

Mobile Home Owners

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what provisions there are to ensure that mobile home owners are aware that they do not have the same rights for compensation for noise, dust and vibration nuisance following new road construction as conventional dwellings; and what guidance he has issued to public inquiry inspectors for new roads on this subject. [56495]

Mr. Jamieson: Compulsory Purchase and Compensation booklets are published by my Department and made freely available at public exhibitions, inquiries and on request to those whose property may be required or affected by road construction. These booklets point out that those living in mobile homes within 300 metres of a new or altered highway may be eligible, in certain circumstances, to receive a noise payment of up to £1,650 but not to claim compensation under Part I of the Land Compensation Act 1973. Inspectors are advised not to hear any evidence about compensation.

Road Safety (Children)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how many prosecutions there have been in each of the last 10 years for carrying children unprotected in the front or back seats of cars. [56106]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: I have been asked to reply.

Information held centrally does not distinguish between the offence of carrying in a motor vehicle a child not wearing a seat belt and the offence of not wearing a seat belt.

Available information is given in the table. As the majority of seat belt offences are dealt with by the issue of a fixed penalty notice these are also included, along with the number of written warnings.

Driving or riding in a motor vehicle while not wearing a seat belt[1]: England and Wales 1991–2000

	Number of prosecutions	Number of fixed penalties	Written warnings	Total dealt with
1991	12,156	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
1992	11,258	102,322	3,214	116,794
1993	9,687	106,153	4,839	120,679
1994	8,715	114,712	6,945	130,372
1995	8,574	126,251	8,923	143,748
1996	8,530	154,345	9,312	172,187
1997	8,180	175,334	14,300	197,814
1998	8,303	193,879	10,891	213,073
1999	6,874	180,698	9,205	196,777
2000	5,740	155,301	6,163	167,204

[1] Offences under sections 14(3), 15(2) and 15(4) of the Road Traffic Act 1988.
[2] Not available.

TREASURY

Teenage Pregnancies

Dr. Fox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many teenage pregnancies there were in each of the last five years in *(a)* Lambeth, *(b)* Southwark and *(c)* Lewisham. [56937]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Dr. Liam Fox, dated 16 May 2002:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking how many teenage pregnancies there were in each of the last five years in (a) Lambeth (b) Southwark and (c) Lewisham. (56937)

Figures for the latest available five years, 1996–2000, are shown in the table below.

Under 18 conceptions for Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark LBs 1996–2000

	Lambeth	Lewisham	Southwark
1996	374	305	315
1997	352	302	284
1998	365	319	318
1999	361	305	310
2000	357	275	314

National Insurance

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the estimated additional cost is to *(a)* Plymouth city council, *(b)* South Hams district council, *(c)* Devon county council and *(d)* Torbay unitary authority in the next financial year as a result of the increase in employer's national insurance contributions announced in the Budget; and what provision will be made to cover the additional costs which will be incurred. [56291]

Dawn Primarolo: It is estimated that the changes to employer NICs announced in the Budget will add around 0.7 per cent. to pay costs on average next year. The cost to the public services will be just over £1 billion which compares with a planned rise in spending on public services of nearly £20 billion. The changes will help to fund improvements to public services and a real terms increase in spending on health over the next five years of over 40 per cent.

I regret that it is not possible to provide reliable sub-regional estimates for the national insurance changes within the disproportionate cost limits.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what he estimates to be the extra revenue generated for the Treasury due to the rise in employer national insurance rates for companies employing fewer than 50 people in each of the next four years; [56173]

(2) what he estimates to be the extra tax revenue generated in the first year by the rise in national insurance employer contributions to companies employing fewer than *(a)* 10 and *(b)* 20 people. [56691]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that it would be possible to provide an estimate only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out the basis for the assessment made in para 2.28 of the Taylor report "The Modernisation of Britain's Tax and Benefit System: Number Two" regarding the under-contribution to the NI Fund by the self-employed; what his latest estimate is of that under-contribution; if he will undertake a similar comparison between the contributions paid by married woman at the reduced rate and the benefits to which such women are entitled; and if he will make a statement. [57147]

Ruth Kelly: The latest estimate of the value of the reduction in contributions by the self-employed which is not matched by reduced benefit entitlement is in Inland Revenue Statistics table 1.5, on the Inland Revenue website (www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/stats/tax_expenditures_g_t05_1.htm).

The value is calculated by estimating the total employee and employer national insurance contributions which would be paid by the self-employed if they were to be subject to Class 1 contributions instead, and comparing this with the estimated total Class 2 and Class 4 contributions actually paid by the self-employed. An adjustment is made to allow for the fact that the self-employed are not eligible for certain contributory benefits, such as contribution-based jobseeker's allowance and the state second pension (or SERPS prior to April 2002).

If a similar calculation was performed for married women who have opted to pay national insurance contributions at the reduced rate it would not show any under-contribution.

Construction Industry

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what centrally set targets are in place for monitoring employment status in the construction industry; and on how many occasions these targets have been met in each year since 1995. [56515]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue presently has about 64 Employer Compliance Units nationally. These units are responsible for monitoring compliance by employers and contractors, and they include dedicated employment status teams.

Employer Compliance Units have a range of targets relating to reviews of employers and contractors. Such reviews may or may not include status issues. Status issues arise as a consequence of reviews and as such are not separately targeted.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures are in place to monitor the employment status of subcontractors in the construction industry to ensure the status adheres to Inland Revenue regulations when undertaking work on Government contracts. [56516]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue monitors the employment status of construction workers involved in Government contracts in the same way as it does in the whole of the rest of the industry, and elsewhere.

Law Enforcement Agencies

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what law enforcement agencies and prosecuting authorities designated with legislation there are within the responsibility of his Department; and what complaints procedure is available for each. [57124]

Ruth Kelly: The Inland Revenue and the Department of Customs and Excise. Each of these Departments has a three-tier complaints procedure governed by a Code of Practice, the third tier being an independent adjudicator. Complainants also have the right to complain, via an MP, to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration.

Aviation Insurance

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what agreement has been reached for aviation insurance terrorism cover from 1 April. [56634]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The end-date for the Government's Troika aviation insurance scheme, which provides third-party war and terrorism insurance for the UK aviation industry, was extended from 31 March to 31 May.

Inheritance Tax

Paul Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the total revenue received by the Exchequer was in inheritance tax in each of the past five years; [56406]

(2) how many people were liable for inheritance tax in each of the past five years; and what percentage of the population this represents. [56407]

Dawn Primarolo: The figures are as follows:

UK inheritance tax receipts and number of taxpaying estates

	Receipts (£ billion)	*Estates[1] (thousand)*
1997–98	1.7	18
1998–99	1.8	18
1999–2000	2.0	21
2000–01	2.2	22
2001–02[2]	2.3	23

[1] Excludes about 2,000 taxpayers on lifetime transfers
[2] Provisional

The taxpaying estates represent about three to four in 10,000 of the UK population; or between 3 and 4 per cent. of deaths.

Anglo-Italian Meetings

Mr. Weir: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on how many occasions in the last six months *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have met their Italian counterparts; and what subjects were discussed. [56890]

Ruth Kelly: Ministers and civil servants meet with a wide range of organisations and individuals, including their European counterparts, as part of the process of policy development and analysis. I refer to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 4 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 689W stating that as with previous Administrations it is not this Government's practice to provide details of all such meetings. All such contacts are conducted in accordance with the Ministerial Code, the Civil Service Code and Guidance for Civil Servants: Contracts with Lobbyists.

Social Care

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to commission a study of the trends affecting social care. [53355]

Mr. Andrew Smith: None; trends were examined in the Wanless report and by the Royal Commission on long term care commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health in 1997 (With Respect to Old Age: A Report by the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care (Cm. 4192-I); Modernising Social Services (Cm. 4169); Long-Term Care: The Government's Response to the Health Committee's Report on Long-Term Care (Cm. 4414)). Further requirements for analysis will be kept under review as part of the normal monitoring of public expenditure.

Departmental Staff (Scotland)

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many and what percentage of *(a)* civil service, *(b)* executive agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public body jobs under the remit of his Department are located in Scotland; and how many of each have been relocated to Scotland since May 1997. [56299]

Ruth Kelly: The Chancellor's civil service Departments and agencies numbers and percentage of Scottish jobs, and the number of posts relocated to Scotland since 1997 are as follows.

Department/agency	*Number of jobs in Scotland*	*Percentage of jobs in Scotland*	*Number of jobs relocated to Scotland*
Debt Management Office	0	0	0
Government Actuary's Office	0	0	0
HM Customs and Excise	1,215	5.26	0
Inland Revenue	6,876	9.91	0
National Savings	6	6	1
OGC	11	2.52	0
Office for National Statistics	0	0	0
Royal Mint	0	0	0
HM Treasury	0	0	0
Valuation Office (agency)	81	2	0

Red Book

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 1 May 2002, *Official Report*, columns 882–83W, on the Budget Red Book, if he will provide figures for each column in respect of marginal deduction rates *(a)* over 30 per cent. *(b)* over 20 per cent. and *(c)* over 10 per cent. [56467]

Ruth Kelly: The following table shows estimates of the number of families facing marginal deduction of *(a)* over 30 per cent. *(b)* over 20 per cent. and *(c)* over 10 per cent.

Number of households facing MDRs (cumulative)

Marginal deduction rate	*Before Budget 1998*	*2002–03 system of tax and benefits*	*After introduction of NTCs*
Over 30 per cent.	810,000	1,200,000	1,960,000
Over 20 per cent.	820,000	1,210,000	2,040,000
Over 10 per cent.	830,000	1,235,000	2,050,000

The figures in the table, which cover the number of households in receipt of either income related benefits of the working families tax credit (WFTC) or new tax credits from April 2003, where at least one person works at least 16 hours or more, include the effects of income tax and national insurance contributions, and the withdrawal of housing benefit and council tax benefit.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has for ministerial visits to *(a)* Syria, *(b)* Lebanon, *(c)* United Arab Emirates, *(d)* Oman and *(e)* Qatar. [54059]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has no plans at present to visit Syria, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar or the United Arab Emirates. I have, however, visited Syria on 23 July 2001, Lebanon on 24 July 2001, Qatar on 16 October 2001 and the United Arab Emirates on 18 March 2002. I have no plans at present to re-visit them, but hope to visit Oman when I can.

Criminal Offences

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many criminal offences have been *(a)* created and *(b)* abolished by his Department since 1997. [55459]

Mr. Straw: A comprehensive and exhaustive list of new and abolished offences could be provided only at disproportionate cost. We can, however, provide the following information about FCO legislation that has been enacted since 1 May 1997. All relevant FCO legislation in this time has been concerned with the implementation of international treaties in United Kingdom law.

The International Criminal Court Act 2001 created new offences of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. These replaced earlier offences wholly (for genocide) or partly (for war crimes).

The United Nations Personnel Act 1997 created new offences of attacking UN personnel, premises and vehicles.

The Landmines Act 1998 created new offences of possessing or using landmines.

The Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Act 1998 created new offences of obstructing on-site investigations and causing a nuclear explosion.

Ministerial Meetings

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the meetings held between *(a)* himself, *(b)* the staff at his Department and *(c)* British diplomatic staff with representatives of (i) the Italian Government and (ii) the Vatican since 22 April, including the participants of each meeting, the subjects discussed and the conclusions agreed upon; and if he will make a statement. [55993]

Peter Hain: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was in touch with Prime Minister Berlusconi on 7 May. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and I most recently met Prime Minister Berlusconi at the General Affairs Council in Brussels. We are regularly in touch with the Italian Government bilaterally and in multilateral fora on a range of issues. The Foreign Secretary has not met Vatican representatives recently, but officials are in regular touch.

Middle East

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the failure of the proposed UN fact-finding mission to Jenin on the future avoidance of conflict in the middle east. [56206]

Mr. Bradshaw: We regret the failure of the Israeli Government to co-operate with the UN to allow the deployment of the fact-finding team. The UN General Assembly has nevertheless asked the Secretary-General to present a report on the recent events that took place in Jenin and in other Palestinian cities. We look forward to this.

As the Secretary-General has said, there is a long shadow cast by events in Jenin but this should not be allowed to derail other peace efforts. The agreements to

resolve the crises in Bethlehem and Ramallah are examples of practical international support which have led to progress. The international community is committed to working with the parties to build on these initiatives. The priority remains to implement recent UN Security Council Resolutions, establish a ceasefire and resume negotiations.

Film Council

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the UK Film Council to increase its profile abroad. [56606]

Mr. MacShane: None, but officials in Trade Partners UK and in FCO posts overseas along with colleagues in the British Council, work closely with the UK Film Council on its export promotion strategies.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on United Kingdom citizens detained in Saudi Arabia. [54392]

Mr. Bradshaw *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Lyons) on 9 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 308W.

Gibraltar

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with Spain concerning joint command of Britain's naval base in Gibraltar. [57145]

Peter Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to my statement in the House on 16 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 451, where I said

> "we will retain our full control over the military base on the Rock".

Convention on the Future of Europe

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what position the Government will be taking on the proposal in the Convention on the Future of Europe that the Charter of Fundamental Rights should be inserted in the treaties; what discussions he has had about this with other member states and other institutions; and if he will make a statement. [56596]

Peter Hain: The Government welcome the European Convention's decision to set up a Working Group to look at the Charter's status and address the legal and practical issues arising from the question of whether, and if so how, the Charter should be included in the treaties. The Government will seek to be represented on this group.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what position the Government will be taking on the proposal in the Convention on the Future of Europe that the European Union should be given full legal personality; what discussions he has had on the matter with other member states and other institutions; what assessment the Government have made of the effects of giving the European Union full legal personality; and if he will make a statement. [56595]

Peter Hain: Although legal personality has not yet been discussed in the Convention on the Future of Europe, it will be on the agenda of one of a preliminary round of six working groups to commence in June.

As with other issues discussed in the Convention, the Government will both set out their ideas on legal personality, and hear the views of the other members at the Convention.

Rough Diamonds

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent progress has been made with the establishment of a global certification scheme for rough diamonds. [56666]

Mr. MacShane: Government, industry and civil society negotiators drawing up the international certification scheme for rough diamonds (the Kimberley Process) have agreed on nearly all outstanding issues. The scheme is designed to ensure a Government-issued certificate attesting to the legitimacy of the contents accompanies each shipment of rough diamonds. The intention is to implement the scheme by the end of 2002, at a date to be agreed at the next meeting in November. Participants are meanwhile devising national action plans to ensure they are ready to effect full implementation by that date.

Committee Mandates

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the mandate of the Committee on Implementation of the Programme of Assistance to Promote the Transition to a Market Economy and to Strengthen Democracy and the Rule of Law in the Partner States of Eastern Europe and Central Asia is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55389]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply. The committee is responsible for oversight of the EC programme of technical assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS). It has met four times over the past 12 months and the next meeting will take place on 23 May 2002. Officials from my Department and members of the staff of the United Kingdom Representation in Brussels represent the United Kingdom on the committee. Over the past 12 months the cost to public funds has been approximately £2,500.

The items currently under its consideration are those on the agenda for the forthcoming meeting. These are annual programmes of assistance for 2002 for Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, thematic research programmes for 2002 and support to national co-ordinating units in programme countries. The committee will also receive information on future programming orientations for Central Asia and the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership Support Fund.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/486/EC, to

"simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation under this decision, the commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Commission Document 5685/02). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Foot and Mouth

11. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on her policy on compensation to those indirectly affected by the foot and mouth disease epidemic in 2001. [55124]

Margaret Beckett: There is no statutory provision for such compensation nor can the Government be the insurer of last resort. The Government did of course help rural business and communities through a series of support measures to aid recovery from the impact of FMD.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many overnight stays were undertaken by her officials working on the foot and mouth epidemic. [54339]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The information requested is not readily available and could not be obtained without disproportionate cost. I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), on 29 April 2002, *Official Report,* column 552W, which gave details of the total amount of overnight subsistence for staff working on the foot and mouth crisis.

Parish Councils

12. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the categorisation of the activity of parish councils as set out in the recent rural White Paper and the Countryside Agency's "State of the Countryside" report 2001. [55125]

Alun Michael: I refer the hon. Member to my letter of 21 March to all MPs which set out the background to the communities' vibrancy issue and made clear that the communities' vibrancy indicator is not a measure of parish council activities. This Government are breaking new ground in actively promoting the role and importance of parish councils and I hope the hon. Gentleman will endorse and support our initiatives.

Sustainable Development Summit

13. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the consultations she is undertaking prior to the world summit on sustainable development. [55126]

Margaret Beckett: DEFRA has funded UNED-UK to carry out a stakeholder consultation exercise which has involved over 350 groups representing civil society. A business adviser has been seconded to DEFRA to liaise with the business community on WSSD. We are also working through the Development and Environment Group of BOND (British Overseas NGOs for Development) to exchange views with NGOs, and the Local Government International Bureau has been a member of the official UK delegation at the preparatory meetings.

18. **Mr. Grogan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on progress in domestic and global preparations for the world summit on sustainable development. [55132]

Mr. Meacher: Preparations for WSSD both in the UK and globally are well under way. We are currently in the process of preparing for the Ministerial-Level Preparatory Committee (known as Prepcom IV) in Indonesia on 24 May to 7 June at which I will lead the UK delegation. This meeting will continue work started at the last Prepcom on the proposed Programme of Action to deliver global sustainable development. It will also start work on the political declaration for the summit.

Mink

14. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her policy is on the control of mink. [55127]

Alun Michael: The responsibility for the control of wild mink rests with those people most likely to benefit from such control, the individual landowners and occupiers. Predation by mink has been a factor in the decline of our native water vole population. The Government's Biodioversity Action Plan for water vole encourages control of mink where they pose a threat to water vole populations.

Sheep

15. **Mr. Roger Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the sheep quota national reserve for 2003. [R] [55129]

Alun Michael: As we have already announced, there will be no allocation of Sheep Annual Premium Quota from the National Reserve for 2003. However we are making arrangements to ensure that producers who would have been eligible to apply to the 2003 Reserve will be able to apply to the 2004 Reserve.

Marine Environment

16. **Mr. Lazarowicz:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures she is taking to protect the marine environment of the seas around the United Kingdom. [55130]

Mr. Meacher: The first Marine Stewardship report was published on 1 May. It sets out our strategy for the conservation and sustainable development of our marine environment. Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

Fuel Poverty

17. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the fuel poverty strategy. [55131]

Mr. Meacher: The UK Fuel Poverty Strategy, published in November last year, set out the government's goal to seek an end to fuel poverty, with the first target to ensure that by 2010, no vulnerable household need risk ill health due to a cold home.

The strategy's aim is to improve the energy efficiency of fuel poor households, to maintain the downward pressure on fuel bills, to tackle poverty and social exclusion.

Waste and Packaging Directives

19. **Sue Doughty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on discussions between her Department and the European Commission regarding the implementation of European waste and packaging directives. [55133]

Mr. Meacher: The UK has been fully involved in the current negotiations on the European Commission's proposal for a directive amending Directive 94/62/EC on packaging and packaging waste.

Draft Water Bill

20. **Dr. Ladyman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the Government response to the consultation on the draft Water Bill. [55134]

Margaret Beckett: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, announced the publication of the Government Response to the draft Water Bill consultation on Thursday 2 May.

The Water Bill aims to ensure improved management of our water resources; place consumers at the heart of a more open and accountable regulatory process and increase the powers of courts and the Regulators to level appropriate financial penalties on water companies. In addition, the Bill will contain provisions for extending competition for users of large amounts of water.

The consultation response considered in detail more than 150 responses and following this, a number of amendments will be made to the draft Water Bill. The main changes are; firstly that Ofwat will be governed by a Regulatory Board rather than an individual Director General, along similar lines to other economic regulators. This is instead of the Advisory Panel proposed in the Draft Bill. Secondly, the Director General's duties to ensure that companies can secure "reasonable returns on their capital" will not be altered. And thirdly the Director General of Water Services will be given a sustainable development duty. While this will not alter the Director General's purpose or aims, it will oblige him to be mindful of social and environmental concerns, when exercising his functions as economic regulator of the industry. The Director General supports these changes.

Timber

21. **Ian Lucas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she will take to ensure that timber procured by Government is from well managed, sustainable sources. [55135]

Mr. Morley: The Government is actively engaged in implementing its policy of seeking to procure its timber and timber products from sustainable and legal sources, DEFRA is monitoring progress and will be issuing further guidance to central government departments and their agencies.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the Government adopted their timber procurement policy. [54438]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The Government's current timber procurement policy became a binding commitment for central Government Departments and their agencies with effect from 28 July 2000, following a written reply to a parliamentary question on that day by the Minister for the Environment, *Official Report*, column 947W. This followed the G8 summit earlier in July 2000, where in response to a UK led initiative members agreed to consider how public purchasing could help reduce illegal logging. Prior to the policy becoming a binding commitment it had been part of the model policy for greening government operations since 1997.

Waste Recycling

22. **Mr. Baron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions she has had with local councils regarding the meeting of waste recycling targets. [55137]

Mr. Meacher: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, has not had any recent discussions with particular local authorities to discuss meeting recycling statutory performance standards. However, negotiations have recently been concluded with 6 local authorities who have agreed to exceed their statutory performance standards on recycling as part of a Local Public Service Agreement. Similar discussions are currently being held with a further 5 local authorities. We have also recently received bids from a number of local authorities for the first year of the £140 million waste minimization and recycling fund.

Common Fisheries Policy

23. **David Burnside:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the timetable for the reform of the common fisheries policy. [55138]

Mr. Morley: The Common Fisheries Policy was substantially laid down in regulations adopted in 1983 which specified an interim review in 1992 and a further review in 2002. Any changes to the regime should be decided by end 2002 for application from 2003. We expect the proposals to be produced by the end of May. We are disappointed that the proposals failed to emerge earlier since the Government is keen to begin

negotiations. The Commission, however, is responsible for handling its own work programme and we must wait for them to complete their deliberations.

33. **Mr. Bellingham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the European Commission's proposals for the reform of the common fisheries policy. [55152]

Mr. Morley: Our primary objective for the Common Fisheries Policy must be for a policy which is both economically and environmentally sustainable and one which involves stakeholders more closely in management decisions affecting them. Only in that way will the CFP attract support and credibility from fishermen and so ensure responsible stock management and give the promise of a viable future. I strongly agree with the Commission's conclusions in their Green Paper on the operation of the CFP that it is not meeting its objectives. The forthcoming review of the CFP will give the opportunity not only to put right what has gone wrong but also to consider how the CFP should develop over the coming years.

We expect the proposals to be produced by the end of May. We are disappointed that the proposals failed to emerge earlier since the government is keen to begin negotiations. The Commission, however, is responsible for handling its won work programme and we must wait for them to complete their deliberations.

Fruit Industry

24. **Hugh Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on Government support for the fruit industry. [55141]

Alun Michael: We assist the horticulture industry by funding a programme of strategic research and development worth almost £11 million per annum. For 2001–02, some £2.6 million of this spend is allocated to the soft and top fruit sector. In addition, the England Rural Development Programme, through both the Rural Enterprise Scheme and the Processing and Marketing Grant, provides opportunities for the industry to improve its competitiveness.

Small Farms Produce

25. **Mr. Andrew Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on her action to improve opportunities for small farmers to market their produce. [55144]

Alun Michael: The Policy Commission Report on Farming and Food made a number of recommendations relating to local and regional foods, which will help support and develop the opportunities for small farmers to market their produce. We have invited views on these recommendations, in order to inform our action plan for the farming and food sectors. This action plan will be launched in the autumn.

The Government are already involved in a number of initiatives aimed at encouraging local food production and marketing. The England Rural Development Programme provides grant aid for a range of activities that may be of benefit to farmers seeking to sell produce locally. We have also assisted various local projects under the Agricultural Development Scheme, as well as supporting the National Association of Farmers' Market's training and accreditation programmes and the development of the South-West Food and Drink Organisation.

Through Food from Britain we contribute to the funding of a network of regional food groups which provide trade development services to regional and speciality food producers, some of whom are farmers.

We have actively encouraged the development of farmers' markets, as has the Countryside Agency which receives its grant aid from DEFRA. Farmers may also derive benefit from the Countryside Agency's "Eat the View" programme which seeks to promote local products that support sustainable land management.

Biosecurity

26. **Mr. Carmichael:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the role to be played in improved biosecurity measures by the state veterinary service. [55145]

Mr. Morley: The state veterinary service played a vital role in promoting biosecurity during the foot and mouth disease outbreak and it will continue to be a key link in the promotion of the biosecurity message.

Local veterinary staff are providing advice relating to on-farm biosecurity when requested and this advice is particularly important when farms are restocking following the outbreak. The biosecurity message is being promoted at local meetings dealing with disease control with farmers and other stakeholders.

The Department is planning to issue a biosecurity code of practice later in the year and will be considering a further biosecurity campaign. The state veterinary service will again play a key role in the delivery of that message.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the financial impact of movement and biosecurity regulations on agricultural shows; and if she will make a statement. [54347]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* The licence conditions for biosecurity at livestock shows, and the movement of animals to and from them, have been developed in close association with the shows organisers and those stakeholders who will be taking livestock to shows this year. No costings have been provided by these interests during the discussions and none have been drawn up by my Department.

The need for strict biosecurity is keenly appreciated by the majority of show organisers. I am pleased that they are taking a responsible attitude to biosecurity to protect livestock farmers and the wider rural community from another devastating outbreak of animal disease. The rules have been drawn up on the advice of the Department's vets to minimise the risk of disease associated with the re-opening of livestock shows and they will be kept under review to ensure that they remain proportionate to the disease risk.

Agriculture (West Country)

27. **Mr. Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she plans to visit this year's Royal Bath and West show to discuss the state of agriculture in the west country. [55146]

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State is unable to attend this year's Royal Bath and West show due to prior engagements, but my noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary Lords, (The Lord Whitty of Camberwell), will be visiting on 31 May.

Dairy Industry

28. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the prospects for the dairy industry. [55147]

Mr. Morley: The current low price of milk has undoubtedly reduced the income of many dairy farmers to levels that appear unsustainable in the long term. However, this low price has largely been caused by factors that are temporary in nature, most notably, oversupply of raw milk in the UK and the weakness of EU and world markets for dairy products.

For the longer term, it is likely that the next round of WTO agriculture negotiations will further restrict the use of export subsidies and the increasing exposure of EU markets to world markets. In addition, enlargement of the EU is likely to lead to pressure on the Community budget, if the CAP is not reformed.

In order to produce a sustainable dairy industry that can compete successfully on the growing world market for dairy products, the industry must be given the opportunity to trade free of artificial constraints imposed by the WTO, as well as by the EU dairy regime. The EU price support system is focused on butter and skimmed milk powder, both in clear surplus, hampering the development of the most efficient farmers and represent significant financial burden to most farmers.

The Government therefore favour the orderly phasing out of milk quotas in combination with a reduction in EU support prices to world prices, and direct but degressive aid to help farmers adjust to the new regime. During the forthcoming review of the milk quota system, due to start in June, the UK will be pressing to achieve confirmation that quotas will not continue after they lapse on 31 March 2008. These changes are intended to provide longer-term direction within the framework of the dairy regime, which farmers need in order to plan their businesses effectively.

Agrimonetary Compensation

29. **Mr. Bacon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on agrimonetary compensation. [55148]

Mr. Morley: We have considered the case for payment of optional agrimonetary compensation to the livestock sector. While we acknowledge the difficulties that the sector is facing and are working with them on the recommendations of the Policy Commission on Farming and Food, we have decided not to pay this subsidy given the many competing demands on the Exchequer at present.

GM Crops

30. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when her Department will analyse the data from the farm-scale evaluations of GM crops. [55149]

Mr. Meacher: The Department will analyse data from the farm-scale evaluation of GM crops once we have received the advice of the Scientific Steering Committee overseeing the progress and publication of the ecological studies and the results are published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. This is anticipated to be in the summer of 2003 form spring-sown crops (spring-sown oil seed rape, maize and beet) and in summer 2004 for winter-sown oil seed rape.

Abandoned Vehicles

31. **Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps her Government are taking to support local authorities in dealing with abandoned vehicles. [55150]

Mr. Meacher: We have supported pilot schemes in the London boroughs of Newham and Lewisham in which the local authority was given DVLA's powers to wheelclamp and remove unlicensed vehicles after 24 hours. We announced the extension of the scheme nationally on 10 April. The London borough of Wandsworth joined the scheme on 23 April.

In October 2001 we published a consultation document on measures to remove abandoned and untaxed vehicles from the streets more quickly and, for the longer term, bring forward changes to vehicle registration and licensing procedures to ensure greater accuracy of DVLA's vehicle record.

Primary powers have now been included in the Finance Bill for changes to the vehicle registration and licensing system, which will place a clear obligation on the last registered keeper to tax and licence a vehicle, and establish an automatic penalty for those who do not relicense on time. the full details of the scheme—including the levels of the automatic penalties and their operation—and the implementation date have yet to be decided.

Regulations to reduce the statutory notice periods after which local authorities can remove abandoned vehicles and the storage periods for unlicensed vehicles were laid before the House on 19 March and came into force on 9 April.

Kent Police piloted a "blitz" approach (Operation Cubit) on abandoned vehicles in the Medway area in co-operation with Kent county council, Medway council, DVLA and the Kent fire brigade for eight weeks in early 2001 and the Home Office has commissioned a detailed evaluation of the pilot which has been academically assessed and circulated to other stockholders for comments, including the Kent police and Kent county council. We hope to publish it in the near future.

Since the original pilot, similar operations have taken place and are shown in the table:

	Date
Swanley	June 2001
Dartford	October 2001
Gravesend	October 2001
Maidstone	January 2002
Swale	January 2002
Hastings	February 2002
Brighton	February 2002
Liverpool	March 2002

To date the operations have removed almost 3,000 abandoned unlicensed vehicles from the streets of Kent and Hastings.

Rights of Way

32. **Ross Cranston:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what progress she has made in implementing the power to close rights of way. [55151]

Alun Michael: I refer to the reply I gave to his previous question on the subject on 12 April 2002, *Official Report,* column 653W. I have now refined our proposals and issue of a consultation paper is imminent.

Tenant Farmers (Retirement Scheme)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to introduce a retirement scheme for tenant farmers. [55486]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 10 May 2002]:* I have no plans at present to introduce such a scheme. We consulted on the early retirement provisions of the EU Rural Development Regulation when drawing up plans for implementation of the regulation, but in the light of responses to that consultation we decided that the limited funds available for implementation would be better directed towards other measures to assist the industry. This is because the type of early retirement scheme available under the regulation could not be targeted effectively towards those who should benefit, such as tenant farmers.

The general question of policy on helping farmers to leave the industry will, however, be considered further in the light of the feedback we receive on the issues we have asked stakeholders to consider following publication of the Policy Commission report.

Game Shooting

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent assessment she has made of the economic value of game shooting; and if she will make a statement. [54342]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 7 May 2002]:* No assessment has been undertaken by my Department of the direct value to the economy of game shooting.

Through the England Rural Development Programme, we provide a means to help farmers wishing to diversify by developing the potential for activities such as game shooting. The benefits of each proposed project are assessed in deciding whether it should receive financial support under the programme.

Committee Mandates

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the mandate of the Committee on geographical indications and protected designations of origin for agricultural products and foodstuffs is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55243]

Mr. Morley: The Regulatory Committee on geographical indications and protected designations of origin for agricultural products and foodstuffs has met twice over the last 12 months. Its mandate is laid down in Article 15 of Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2081/92. Its activities include helping the Commission to decide on the registration of protected food names and to draw up Commission regulations relating to the operation of the scheme. The UK is represented on the Committee by two officials from DEFRA. The annual cost to UK public funds of its work over the last 12 months is £1,000. The main issue currently under its consideration concerns the registration of feta cheese as a Protected Designation of Origin.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

> "simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the mandate of the Committee on certificates of specific character for agricultural products and foodstuffs is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55244]

Mr. Morley: The mandate of the Committee on certificates of specific character is laid down in Article 19 of Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2082/92. Its activities include assisting the Commission to decide on the registration of protected food names and to draw up Commission regulations relating to the operation of the scheme. It has not met over the last 12 months. When it does meet, the UK representation consists of two officials from DEFRA. There have been no costs associated with the work of the Committee over the last 12 months and there are no items currently under its consideration.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

> "simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

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As part of the review process, the UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the mandate of the Standing Committee on agricultural research is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55241]

Mr. Morley: The Standing Committee on Agricultural Research (SCAR) was set up under Article 43 of the Treaty of Rome in 1957. In order to meet the aims of the Common Agricultural Policy, SCAR advises the Commission on co-ordination and promotion at Community level of agricultural research activities undertaken in the member states. SCAR met twice (19 June 2002, 11 March 2002) over the last 12 months for half-day meetings on both occasions. UK representation is normally the Head of Research Policy and International Division in DEFRA with supporting staff, and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC). This cost of this work to the public purse of DEFRA is about £8,500 per annum, including staff time and travelling expenses. SCAR has been examining in particular the development and implementation of the proposed new Framework Programme 6 for collaborative EU research, technology and development in those areas within its competence and interest. The papers of SCAR meetings are available on www.europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture. An annual report on the working of committees such as SCAR was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). The UK Government have encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the mandate of the Management Committee of the common organisation of agricultural markets for natural fibres is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [55250]

Mr. Morley: The Management Committee for Natural Fibres assists the European Commission in the operation of the common organisation of the markets in flax, hemp, cotton and silkworms. The UK is represented by officials from this Department. It has met seven times over the last 12 months at a cost of £6,300 to public funds, excluding the salary costs of the officials. The Committee's current priorities are the implementation of control arrangement for imports of hemp and hemp seed from third countries and the effects of the recent reforms of the regimes for cotton and for flax and hemp. Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

> "simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government has encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the mandate of the Committee for the adaptation to technical progress and application of the Community award scheme for an eco-label is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if she will list the items currently under its consideration; if she will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [56728]

Mr. Meacher: Regulation (EC) 1980/2000 on a revised Community ecolabel award scheme is intended to promote products which have the potential to reduce negative environmental impacts, as compared with the other products in the same product group, thus contributing to the efficient use of resources and a high level of environmental protection. This objective is pursued by a scheme to provide information to consumers in the form of an environmental award label, which can be displayed on products that meet criteria established under the Regulation. A committee composed of representatives of member states and chaired by the Commission has been established to assist the Commission in the operation of the ecolabelling scheme, in particular by reaching decisions on the product criteria to be applied and the administrative arrangements needed to run the scheme.

The Committee has met four times in the last 12 months. The UK is formally represented on the Committee by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The cost of attending this Committee over the last 12 months was approximately £3,000.

The main issues currently being considered by this Committee are decisions on ecological criteria for award of the ecolabel to paints and varnishes, copying and printing paper, bed mattresses and light-bulbs.

Together with member states, the Commission is currently conducting a review to bring existing legislation on the conduct of comitology committees into line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC, to

> "simplify the requirements for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission".

As an obligation to this Decision, the Commission undertook to publish an annual report on the working of committees. The first report was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 February 2002 (Com (2001) 783 Final). As part of the review process, the UK Government has encouraged the Commission to produce and maintain

an electronic database of every comitology committee, its agendas and recent actions, to be accessible through its website.

Countryside Stewardship Scheme

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to her answer of 18 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 1071, on the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, on what basis decisions are made to visit farms after the first year of the scheme; and what monitoring systems are in place to check whether a visit in the second year is necessary. [55338]

Mr. Morley: The compliance monitoring inspections of Countryside Stewardship Scheme agreements carried out by the Rural Payments Agency are selected using risk based criteria and are not specifically related to the year of the agreement. Inspections may therefore take place in any of the ten years of an agreement: the need for any follow-up inspections will be assessed in the light of the initial inspection.

Under the risk based strategy for selecting care and maintenance visits, technical staff from DEFRA's Rural Development Service aim to visit all agreements in their first year. Visits in subsequent years may additionally be carried out following a compliance monitoring inspection, a request for a major amendment to an agreement or at the request of an agreement holder.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many farmers in the United Kingdom have participated in the Countryside Stewardship scheme in each year since it started. [55296]

Mr. Morley: The number of applicants who have joined the Countryside Stewardship scheme in each year since the scheme started in 1991 are as follows:

	Number of new agreements
1991–95[1]	5,027
1996	1,117
1997	1,195
1998	1,275
1999	1,168
2000	2,205
2001[2]	2,360
Total number of agreements[3]	14,347

[1] Annual figures for the period 1991–95, when the scheme was operated by the Countryside Commission are not available.
[2] Estimate.
[3] Farmers may hold more than one agreement.

Wastepack

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on what date her Department was first informed of an *(a)* potential and *(b)* actual problem with Wastepack meeting its obligations for 2001 under the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997; and if she will make a statement. [54791]

Mr. Meacher: The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) announced on 15 April 2002 that, having completed its compliance assessment, it concluded that Wastepack compliance scheme had failed to take reasonable steps to carry out its recovery and recycling obligations under the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997 (as amended). During my Department's review of progress on recovery and recycling in 2001 it sought confirmation from the major compliance schemes in November 2001 that they were on course to meet their obligations under the Regulations.. We first became aware of a problem when the third quarter returns from accredited reprocessors suggested that there remained a significant amount of recovery to be achieved by the scheme in the final quarter.

CITES

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will seek greater protection for big leaf mahogany under CITES. [55297]

Mr. Meacher: The Government intend to explore with other member states the possibility of listing big leaf mahogany on Annex B of Council Regulation 338–97. Such a listing would require member states to be satisfied that the trade would not be detrimental to the conservation of the species before the timber could be imported into the EU.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what preparations her Department is making for the CITES 12 meeting of the Conference of the Parties. [55298]

Mr. Meacher: All proposals for discussion at the Conference of Parties have to be with the CITES Secretariat by 6 June. A proposal to list the basking shark on Appendix II has been prepared and will be submitted shortly. Officials have also contributed to the preparation of a draft resolution on trade in biological samples. These and proposals by other EU member states will be discussed at a meeting on 16 May. A further meeting to agree a common position on all CITES proposals will be held at the end of July. Views on these proposals will be sought from NGOs and other interested parties in the run up to this later meeting.

Kyoto Treaty

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions she has had with US officials about the ratification of the Kyoto treaty. [51611]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 24 April 2002]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State discussed ratification of the Kyoto protocol with several US officials during a visit to the US on 10–12 April. She updated them on the progress made by the UK and our EU partners on ratification of the protocol. The UK continues to urge the US to participate fully in international action to tackle climate change on the grounds that this is necessary to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that the cost for developed countries of implementing the Kyoto protocol will only be between 0.1 per cent. and 1.1 per cent. of GDP in 2010.

Veterinary Residues

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the

membership of the Advisory Group on Veterinary Residues between 1995 and 2001; and if she will give their dates of membership and the register of their interests. [55732]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* The membership of the Advisory Group on Veterinary Residues (AGVR) is listed in the Veterinary Medicines Directorate's (VMD) six annual reports on Surveillance for Veterinary Residues for 1995–2001. Only non-civil service members of the committee would have given declarations of interest. There was no expectation at the time that their declarations of interest would be made public. Under Part II, Paragraph 14 a) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, it is necessary to contact the ex-members to seek permission for the declarations to be disclosed. The VMD will write to the ex-members and disclose the declarations of those who consent.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will publish the guidelines relating to the establishment of the Advisory Group on Veterinary Residues in 1995 and the Veterinary Residues Committee in 2001. [55731]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 May 2002]:* The Advisory Group on Veterinary Residues (AGVR) was set up in 1995 to ensure that the Veterinary Medicines Directorate's residues surveillance programmes were subject to independent scrutiny and advice. The AGVR's terms of reference are given in the VMD's annual reports on Surveillance for Veterinary Residues. Interested organisations, including consumer groups, were asked for nominations to serve on the AGVR. Account was taken of the advice given in the 'Guide to Public Appointments' that pertained at that time.

The Veterinary Residues Committee was set up in 2001 to interpret and advise on the incidence and concentrations of residues of veterinary medicines in samples collected under the VMD's and FSA's surveillance programmes.

Appointments to the VRC were made in accordance with Nolan principles. Information on the appointments process and terms of reference for the VRC is given on their website: vet-residues-committee.gov.uk.

Aggregates Levy

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she *(a)* has made and *(b)* plans to make of the role and impact of the sustainability fund in England; how this fund will operate; and if she will make a statement. [53714]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have consulted widely on the role and impact of the sustainability fund. In August 2000 we consulted on the objectives of the fund and, in broad terms, the best use of resources. A second consultation paper, in October 2001, invited comments on proposals for the operation and distribution of the fund in England. A summary of responses is on my Department's website.

I announced final decisions on the distribution of the fund on 10 April. It will be distributed through the Countryside Agency, English Heritage, English Nature, WRAP, DTI's Construction Innovation and Research Management Programme, DTLR's Planning Research programme, Clean Up programme and Freight Facilities Grant. It will run for two years initially, with £29.3 million available each year.

Monitoring and review arrangements will be put in place to assess the impact of the fund and help inform future decisions on how the fund works. The fund aims to reduce damage to the environment from extracting aggregates by reducing the demand for primary aggregates, promoting more environmentally friendly extraction and transport and reducing the effect of local aggregate extraction.

Maladministration

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many findings there have been of maladministration by ombudsmen with responsibility for agencies under the remit of her Department since 1997. [56312]

Mr. Morley: Information on the handling of complaints is set out in tabular form by the Parliamentary Ombudsman each year as an attachment to his annual report. For those complaints where there was evidence of maladministration which warranted a full investigation, the table sets out how many complaints were upheld as being fully or partially justified. Copies of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's annual reports for the period 1997–98 to 2000–01 inclusive can be viewed in the House Library, or on the Parliamentary Ombudsman's website at www.ombudsman.org.uk/publications

Refrigerators

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will publish details of the methodology used to determine the size of the moneys given to local authorities to further assist in the costs associated with the implementation of the Ozone Depleting Substances Regulation for the period 1 January 2002 to 31 March 2002; and what his estimate is for the annual cost of these measures. [38866]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 28 February 2002]:* The figure was based on early estimates of the costs that local authorities would face in the period January to March 2002. These estimates were made on the basis of the best information [illegible] and at the time. It was assumed that: 2.5 million fridges would be disposed of each year; treatment costs would be around £15 per unit; and up to 40 per cent. of units might continue to be taken back by retailers and manufacturers. However, Government accepted that additional payments might be needed once the actual costs and consequences of the regulation were clearer.

As I informed the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 15 April, my estimate of the total cost of the measures needed to deal with fridges in 2002–03 is £40 million.

Sustainable Development

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she intends to include representatives of the devolved Administrations in the UK delegation to the World Summit on Sustainable Development. [56132]

Mr. Meacher: As I stated in my answer of 19 December 2001, the Devolved Administrations have been closely involved in the development of the UK's position on the World Summit on Sustainable Development. They will be represented at the summit.

Voluntary Sector (Funding)

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire of 25 January, *Official Report*, columns 1185–86W, on Government funding of the voluntary sector, if she will list the grant schemes and other mechanisms by which *(a)* her Department, *(b)* the Countryside Agency and *(c)* English Nature distribute funding to voluntary sector organisations. [51402]

Alun Michael *[holding answer 19 April 2002]:* There are various grant schemes and spending programmes through which DEFRA, the Countryside Agency and English Nature provide funding to organisations in the voluntary and community sector.

DEFRA makes funding available to the voluntary and community sector through the Wildlife and Countryside Research Programme, the Environmental Action Fund and the Rural Stress Action Plan. Funding is also made available directly to the National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs, ENCAMS and National Energy Action.

The Countryside Agency has a variety of funding streams to which voluntary sector organisations and other groups are eligible to apply, flowing from its work on rural services (including community development and social exclusion), Rural Housing Enablers, market towns, its Vital Villages programme (including Community Services Grant and Rural Transport Partnership), the Wider Welcome scheme (including national trails maintenance and rights of way work), and the Walking Your Way To Health initiative.

English Nature distributes funding to voluntary sector organisations through the Reserves Enhancement Scheme, Volunteer Action Grants, Section 35 National Nature Reserve (NNR) Capital Grants Scheme, Land Purchase Grants and the Biodiversity Grant Scheme.

Dairy Producers

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will take steps to support organic yoghurt and cream farm producers. [55630]

Mr. Morley: We have already made considerable support available to encourage conversion to organic farming and will continue to do so. We have budgeted expenditure of £140 million over the lifetime of the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP), which should triple the area under organic management by 2006. And, through both the Rural Enterprise Scheme and the Processing and Marketing Grant, the ERDP provides opportunities for these sectors of the industry to improve their competitiveness.

The development of the organic sector will be carried forward by an organic action plan which is being drawn up with stakeholders. We hope to complete this work by July.

Meat and Livestock Commission

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will set up a public inquiry into Meat and Livestock Commission invoices sent to the Intervention Board in 1998 and 1999. [55029]

Mr. Morley: I do not consider that a public inquiry into invoices received from the Meat and Livestock Commission during those two years would be beneficial or is, indeed, necessary.

All expenditure incurred by the Intervention Board was published in the Board's annual accounts which, as with the accounts of all Government Departments, are subject to annual audit to assure Parliament that taxpayer's money is being properly spent and accounted for.

Sewage Discharges (Whitburn and Hendon)

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects to publish the report of the inquiry into sewage discharges from Whitburn and Hendon; and if she will make a statement. [55708]

Mr. Meacher: The report of the inquiry prepared by the appointed inspector was submitted on 1 March. It is currently under consideration and will be published together with the announcement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's decision on the Whitburn and Hendon discharge consent applications. I am aware of the interest in the outcome of this inquiry and can assure my hon. Friend that we are working to ensure that this decision is made as quickly as possible.

Marine Stewardship Reports

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans the Government have to bring forward legislation to implement the policy objectives of the Marine Stewardship reports. [55186]

Mr. Meacher: We will consult later this year on the regulations to extend the Habitats and Birds Directives out to the limit of jurisdiction of UK waters to protect important habitats and species. Further legislation will be brought forward if it is needed to deliver our vision of clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas.

Waste Composting

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received on statutory safety regulations in the UK for the composting of household waste; and if she will make a statement. [54549]

Mr. Meacher: The Department occasionally receives correspondence from householders located close to a composting facility on the safety requirements linked to that facility.

Illegal Waste Disposal

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether he plans to increase the penalties for people who *(a)* fly tip and *(b)* throw refuse from vehicles. [56145]

Mr. Meacher: The penalties available for those convicted of fly tipping are severe. For non-special waste the maximum penalty for conviction in Crown court is an unlimited fine and/or up to two years imprisonment. For special waste, the maximum prison sentence is increased to five years. There are no plans to raise these penalties further.

Anyone caught littering, including littering from a vehicle, may be issued with a Fixed Penalty Notice. Fixed Penalty Notices for litter and dog fouling offences were increased from £25 to £50 on 1 April 2002.

BNFL

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what meetings *(a)* she and *(b)* other departmental ministers have held recently with senior executives from BNFL. [55986]

Mr. Meacher: None.

CERRIE

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to her answer, of 20 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 372W, she will list the consultants appointed to the secretariat; and if she will set out the reasons CERRIE meetings are not held in public. [48287]

Mr. Meacher: As I indicated in my reply of 20 March, three consultants have been appointed to provide the Committee Examining Radiation Risks of Internal Emitters (CERRIE) with an independent secretariat. They are Ian Fairlie, Marion Hill and Paul Dorfman.

Several of the members of CERRIE are on record as having strongly held contradictory views about the radiation risks from internal emitters. The CERRIE meetings are intended to provide an opportunity for those differences of opinion to be debated, at length, in an environment that will encourage consensus to be reached, as far as that is possible. Holding the meetings in private will aid the uninhibited expression of views and the ability, where appropriate, for individuals to change their minds in the light of the evidence before them. However, in order to be transparent about their discussions, CERRIE are preparing their own website which will include, among other things, summary minutes of their meetings. CERRIE's final report to the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE) will also be published.

Water Framework Directive

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the extent to which the proposals set out in the draft Water Bill are necessary in order to meet environmental objectives under the Water Framework Directive. [56430]

Mr. Meacher: The draft Water Bill is not being used specifically to transpose the directive but certain provisions in the Bill in respect of water abstraction and efficient use of water by water companies will help deliver the directive's requirements.

The main transposing provisions for England will be contained in regulations made under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 and other appropriate enabling powers. Consultation on draft regulations should take place in 2003, following further consultation this year on possible approaches to transposition.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to produce a new Regulatory Impact Assessment of the Water Framework Directive. [56428]

Mr. Meacher: An updated Regulatory Impact Assessment will form part of a third consultation paper on implementation of the directive in England and Wales, which is due to be published in 2003.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, implementation of the directive and the assessment of its costs and benefits are being managed wholly by the Scottish Executive and the Northern Ireland Executive.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to implement the no deterioration duty under the Water Framework Directive. [56429]

Mr. Meacher: Article 4 of the directive says that, in making operational programmes of measures in the river basin management plans, member states have to implement the necessary measures to prevent deterioration in the status of water bodies.

As with all other obligations in the directive, my Department will ensure that this obligation is complied with. To the extent that new regulatory powers are needed, they will included in proposed regulations on which we plan to consult next year.

We are required to take the necessary legal and other steps to transpose the directive by December 2003.

Nitrates

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the amount of environmental damage likely to occur in areas which would be excluded from nitrate vulnerable zones under Option 2 of the consultation paper on implementing the Nitrates Directive. [56431]

Mr. Meacher: Areas of England would be excluded from the discrete NVZ area under the Option 2 approach because they drain into waters for which monitoring data do not exceed the specific criteria laid down in the Nitrates Directive.

However, we recognised the potential wider environmental effects of manure spreading in these areas in the partial Regulatory Impact Assessment annexed to our recent consultation paper 'How should England implement the 1991 Nitrates Directive?'.

We are currently considering all responses received to the consultation before announcing a decision in due course on which implementation option will be pursued in England.

Warm Front Scheme

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many contractors under the Warm Front scheme are based in each county in the south of England. [52447]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 25 April 2002]:* Installers are appointed by the Warm Front scheme managers to work in specific areas of England, which do not necessarily follow county boundaries. Installers working in areas of Berkshire, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Kent, Hampshire, Somerset, Sussex, Wiltshire and Greater London, have 49 main offices in those areas.

Illegal Meat Imports

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the findings of investigations carried out by her Department on the risks posed to animal health by illegal consignments of meat imported into the UK. [54496]

Mr. Morley: A risk assessment has been commissioned by DEFRA to quantify the probability of an outbreak of exotic disease linked to illegal imports. The work will seek to identify the pathways virus might travel and what are the critical control points along those pathways.

The risk assessment is being carried out by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) and will facilitate the identification of effective control strategies and efficient and effective resource allocation to reduce risks to animal health from exotic diseases. The work commenced in March 2002 and is scheduled to run for six months. It is therefore too early to reach any conclusions.

Common Land (Access)

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will lay draft regulations before Parliament under section 68 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 relating to vehicular access over common land. [57613]

Alun Michael: Draft regulations have been laid in both Houses, together with a regulatory impact assessment and an analysis of the responses made to the draft regulations circulated in July 2001. The Government's objective has been to strike a fair balance between the owners of common land, and those who have, for many years, driven across the land to get to their homes.

The major change in the regulations is in relation to the compensation payable. This reflects the Government's view that the compensation payable in respect of older premises, already in existence when it became an offence to drive on common land, should be a relatively small amount. Owners of premises in existence on or before 31 December 1905 will pay 0.25 per cent. of the value of the premises. Owners of those built between 1 January 1906 and 30 November 1930 will pay 0.5 per cent. Compensation in respect of all other premises remains at 2 per cent.

We hope that the regulations will be considered by both Houses before the summer recess, and will then come into force as soon as possible.

Flooding

Mr. Dhanda: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent representations she has received on the impact climate change will have on flooding in the United Kingdom. [55139]

Mr. Morley: While we have received no recent representations, we have recognised for some time that increased flood risk is one of the significant issues arising from climate change. Indeed the Government have issued guidance on expected sea level rise since the 1980's. Last year we published an assessment that showed that without present adaptation policies, such as formal defences, managed realignment, wetland creation etc., average annual flood damage from rivers could increase by some 60 per cent. and on the coast by around 400 per cent. This emphasised the need for an appropriate precautionary response.

On 26 April 2002 DEFRA published "Climate Change Scenarios for the United Kingdom", a new set of scenarios prepared by the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research, Tyndell Centre for Climate Change Research and University of East Anglia. These largely confirm the general trend of previous predictions but provide additional detail and increased spatial resolution.

We will be reviewing all policy areas, including flood management, in the light of these scenarios over the coming months and will consider carefully the need for any consequent adjustment to our guidance.

Wildlife Crime

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on what her Department is doing to tackle crime relating to wildlife. [55136]

Mr. Meacher: The Department is determined to tackle wildlife crime and we have a number of relevant initiatives under way. For example I launched the National Wildlife Crime Intelligence Unit, and we are about to begin a review of COTES, which will include an assessment of the level of penalties and police powers of arrest.

Sellafield

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what steps she has taken to ensure that there is no contamination of drinking water from the leaks from the sludge storage tanks in Building B241 at Sellafield; [53660]

(2) what action she has taken and when since she was informed that the sludge storage tanks in Building B241 at Sellafield were leaking; [53661]

(3) when she was first informed that the sludge storage tanks in Building B241 at Sellafield were leaking. [53631]

Margaret Beckett: Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Pollution, then part of the Department of the Environment, became aware of the suspected leakage from B241 around 1993.

I understand that BNFL has confirmed that technetium-99 (Tc-99) has been detected in groundwater from boreholes in and around the Sellafield site which

probably originate from the leaks from the B241 sludge storage tanks. Having carried out an assessment of the radiological impact, the Environment Agency is satisfied that this would be insignificant. The groundwater at Sellafield is not used for drinking water supplies. The agency has carried out additional monitoring of local surface waters and has not detected Tc-99

Remedial action to eliminate the leaks is the responsibility of BNFL. The Environment Agency has requested BNFL to undertake monitoring to confirm the point of leakage and will work with the Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate to consider any regulatory action.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Special Advisers

Norman Baker: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) whether unpaid special advisers who are appointed for less than a year are obliged to sign the Official Secrets Act in circumstances where advisers, both paid and unpaid, who are appointed for more than a year are obliged to do so; [54677]

(2) what regulations control the appointment of unpaid special advisers if they are appointed for less than one year; and if he will make a statement; [54673]

(3) how many unpaid special advisers who have been appointed for a term of less than a year there are in *(a)* his Department and *(b)* all Departments; [54675]

(4) what the expense to *(a)* his Department and *(b)* all departments of appointing unpaid special advisers for less than a year was in the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement; [54676]

(5) in what way selection criteria applied to unpaid special advisers differ from those applicable to paid special advisers. [54674]

Mr. Leslie: All special advisers, whether paid or unpaid and whatever the duration of their appointment, are employed under terms and conditions set out in the Model Contract for Special Advisers and in accordance with paragraph 50 of the Ministerial Code. The rules on the selection and appointments of unpaid special advisers are the same as those for paid special advisers. All appointees are covered by the Official Secrets Act. I am not aware of any unpaid special advisers appointed for a period of less than a year.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Report

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when the 2002 departmental report will be published. [49580]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 15 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 774W.

National Insurance

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will estimate the cost in the next 12 months of the Budget changes to employers' national insurance contributions to *(a)* her Department, *(b)* agencies of her Department and *(c)* local government carrying out functions within the responsibility of her Department. [52079]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 29 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 544W.

COSLA

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations her Department has received from COSLA regarding the impact of *(a)* the aggregates levy and *(b)* the rise in employers' national insurance contributions on Scottish local authorities in 2002–03. [56881]

Mrs. Liddell: None.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list by local authority the level of *(a)* rent and *(b)* council tax arrears in each year since 1993 in Scotland. [50331]

Mrs. Liddell: Tables containing the relevant information have been placed in the Library.

Table (a) shows the current level of council tax arrears by local authority for each year since 1996–97. Figures for 1993–96 are not collected separately.

Table (b) shows rent arrears per local authority for each year since 1993.

Since July 1999 these have been devolved matters, and are the responsibility of the Scottish Executive.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Departmental Report

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Advocate-General when the 2002 departmental report will be published. [49581]

The Advocate-General: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 15 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 774W.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Jury System

Mr. Watts: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the representations he has received in favour of the jury system. [33746]

Mr. Wills: Of the 487 representations received in response to the Auld report on criminal courts reform, a number of organisations including the Bar Council, the Law Society and private commentators have expressed concern about the report's recommendations that the defendant's automatic right to elect jury trial in either-way

cases should be abolished. As the Lord Chancellor has stated publicly, the Government are now considering the report's recommendations in detail, and hope to publish a White Paper announcing their conclusions before the summer recess. Responses from the general public and the main criminal justice stakeholders, subject to their agreement, are being placed on the Lord Chancellor's web site www.criminal-courts-review.org.uk

Mr. Cox: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women from ethnic minority backgrounds were selected for jury service at courts in Greater London during the last 12 months. [55200]

Mr. Wills: We do not collect information on the gender or ethnicity of people summoned to be, or sitting as, jurors. One of the main reasons for this is that jury summoning and selection is random at each stage, and it should therefore reflect the gender and ethnic breakdown of those who are registered to vote. This should also reflect regional variations, as catchment areas are based on the locality to the court.

However, a research study is currently being developed to explore the representation of ethnic minorities in jury pools. Further details will be announced in due course.

Criminal Offences

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many criminal offences have been *(a)* created and *(b)* abolished by his Department since 1997. [55432]

Mr. Wills: A comprehensive and exhaustive list of new and abolished offences could be provided only at disproportionate cost. We can however provide the following information about the following measures which have been enacted since 1 May 1997.

The Access to Justice Act 1999 created two offences: Misrepresentation in relation to Community Legal Service/Criminal Defence Service and Unauthorised disclosure of personal information supplied for enforcing warrants. The first offence replaces the similar offence in relation to legal aid under the Legal Aid Act 1988.

The European Communities (Lawyer's Practice) Regulations 2000 (SI 1119–2000) created an offence for a European lawyer to practise in England and Wales and Northern Ireland without registering with the relevant competent authority. This was a regulation made by the Lord Chancellor implementing a European directive.

The Land Registration Act 2002 creates two and repeals three. The Statute Law (Repeals) Act 1998 repealed eight offences.

Human Rights

Norman Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department whom he has identified as the contact points in each department for human rights issues. [54666]

Mr. Wills: A civil servant in each Department has been designated as the contact point for human rights issues. I will send the right hon. Gentleman the full list of the 26 contact points for his information, although general inquiries on human rights issues should in the first instance continue to be sent to officials in my Department, which plays a co-ordinating role on the Human Rights Act.

Hague Child Abduction Convention

Ross Cranston: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, what the return rates *(a)* to and *(b)* from the UK under the Hague Child Abduction Convention were for each of the last two years for European signatories to the convention. [56256]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Lord Chancellor is the central authority for the operation of the convention for England and Wales only. The tables show the return rates to and from England and Wales, for each of the last two years for European signatories to the convention.

Table (a): Return rates to England and Wales

	2000	*2001*
Cases received during the year	88	96
Cases outstanding at end of the year	26	29
Cases where return of child achieved	40	38
Return rate (percentage)	64.5	56.7

Table (b): Return rates from England and Wales

	2000	*2001*
Cases received during the year	139	155
Cases outstanding at end of the year	51	55
Cases where return of child achieved	57	58
Return rate (percentage)	64.8	58

Spouse Murderers

Tim Loughton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, how many parents convicted of murder against a spouse have been deprived of parental rights over children in the last five years. [53265]

Ms Rosie Winterton: This information is not available. A key aim of the Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic Violence is to improve the way the criminal and civil justice systems work together. The work of the group will include looking at whether, and if so how, information such as this could be obtained.

Wardship Orders

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, how many wardship orders were made in each year since 1990. [56153]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The following statistics are available:

1990—6,227

1991—5,014.

The Children Act 1989 came into force on 14 October 1991. Under the Act, the use of wardship by local authorities is severely limited. Leave to make an application for any exercise of the court's inherent jurisdiction must be granted by the High Court. Applications by private individuals are not restricted, but the same results can generally be achieved by obtaining a prohibited steps or specific issue order under section 8 of the Act. Statistics have not been collected since 1991 because the number of wardship orders made has been negligible.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Greater Manchester Police

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide a breakdown of one-off ring-fenced grants to Greater Manchester police by constituency since 1997–99, and if he will make a statement. [42842]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 19 March 2002]:* Details of one-off grant payments to Greater Manchester police since 1997–98 are set out in the table. These cannot be broken down by constituency.

£

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Special firearms grant[1]	78,144	7,692	—	—	—
Beacon scheme[2]	—	—	99,977	6,000	—
Arrest referral	—	—	—	523,000	613,000
Operation Hawk[3]	—	—	—	1,943,000	1,257,000
Robbery grant	—	—	—	3,200,000	—
Fuel distribution emergency	—	—	—	505,103	58,050
Targeted policing initiative (North Trafford)	—	—	—	62,898	44,597
Targeted policing initiative (Trafford Park)	—	—	—	—	69,785
Execution of warrants	—	—	—	233,000	—
Policing Oldham disturbances	—	—	—	—	1,440,000
Commonwealth games[4]	—	—	—	—	1,700,000

[1] Firearms grant for policing costs associated with ban on handguns.
[2] Beacon scheme funding for imaginative ideas linked to increasing police efficiency.
[3] A Greater Manchester police street crime initiative.
[4] Payment of the first instalment of a total grant of up to £5 million for policing the games.

Police Pay

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the shorter pay scales for the federated ranks will be. [44022]

Mr. Denham: On 9 May 2002, the Police Negotiating Board (PNB) reached agreement on a package of reforms to police pay and conditions of service. PNB is the statutory negotiating body for police pay and conditions of service throughout the United Kingdom.

The package includes shortening the constables' pay scale by four points, achieved by removing two points on 1 April 2003, a third on 1 April 2004 and a fourth on 1 April 2005. The pay scales for sergeants, inspectors and chief inspectors will be shortened on 1 April 2003 by removing the current bottom point.

From 1 April 2003, the pay points on all the federated ranks' scales will be increased by £402.

The shorter pay scales will mean that officers in the federated ranks will reach the top of their respective pay scales more quickly than under the current arrangements. At the top of the scales, they will be eligible for a new competence-related payment of £1,002 a year.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how a police officer will be eligible for the new competence-related pay. [44023]

Mr. Denham: On 9 May 2002, the Police Negotiating Board (PNB) reached agreement on a package of reforms to police pay and conditions of service. PNB is the statutory negotiating body for police pay and conditions throughout the United Kingdom. PNB agreements have to be approved by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in England and Wales and by my right hon. Friend the Scottish Minister in Scotland.

The package of reforms includes a new competence-related pensionable payment of £1,002 at the top of the federated ranks' pay scales. In order to get the payment, officers will have to have spent a year at the top of their respective scales and demonstrate high professional competence under each of the following broad headings:

Professional competence and results;

Commitment to the job;

Relations with the public and colleagues;

Willingness to learn and adjust to new circumstances.

A PNB Working Group will agree the final details for the scheme by 30 September 2002, so that the first payments can be made from 1 April 2003.

In the PNB agreement, it is stated that at least 75 per cent. of those eligible are expected to get the payment. There will, however, be no quota system. Any eligible officer who demonstrates the necessary competencies will get the payment.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how the funding will be provided for the £500 to £5,000 annual payment to police officers at the sharp end; [48290]

(2) how the funding will be provided for the proposed payment of £400 to all police officers and the £1,000 payment for police officers at the top of their pay scales. [48291]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 April 2002]:* On 9 May 2002, the Police Negotiating Board (PNB) agreed a package of reforms to police pay and conditions of service.

The package includes an increase of £402 on top of the basic salary for all the federated ranks from 1 April, 2003. Officers at the top of the federated ranks' pay scales will be eligible for a new competence-related payment of £1,002 a year. There will also be a new special priority payment scheme under which those at the sharp end of policing may qualify for one-off payments of normally between £500 to £3,000, exceptionally up to £5,000.

The payment depends on appropriate additional resources being provided to police.

The new pay and conditions package agreed on 9 May 2002 will provide a modernised pay structure rewarding those at the sharp end and reducing reliance on overtime. In so doing, it both underpins the rest of the police reform programme and demonstrates the Government's commitment to invest in the police service to achieve the reforms needed and to give it the support and flexibility it requires to deliver a first-class service to the public.

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average annual increase in police pay has been in each of the last 10 years. [52997]

Mr. Denham: Police pay increased by an average of 6.5 per cent. in 1992 and 1.5 per cent. in 1993. In 1994, the pay scales were restructured, and there was no uniform increase in police pay.

Since 1995, police pay has been increased every September by reference to the median percentage of the manpower index of non-manual private sector workers. In 1995 the increase was 3 per cent. in 1996, 3.5 per cent. in 1997, 3.5 per cent., in 1998, 4 per cent., in 1999, 3.6 per cent., in 2000, 3 per cent. and in 2001, 3.5 per cent.

The increase in basic pay agreed as part of a package of reforms to police pay and conditions in the Police Negotiating Board on 9 May 2002, will be on top of the pay award from September 2002.

Police

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many black and Asian officers there are in the *(a)* Metropolitan police, *(b)* Leicestershire police and *(c)* Derbyshire police; and at which rank. [54499]

Mr. Denham: The information has been provided by the respective chief officer of police and is set out in the table. The figures reflect the position on 31 March 2002.

Number of black and Asian officers

Rank	Metropolitan police	Leicestershire constabulary	Derbyshire constabulary
Assistant commissioner[1]	1	—	—
Assistant chief constable[2]	2	—	—
Chief superintendent	2	—	—
Superintendent	4	1	—
Chief inspector	9	1	1
Inspector	36	2	5
Sergeant	112	9	6
Constable	1,113	64	41
Total	1,279	77	53

[1] Assistant commissioner in the Metropolitan police is equivalent to the rank of chief constable.

[2] Assistant chief constable includes the ranks of deputy assistant commissioner and commander in the Metropolitan police.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police were assigned to Operation Patrol in Uniform in Wales in each year since 1997. [53485]

Mr. Denham: The precise information requested is not collected, but the information in the table has been provided by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) using returns supplied by police forces of the number of officers undertaking particular classes of duty. The basis on which HMIC classify police service staff changed in the year 1999–2000 so the figures for 31 March 2000 and 31 March 2001 are not directly comparable with those for earlier years.

The figures up to and including 31 March 1999 cover officers classified as undertaking patrol or traffic duties in roles that could only be filled by a police officer.

The figures for 2000 and 2001 cover operational officers classified as undertaking foot, car or beat patrol, traffic duties, working with police dogs and mounted officers. Operational officers are any, including covert staff, whose primary role is directly to deliver the overarching aims of the police service. Operational officers will not necessarily undertake duties in uniform but the vast majority undertaking patrol functions will do so.

Operational patrol officers (full time equivalent)

As at 31 March	Dyfed—Powys	Gwent	North Wales	South Wales
1997	648	826	855	1,714
1998	687	800	895	1,623
1999	690	857	851	1,809
2000	706	841	794	1,859
2001	537	724	820	1,917

Crime Prevention/Weston-Super-Mare

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to offer funding to local crime prevention initiatives in Weston-Super-Mare. [54471]

Mr. Denham: Home Office crime reduction funding is allocated to the North Somerset Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and the North Somerset Youth Offending Team, which cover Weston-Super-Mare. The total funding allocated in 2002–03 is £464,897 comprising:

Purpose	Amount £
North Somerset Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership	
Communities Against Drugs[1]	162,800
Safer Communities Initiative	56,163
Partnership Development	57,500
Small Retailers in Deprived Areas Scheme	25,906
Total	302,369

Purpose	Amount £
North Somerset Youth Offending Team	
General funding	102,263
Drugs services	31,044
Referral orders	29,221
Total	162,528

[1] 2001–02 baseline allocation

Policing Costs

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the average annual cost of employing *(a)* a police officer and *(b)* a police constable in (i) a provincial force and (ii) London in the last five years. [41614]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 8 March 2002]:* I have today placed this information in the Library.

Police Performance

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will rank the performance of each police force in England according to the Best Value Performance Indicators relating to *(a)* violent offences under the influence of an intoxicating substance and *(b)* violent offences committed in connection with licensed premises. [55111]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 May 2002]:* The suite of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) for the police relating to violent offences under the influence of an intoxicating substance and violent offences committed in connection with licensed premises first comes into effect during the current year 2002–03.

Class A Drugs (Tunbridge Wells)

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people *(a)* in total and *(b)* under the age of 25 years in Tunbridge Wells were found in possession of Class A drugs in each year since 1997. [55192]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The information requested is not collected centrally. However, it will be possible to provide some information on the number of persons in Kent cautioned or found guilty of possessing Class A drugs from 1997 to 2000. I will write to the hon. Member by 24 May 2002. A copy of the letter will be placed in the Library.

Police Service (Religion)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will collect statistics on the religious affiliation of civilian and uniformed staff in the Police Service with special reference to Muslim women in the work force; and if he will make a statement. [55440]

Mr. Denham: We have no current plans to collect data on the religious affiliation of police officers and support staff. Data are collected on ethnicity. This is used to monitor the progress of police forces in meeting their targets on minority ethnic recruitment, retention and progression.

Antisocial Behaviour

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many antisocial behaviour orders have been issued to date. [55857]

Mr. Denham: Official statistics on the number of AntiSocial Behaviour Orders (ASBO) issued are based on quarterly returns received from magistrates courts committees (MCCs). The total number of ASBOs issued, as from 1 April 1999 up until the end of December 2001 (latest available), is 518.

The requirement for further checks for completeness of information reported from MCCs is currently under review.

Alcohol

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the changes in his Department's guidelines to the police relating to the seizure of alcohol from young people. [54978]

Mr. Denham: There are no guidelines dealing specifically with this subject, but all chief police officers and chief executives of local authorities were informed by letter, of the measures relating to alcohol consumption in public places, contained in the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 Act prior to their commencement in September 2001.

Recorded Crime

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 7 May 2002, Ref. 52335, whether before 1 April, the police had discretion to record a reported crime; and if he will make a statement. [55584]

Mr. Denham: The rules regarding re-classification of a recorded crime were the same prior to 1 April 2002 as they are now. Re-classification is not usually permitted. The rules state that a recorded crime cannot be re-classified unless it is re-classified to a homicide (murder, manslaughter or infanticide).

Once a crime has been recorded it can only be classified as a 'no crime' if one of the following criteria is satisfied:

(i) The crime was committed outside the jurisdiction of the police force in which it was recorded.

(ii) Where, following the report of an incident which has subsequently been recorded as a crime, credible evidence comes to light, which determines that no crime has been committed.

(iii) If the crime, as alleged, constitutes part of a crime already recorded.

(iv) If the reported incident was recorded as a crime in error.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many incidents of domestic violence there were in each year since 1997 in Wales; [56175]

(2) how many incidents of domestic violence there were in each year since 1997 in Lancashire. [56174]

Mr. Denham: Details of the numbers of domestic violence incidents in Wales and Lancashire, obtained from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary Annual

Statistical Return from police forces, are given. The definition of domestic violence incidents used for the figures up to 1998–99 was as follows:

> Any form of physical, sexual or emotional abuse which takes place within the context of a close relationship. In most cases, the relationship will be between partners, married, cohabiting or otherwise; or ex-partners.

The figures for 1999–2000 and 2000–01 used the following definition:

> Any violence between current or former partners in an intimate relationship, wherever and whenever the violence occurs. The violence may include physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse.

The figures up to 1998–99 are therefore not directly comparable with those for 1999–2000 and 2000–01. Changes in numbers of domestic violence incidents recorded may be due to increased willingness on the part of victims to report these crimes, and to changes in force policy in how to handle and record such incidents. In particular, Lancashire changed their recording and reporting procedures in the 2000–01 financial year, resulting in a higher figure for that year.

Number of domestic violence incidents

Year	Wales	Lancashire
1996–97	21,068	6,216
1997–98	21,160	5,760
1998–99	17,913	6,778
1999–2000	17,159	8,560
2000–01	15,763	17,392

Burglary

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many burglaries have been committed in Wales in each year since 1997; [56177]

(2) how many burglaries have been committed in Lancashire in each year since 1997. [56176]

Mr. Denham: The numbers of burglaries (both domestic and other) recorded by the police in Wales and Lancashire since 1997 have been published in successive editions of 'Criminal Statistics England and Wales', and are given in the table.

Number of burglaries

Year	Wales	Lancashire
1997[1]	46,445	27,921
1998–99[2]	41,941	24,226
1999–2000[2]	36,764	21,360
2000–01[2]	32,883	21,673

[1] Calendar year

[2] Year ending March

There was a change in counting rules for recorded crime on 1 April 1998. However, it is thought that this had relatively little effect nationally on the number of burglary offences recorded. The 2000–01 figure for Lancashire may have been affected by new recording practices introduced by the force in April 2000.

Common Assault

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents of common assault have been committed in Lancashire in each year since 1997. [56178]

Mr. Denham: The number of common assaults, and racially aggravated common assaults, recorded by the police in Lancashire are given in the table. The former category was introduced as a recorded crime on 1 April 1998, and the latter was counted separately from 1 April 1999.

Recorded common assaults in Lancashire

Year	Common assault	Racially aggravated common assault
1998–99[1]	2,109	n/a
1999/2000[1]	2,208	63
2000/01[1]	3,052	52

[1] Year ending March

It should be noted that recorded violent crime is subject to changes in reporting and recording. The 2000–01 figure for Lancashire may have been affected by new recording practices introduced by the force in April 2000. Also, for example, the 2001 British Crime Survey found that, over England and Wales as a whole, reporting to the police of common assault rose from 29 per cent. in 1999 to 39 per cent. in the year 2000.

The British Crime Survey has shown that, in England and Wales as a whole, the number of common assaults recorded in the survey decreased by 14 per cent. between the 1999 and 2000 calendar years, whereas common assaults recorded by the police increased by an estimated 9 per cent. Common assaults recorded by the police may therefore not necessarily be a reflection of the real level of this offence.

Young Offenders' Diet

Mr. Hendry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent research he has carried out into potential links between the behaviour of people detained in young offenders' institutions and food supplements, food colouring and mineral deficiencies. [55048]

Beverley Hughes: Natural Justice, a registered charity, undertook a research project at Aylesbury young offender institution in 1996–97 to monitor the effects of nutritional supplements on the behaviour of young offenders. The behaviour of the young offenders was measured before and after by looking at the number of minor and Governor reports. The results were independently reviewed by the Home Office's Research, Development and Statistics Directorate (RDSD) who concluded that the results demonstrated a positive effect of nutritional supplements on behaviour. However, the numbers involved were small which made drawing wider conclusions difficult.

Law Enforcement Agencies

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what statutory law enforcement agencies and prosecuting authorities there were within the responsibility of his Department; and what complaints procedure is available for each. [57106]

Mr. Denham: The Home Office is responsible in England and Wales for the police, the prison service and the national probation directorate. Complaints against the police are dealt with by the Police Complaints Authority; those against the prison service and the national probation directorate by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman.

Dangerous Driving

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures have been introduced by the Government against *(a)* dangerous drivers and *(b)* those who consistently offend. [56269]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: We are currently considering the report of a major research study into dangerous driving offences and will decide in due course whether to bring forward proposals for change in the law or its administration.

The Government also produced a consultation paper on road traffic penalties in December 2000 with the purpose of assessing whether the current maximum penalties for road traffic offences remain appropriate. The consultation paper made a number of proposals in respect of dangerous driving including an increase in the maximum penalty from two to five years' imprisonment. We are currently in the final stages of preparing the Government's response to the consultation exercise setting out a final set of recommendations. We expect this to be published in the very near future.

Animal Rights Protests

Martin Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made by the *(a)* Ministerial Committee on Animal Rights Extremism and *(b)* police unit within the National Crime Squad on violent animal rights protests. [57015]

Mr. Denham: The Ministerial Committee on animal rights extremism has taken a range of measures, including agreeing upon and implementing legislation to allow police to remove intimidatory protesters from outside homes, introducing procedures to prevent disclosure of the home addresses of directors of vulnerable companies, and carrying out a thorough review of the criminal justice system in relation to animal rights cases and identifying improvements where necessary.

The National Crime Squad has undertaken a number of operations which have resulted in the arrest of 70 individuals for a variety of offences relating to animal extremism, and has supported colleagues nationally in the co-ordination of both intelligence and operational activity.

Retail Crime

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much of the money allocated to his Department in the Budget will be used to tackle retail crime. [54569]

Mr. Denham: The additional funding will be used to tackle street crime, as well as for counter terrorism measures, prisons provision and juvenile offenders, related issues. Many of these measures are likely to have a beneficial impact on reducing retail crime.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures his Department is taking to tackle retail crime. [54562]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on 27 June last year the provision of £15 million over three years from the Capital Modernisation Fund to assist small retailers in deprived areas to improve the security of their businesses. £3 million was available in the 2001–02 financial year, with a further £6 million in both 2002–03 and 2003–04.

This money, which is being spent on schemes identified by Regional Crime Reduction Directors, in conjunction with Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, is being used to help small retailers to improve security. This is being achieved by employing a variety of interventions, including enhancing the security of individual premises and improving the environment of shopping centres. Nearly 3,000 shops in 114 retail schemes in some of the most deprived areas in England and Wales benefited from first year funds. More shops will be assisted in the next two years.

The Home Office has also supported work undertaken to establish retail crime partnerships by funding a consultant post for the past two years. The consultant has worked closely with the British Retail Consortium to produce a definitive guide on how to establish and run a retail crime partnership and encouraged retailers and other stakeholders in main shopping centre areas to establish partnerships to tackle retail and related crime.

Funding totalling £223,000 was also given to aid retail crime reduction initiatives under various programmes administered by regional crime reduction directors in the financial year ending 31 March 2002 and a further £86,500 is expected to be disbursed through regional crime reduction directors specifically for retail crime reduction initiatives in the current financial year.

Other funding under the Crime Reduction Programme, such as the £170 million for schemes for the installation of closed circuit television, particularly in town centres, will help to reduce shop theft as well as other types of crime. Other initiatives such as the street wardens schemes will also be of benefit to retailers in the areas where they operate.

The Home Office also makes advice available to retailers and crime reduction practitioners on the crime reduction website, including best practice guidance in the "Toolkit" on Business and Retail Crime give website address. Booklets which give crime reduction guidance to retailers have also recently been updated and give advice in a user-friendly postcard format leaflet entitled "Don't Discount Crime".

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to offer funding to local retail crime prevention initiatives in town shopping centres and secondary shopping areas. [54726]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) on 14 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 605W.

EU Arrest Warrant

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether the proposed EU arrest warrant will apply to extradition requests by military tribunals. [54210]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Our extradition law currently provides that we cannot extradite for offences which are purely military offences and have no equivalent under general criminal law. We intend to replicate that provision in the new law. However, we have always been prepared to extradite in cases where an individual has committed a military offence which has a counterpart under criminal law. It is therefore legally possible under present arrangements, although exceptionally rare, for an extradition partner to seek the return of an individual to appear before a military court.

Under the terms of Article 6 of the Framework Decision on the European Arrest Warrant, it is the responsibility of each member state to designate its issuing judicial authorities. In principle, it would therefore be possible for a European Arrest Warrant to be issued by a military tribunal, although such instances are likely to be rare.

National Criminal Intelligence Service

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) of 9 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 322W, how many and what percentage of financial disclosures were received by the National Criminal Intelligence Service in 2000, broken down by category of source; and what was the average number of financial disclosures for each relevant member of staff at NCIS in that year. [56626]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth *[holding answer 15 April 2002]:* In 2000, the Economic Crime Branch of the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) received 18,408 suspicious transaction reports from the following sources:

	Number	*Percentage*
Banks	11,532	62.65
Bureaux/money transfer	2,801	15.21
Building societies	1,756	9.54
Insurance	606	3.29
Solicitors	248	1.35
Gaming/betting	316	1.72
Securities firms	128	0.70
Mortgage	123	0.67
Motor organisation	120	0.65
Independent financial adviser	108	0.59
Accountants	77	0.42
Regulators	64	0.35
Credit cards	44	0.24
Asset management	39	0.21
Auction houses	24	0.13
Cheque cashiers	12	0.07
Estate agent	3	0.02
Company formation	2	0.01
Market and exchange	1	0.01
Others	404	2.19

Due to the varying roles and responsibilities of staff within the Economic Crime Branch, information relating to the average number of financial disclosures for each relevant member of staff for NCIS is not readily available. 30 members of staff were employed in the Economic Crime Branch in April 2000, but not all would have been dealing with financial disclosures.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Statement

Mr. Syms: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to the statement of the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions of 9 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 303, if *(a)* he, *(b)* his political and press advisers, *(c)* other Downing street staff and *(d)* Ministers discussed this recommendation with (i) the Cabinet secretary and (ii) his staff prior to the recommendation being made to the permanent secretary to the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions that he should make such a statement. [57013]

The Prime Minister: The circumstances which led to the statement made by the permanent secretary of the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions have been set out in evidence to the Public Administration Select Committee.

Nepal

Mr. Gray: To ask the Prime Minister what further discussions he plans with the Prime Minister of Nepal about the Gurkhas. [56706]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans for discussion with the Prime Minister of Nepal.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Prime Minister if he introduced Mrs. Blair to the Prime Minister of Nepal on his visit on 13 May. [56707]

The Prime Minister: No.

Lord-Lieutenant of Essex

Bob Russell: To ask the Prime Minister what the arrangements are for the appointment of the next lord-lieutenant of Essex; who is serving on the committee considering names; and who appointed them. [57115]

The Prime Minister: Lord-lieutenants are appointed by the Queen on my advice. The Prime Minister's secretary for appointments is responsible for carrying out a wide consultation process within the county on my behalf, as is the case with all lord-lieutenants in England. The consultation is now complete and I understand that included correspondence with the hon. Member. We hope to announce the successor to Lord Braybrooke shortly.

The secretary for appointments is a senior civil servant and was appointed following a competition within the civil service.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pensions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) pursuant to the answer of 23 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 534W, on non-state

pensions, how the figures for 2000 were calculated from the data contained in the ONS MQ5 Survey; [46485]

(2) pursuant to the answer of 23 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 534W, on non-state pensions, if he will break down each year's contributions between *(a)* contributions to self-administered pension arrangements, *(b)* regular premiums to individual insured pension arrangements, *(c)* single premiums to individual insured pension arrangements, *(d)* regular premiums to group insured pension arrangements and *(e)* single premiums to group insured pension arrangements; [46486]

(3) pursuant to the answer of 23 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 534W, on non-state pensions, whether individual transfers from one insured pension provider to another have been excluded from the answer; and if he will estimate the amount of such transfers in each year; [46487]

(4) pursuant to the answer of 23 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 534W, on non-state pensions, whether investments of existing assets of self-administered pension funds in *(a)* managed funds and *(b)* annuity contracts operated by insurance companies have been excluded from the answer; and if he will estimate the amount thereby excluded in each year; [46488]

(5) pursuant to the answer of 23 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 534W, on non-state pensions, if he will estimate the number of individuals for or by whom contributions were made in each year from 1992 to 2000. [46489]

Mr. McCartney: The figures quoted in my answer of 23 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 534W, are updated in the table. It is necessary to update them because the Office for National Statistics reissued the figures on which they are based on 16 May 2002.

Table 1 shows the amount contributed to non-state pensions for all years from 1992 to 2001. The figures include contributions of both employers and employees to self-administered pension funds and the pensions business of insurance companies.

As before, the figures show that there has been sustained growth in contributions to non-state pensions. The figures suggest that the stable economy has created the right conditions to save, and that our policies to encourage higher levels of private saving are having a positive effect.

The method used to calculate the figures is set out in the notes to the table.

Table 1: Contributions to non-state pensions

£ billion

	Cash terms	*1997 prices*
1992	32	37
1993	37	41
1994	34	37
1995	36	38
1996	43	44
1997	50	50
1998	62	60
1999	67	63
2000	74	68
2001	86	77

Notes:

1. All figures rounded to nearest £ billion.
2. Figures are based on the ONS MQ5 publication. They have been recalculated in light of the reissue of the MQ5 publication on 16 May 2002. The MQ5 publication is subject to change because it is under constant review. Since the figures above are dependent on MQ5, they are similarly subject to change.
3. The figures shown in cash terms are the sum of the series RKDL and RKAF in the ONS MQ5 publication.
4. The figures shown in 1997 prices are the sum of the same series after adjustment for price changes using the RPI index.
5. There is a small discontinuity in the series between 1998 and 1999. For further information see ONS's pension fund surveys technical article of 16 May 2002, available at www.statistics.gov.uk/products/p502.asp.
6. The data in the above table may include some transfers from one insured pension provider to another. ONS, who produce the underlying data, look out for this possible problem and, where identified, correct for it. Information on the amount of these transfers is not available.
7. Investment of existing assets of self-administered pension funds in managed funds and annuity contracts operated by insurance companies have not been excluded.

The figures in 1997 price terms in the table represent an update to the DWP's indicator 'Amount contributed to non-state pensions—real terms (United Kingdom)'. This indicator is one of the set monitored in the Government's annual poverty and social exclusion report, "Opportunity for All". The latest report, "Opportunity for All—Making Progress" (Cm 5260) was published in September 2001.

The breakdown of these figures between different types of contributions is set out in table 2 in cash terms and then in 1997 price terms.

Table 2

	Contributions to self-administered pension arrangements	*Regular premiums to individual/personal insured pension arrangements*	*Single premiums to individual/personal insured pension arrangements*	*Regular premiums to group insured pension arrangements*	*Single premiums to group insured pension arrangements*	*Total contributions to non-state pensions*
Cash terms						
1992	9	6	8	4	5	32
1993	10	7	10	4	6	37
1994	11	7	7	3	6	34
1995	11	8	7	4	6	36
1996	12	7	10	4	10	43
1997	12	9	11	4	14	50
1998	11	10	13	4	24	62
1999	14	10	12	4	26	67
2000	16	9	18	4	27	74
2001	16	12	24	4	31	86

Table 2

	Contributions to self-administered pension arrangements	*Regular premiums to individual/personal insured pension arrangements*	*Single premiums to individual/personal insured pension arrangements*	*Regular premiums to group insured pension arrangements*	*Single premiums to group insured pension arrangements*	*Total contributions to non-state pensions*
1997 price terms						
1992	11	7	10	4	5	37
1993	11	7	11	4	7	41
1994	12	7	7	4	6	37
1995	12	8	8	4	6	38
1996	12	7	10	4	11	44
1997	12	9	11	4	14	50
1998	11	10	12	4	23	60
1999	13	9	12	4	25	63
2000	14	9	17	3	25	68
2001	14	10	21	4	27	77
ONS data series on which figures are based	RKDL	RLVQ	RLQU	RKPX	RLQX	—

Notes:

1. All notes to table 1 also apply to this table, except for notes 3 and 4, which do not apply.
2. The figures shows in cash terms are from the ONS MQ5 publication and are the series named in the last row of the table.
3. The figures shown in 1997 prices are the same series after adjustment for price changes using the RPI index.
4. Figures may not exactly add up to the totals due to rounding errors.

The source used to derive the above information does not enable an estimate to be made of the number of individuals for or by whom contributions to non-state pensions were made. However it is possible to estimate similar information using the Family Resources Survey. These figures are not directly comparable to those above because they are derived from a different source. Estimates are shown in the following table for the years available.

Table 3

	Number of people who are members of a non-state pension	*Number of people currently contributing to a non-state pension*
1995–96	15.5	n/a
1996–97	15.1	n/a
1997–98	15.0	n/a
1998–99	15.2	n/a
1999–2000	n/a	14.4
2000–01	n/a	14.4

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to nearest 100,000.
2. Figures are for people aged 20 to state pension age.
3. Estimates are based on the Family Resources Survey. There are alternative estimates of similar information which produce slightly different results.
4. Estimates are subject to error inherent in survey-based data.

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, pursuant to his answer of 2 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 978W, if he will provide information on male pensioners on the same basis. [55299]

Mr. McCartney: The information requested for different pensioner groups has been provided on the same basis. Figures have been provided where sample sizes and other factors dictate that they are sufficiently robust. In the case of the information requested for single pensioners, sample sizes for single men were too small to allow robust comparisons over short time periods to be carried out, whereas sample sizes for single women were larger as there are more of this group in the population.

Pension Annuities

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many replies were received in the course of the Government's consultation on pension annuities; and how many were in favour of reform. [56414]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

601 responses have been received and are currently receiving careful analysis.

Employment Agencies Act

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he plans to publish draft legislation for new regulations under the Employment Agencies Act 1973 relating to agents for the acting profession and performing arts. [56875]

Alan Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

We will shortly be issuing the revised draft Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations, which will cover the private recruitment industry, including agents acting on behalf of those engaged in the entertainment sector. There will then be a consultation exercise on certain aspects of those regulations.

Correspondence

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the average response time was for responding to departmental correspondence; what percentage of letters took longer than one month for a response; and what percentage took longer than three months for a response in each of the last five years. [37438]

Maria Eagle: Information on correspondence received from all sources across the whole Department is not maintained in the format requested. General information on the volumes of correspondence received and on overall performance across Whitehall is published by the Cabinet Office. The figures up to 2000 were published on 6 April 2001, *Official Report*, columns 324–28W, and on 19 July 2001, *Official Report*, columns 454–56W. The combined

DSS/DWP average response time during 2001 for letters from Members to Ministers was 18 days. 34 per cent. took longer than 20 working days for a response. In DWP only for 2001, the average response time to letters from Members to DWP Ministers was 15 days, and 29 per cent. took longer than 20 working days for a response. The Cabinet Office will be publishing further figures on the volumes and performance on correspondence shortly.

Departmental Report

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when the 2002 departmental report will be published. [49578]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 15 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 774W.

HIV

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will propose amendments to the Liability Discrimination Act 1995 to protect people with HIV from discrimination at the point of diagnosis. [50694]

Maria Eagle: We are considering a number of proposals for changes to the Disability Discrimination Act. We are considering our legislative strategy in the light of responses to the recent consultation on "Towards Equality and Diversity" which concerns implementation of the European Community employment directive.

Jobcentres

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps he plans to take to improve access to jobcentres in rural areas under the new deal arrangements. [50845]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The administration of Jobcentre Plus is a matter for the chief executive, Leigh Lewis. I have asked him to reply to the hon. Member.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Miss Anne McIntosh, dated May 2002:

As Jobcentre Plus is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning the steps to be taken to improve access to jobcentres in rural areas under the New Deal arrangements. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

Jobcentre Plus understands the difficulties that people living in rural areas can face, both in securing employment and gaining access to our services. Staff in rural jobcentres work with clients on an individual basis to explore ways to overcome these problems and will often give advice on either jobsearch or benefits over the telephone. They can offer also postal signing arrangements where that is permissible.

We have also introduced new services which should be particularly useful for our customers in rural areas. "Jobseeker Direct" – on 0845 6060234 – is a telephone jobfinding service available to both unemployed and employed people. They can also look for jobs and learning opportunities on the internet, with our two websites www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk and www.worktrain.gov.uk.

I hope this is helpful.

Direct Bank

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the *(a)* percentage and *(b)* amount of funding that (i) the Government and (ii) the banks will invest to establish the new direct bank. [54511]

Malcolm Wicks: The Government have recently signed contracts with Post Office Ltd. for the provision of the new card account at Post Office. This is a commercial arrangement for the provision of a service and does not constitute direct funding. The precise value of the contracts will depend on the number of card accounts.

The main UK high street banks and the Nationwide Building Society have together agreed to contribute a total of £180 million over five years towards the costs of the new card account at Post Office. They have also agreed to make their introductory bank accounts accessible through post offices.

International Social Security Agreements

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when each international reciprocal social security agreement was entered into; and what the extent of the reciprocity is in each case. [55579]

Maria Eagle: The information on reciprocal social security agreements with other countries is as follows.

The main purpose of such reciprocal agreements is to protect the social security position of workers moving between the two countries during their working lives. They prevent employees, their employers and the self-employed from having to pay social security contributions to both the home state and the state of employment at the same time and ensure that such workers' rights to certain benefits are maintained. They vary to some extent from country to country depending on the nature and scope of the other country's social security scheme. Generally, they cover contributory benefits in respect of the following contingencies: sickness, invalidity, unemployment, retirement, bereavement and industrial injuries. Workers who have contributed to both countries' schemes during their working lives can usually receive an old age pension from each country which reflects the proportionate amount or their insurance in, or contributions to, each country's scheme.

List of current reciprocal social security agreements and the year they came into force

Austria
Barbados—1981 (replaced the 1971 agreement)
Belgium—1992
Bermuda—1958
Canada—1969
Cyprus—1995 (replaced the 1959 agreement)
Denmark—1983 (replaced the 1959 agreement)
Finland—1960
France—1984 (replaced the 1959 agreement)
Germany—1958
Gibraltar—1961
Iceland—1974
Ireland—1985
Isle of Man—1960
Israel—1977 (replaced the 1948 agreement)

Italy—1957
Jamaica—1953
Jersey and Guernsey—1997 (replaced the 1972 agreement)
Luxembourg—1994 (replaced the 1978 agreement)
Malta—1955
Mauritius—1966 (replaced the 1956 agreement)
Netherlands—1981
New Zealand—1955
Norway—1983 (replaced the 1969 agreement)
Philippines—1991 (replaced the 1957 agreement)
Portugal—1989
Spain—1979
Sweden—1975
Switzerland—1988 (replaced the 1956 agreement)
Turkey—1969
USA—1961
Yugoslavia'—1984 (replaced the 1969 agreement)

' Now applies to: the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia-Montenegro—1958), Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Maladministration

Annabelle Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many findings there have been of maladministration by ombudsmen with responsibility for agencies under the remit of his Department since 1997. [56305]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Information on the handling of complaints is set out in tabular form by the parliamentary ombudsman each year as an attachment to his annual report. For those complaints where there was evidence of maladministration which warranted full investigation, the table sets out how many complaints were upheld as being fully or partially justified. The parliamentary ombudsman's annual reports for the period 1997–98 to 2000–01 inclusive are available in the Library and can be viewed on the parliamentary ombudsman's website at www.ombudsman.org.uk/publications.

Pensioners

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many newly qualified pensioners have lost part of their state retirement pension in each of the past five years on account of failure to apply within three months of the qualifying date for first payment; what the total was in *(a)* unpaid pension entitlement and *(b)* discretionary payment of restored pension in cases where administration failure has occurred; and if he will make a statement. [56590]

Mr. McCartney: Because pensioners can elect to defer payments of their pensions for up to five years in order to earn increments which increase the amount payable, information on the number of people who fail to make a claim for state retirement pension within the statutory period is not available.

In a very small number of cases administrative failure causes the late payment of entitlements. Where this is the case extra statutory payments of state retirement pension are paid. Details of payment in the last five years are set out in the table.

Period	*Cases paid*	*Total amount paid (£)*
1997–98'	241	674,776.23
1998–99'	204	513,077.55
1999–2000'	150	347,599.80
2000–01'	291	659,868.56
2001–02'	138	286,233.40

' 12 months April to March

Anglo-Italian Meetings

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on how many occasions in the last six months *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have met their Italian counterparts; and what subjects were discussed. [56891]

Mr. Darling: I met my Italian counterpart, Roberto Maroni, in London on 5 February 2002, when we discussed labour market reforms in the UK and Italy.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to reduce non-attendance at personal capability assessment examinations for incapacity benefit. [57614]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: When people claim incapacity benefits they are normally required to undergo a Personal Capability Assessment carried out by SchlumbergerSema Medical Services on behalf of the DWP. Currently, around 25 per cent. of customers nationally do not attend their appointment, which are arranged by correspondence.

A telephone appointment booking service has been piloted in Derby and Stoke (from October 2001) and in Liverpool (Bootle and Mann Island), Acton and Euston (from February 2002). This has proved very successful in reducing non-attendance, reducing waiting time for customers at medical centres and allowing customers to discuss the PCA process with staff prior to their appointment. As well as providing a better customer service, the new process has improved administration and made better use of doctors' time. We therefore intend to adopt the process nationally by the end of June 2002.

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Derby city council. [57615]

Malcolm Wicks: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's report on Derby city council was published today and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report finds that there are inconsistencies in the way that Derby city council administers benefit. On the one hand, the council gives a high priority to promoting and paying benefit and is commended for these activities. However, local authorities also have a duty to safeguard their activities against fraud, irregularity and corrupt practices. At Derby, BFI finds that the council has neglected counter fraud activity, detecting error and recovering overpaid benefit.

The BFI commends the council for its work on benefits take-up and social policies which support the high level of importance that elected members give to promoting and paying benefit and to providing a high quality customer

service. However, the BFI is extremely concerned that this has been prioritised to the detriment of other responsibilities. Inspectors found the council has created an environment where benefits, overpayments and counter fraud sections have been hindered from focusing on reducing fraud and error.

Management checking was abandoned in August 1999 due to IT problems and as a result there is no assurance on the security on access to benefits.

The report finds that the council has carried out counter fraud activities simply to achieve Weekly Benefits Savings targets, with little commitment to reducing, deterring or eradicating fraud and error. The fraud team has been managed on a part-time basis since September 2000 and little effort has been made to prosecute fraudsters.

The report makes a great number of recommendations to the council to help to raise the standard of both benefits administration and counter fraud work.

HEALTH

Design Champion

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the reasons were for the selection of Lord Hunt of King's Heath as the Department of Health's Design Champion. [47022]

Ms Blears: The Department's design programme "Achieving Excellence in Healthcare Design" was launched by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in November 2001. This programme will be realised by NHS Estates.

My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (the Lord Hunt of Kings Heath) is the Health Minister with direct responsibility for many of NHS Estates' key objectives. He is personally mentoring four schemes at Central Manchester Teaching Hospitals NHS trust, University hospitals Birmingham NHS trust, Walsall hospitals NHS trust and Leicester city west NHS trust.

Homeless People

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of people who are considered homeless have been diagnosed with mental health problems. [56156]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Dr. Evan Harris, dated 16 May 2002:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question concerning the (a) number and (b) percentage of people who are considered homeless have been diagnosed with mental health problems. (56156)

National figures for the number and percentage of people considered homeless who have been diagnosed with mental health problems are not available. However, in 1994 a national survey of mental disorder among homeless people aged 16 to 64 was carried out by ONS (then OPCS) on behalf of the Department of Health. In order to include all groups of homeless people, separate samples were selected from:

hostels (530 people)

private sector leased and short life accommodation (268 people)

people sleeping rough and using nightshelters (187 people) and day centres (181 people).

The attached table gives the prevalence of mental disorder found in the survey among homeless people resident in hostel and private sector leased accommodation. Further details of how disorder was assessed in this survey and the way in which the sample was selected can be found in Gill et al, (1996) Psychiatric morbidity among homeless people, London: HMSO.

Table 1: Prevalence of mental disorder among homeless people in 1994
Great Britain

Percentage assessed with disorder

	Type of disorder				
	Psychotic disorder[1]	*Neurotic disorders*[2]	*Alcohol dependence*	*Drug dependence*[3]	*GHQ12 score*[4] *>=4*
Homeless adults in					
Hostels	8	41	16	11	39
Private sector leased accommodation	2	38	3	7	42
Nightshelters	n/a	n/a	44	29	59
Sleeping rough and using day centres	n/a	n/a	50	24	57

[1] Disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.
[2] Disorders such as depression, generalised anxiety disorders, phobias, etc. (often called common mental disorders).
[3] People were defined as dependent on a drug if they had taken it every day for two weeks or more in the past year, and they had taken the drug more than prescribed, without prescription or to get high.
[4] The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ12) is a short questionnaire designed to detect mental health problems. Comparison between GHQ scores in the samples of residents in hostels and private sector leased accommodation and the measure of neurotic disorders used in this survey showed that a person scoring four or above has a high probability of being assessed as having a neurotic disorder.

Litigation

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases *(a)* his Department and *(b)* its agencies have defended in (i) industrial tribunals and (ii) the courts in each year since 1997; how many were concluded in their favour; and what the total cost to his Department of litigation was in each year. [41112]

Ms Blears: The available information is shown in the table. Detailed information for 1997–99 is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Cases defended by Department and its agencies	Result	Costs (Counsel fees and settlement costs) £
1997		
17	—	—
1998		
31	—	—
1999		
18	—	—
2000		
30	16 concluded in our favour	14,574.00
	14 on-going	19,342.00
2001		
28	12 concluded in our favour	47,656.00
	16 on-going	11,650.00
9,500 part-time pension cases	On-going	—

Notes:

The Department's agencies are Medicines Control Agency, Medical Devices Agency, NHS Pensions Agency, NHS Estates, NHS Purchasing and Supplies Agency. They are not always recorded separately and therefore a split between them cannot be shown.

All figures are for employment tribunal cases and not "the courts".

The costs given relate to settlement costs and counsels' fees.

Cases concluded in our favour are cases that have been dismissed, withdrawn, struck out or settled. The Department chooses to settle in some cases to ensure cost effectiveness. It is not normally for a large sum of money.

The part time pension cases concern issues of equal pay and sex discrimination and they are on-going (commenced in 1995).

New Hospitals

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what new hospital schemes were given the go-ahead in *(a)* 2001 and *(b)* 2002. [47826]

Mr. Hutton: A list of new hospital schemes (with a capital value of £10 million or greater) which have been given the go-ahead in 2001 and 2002 is given below.

Approved to go-ahead under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI):

2001:

University Hospital Birmingham/South Birmingham Mental Health NHS Trusts

Bradford Hospitals NHS Trust

Avon and Western Wiltshire Mental Health NHS Trust

North West London Hospitals NHS Trust

East Kent Hospitals NHS Trust

University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust

Lewisham Hospital NHS Trust

Peterborough Hospitals NHS Trust

Salford Royal Hospitals NHS Trust

Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells/Invicta Community

Pinderfield and Pontefract Hospitals/Wakefield & Pontefract Community/Dewsbury Health Care NHS Trust

Forest Healthcare NHS Trust

Brighton Health Care NHS Trust

United Bristol Healthcare NHS Trust

Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust

Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals NHS Trust

Mid Essex Hospitals NHS Trust

Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust

Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust

North Middlesex Hospitals NHS Trust

North Staffordshire Hospitals NHS Trusts

Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust

St. Helens and Knowsley Hospitals NHS Trust

Walsall Hospitals/Walsall Community Health NHS Trusts

Royal Wolverhampton Hospitals NHS Trust

Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust

Southampton University Hospitals NHS Trust

South Devon Healthcare NHS Trust

Tameside and Glossop Acute Services NHS Trust

Northumberland Mental Health—St. George's Morpeth

Leeds Teaching Hospitals—Wharfedale

The Kingston Hospital NHS Trust

Publicly Funded Schemes

Northern Lincolnshire and Goole Hospitals NHS Trust

Barnet PCT (Edgware Community)

Blackpool Heart Centre

Liverpool Cardio-thoracic Centre

Central Manchester Heart Centre

South Manchester Heart Centre

Southampton Cardio-thoracic Centre

Derriford Heart Centre, Plymouth

2002

Brighton Healthcare NHS Trust—Royal Alexandra Hospital for sick children.

St. Ebba's Hospital, Epsom

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has for the residual mental health service on the St. Ebba's hospital site in Epsom; [47501]

(2) if he will build a village community on the St. Ebba's site for people with learning disabilities; [47504]

(3) what account he has taken of the proposals put by members of the St. Ebba's parents and relatives group since the end of the public inquiry in its future plans for the site; and if he will make a statement. [47502]

Ms Blears: Surrey Oaklands national health service trust has plans for a total of 55 residents to be cared for on the reconfigured site with a further six people to be cared for in an adjacent home with easy access to on-site facilities.

Three homes providing continuing care are already open. The proposals for the further use of the St. Ebba's site are still under development. Current proposals envisaged that all building work should be completed and the remaining accommodation available for occupation by early 2004. The St. Ebba's parents and relatives group has been fully involved in all stages of the planning process.

PFI

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total savings to public funds of the Private Finance Initiative contract for the adult acute psychiatric unit reprovision for the Thames Gateway NHS trust by comparison with a non-private finance initiative alternative. [49518]

Mr. Hutton: The business case justifying the individual schemes estimated the net savings in present value terms (i.e. all future costs and benefits discounted to their present values) compared with publicly funding the scheme as follows:

Net present costs of PSC v PFI option

	Thames Gateway NHS trust
PFI (£000)	54,245
Public (£000)	55,778
Savings in net present value terms (£000)	1,533
Percentage difference	2.75

Primary Care Trusts

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what his estimate is of delays in PCT investment due to the need to obtain private sector partners; and if he will make a statement; [48872]

(2) if he will provide for 2002–03 his estimate of investment by primary care trusts via *(a)* NHS LIFT involving private sector partners, *(b)* direct NHS sources and *(c)* other sources; what is the average amount for each category, per PCT; and if he will make a statement; [48870]

(3) what arrangements he has put in place to avoid variations in LIFT funding to PCTs because of differences in access to private sector partners; and if he will make a statement. [48871]

Mr. Hutton: The NHS Local Improvement Finance Trust (NHS LIFT) initiative was announced in the NHS Plan. The initiative aims to deliver a step change in the quality of the primary care estate. LIFT's initial focus has been to encourage investment in those parts of the country—such as inner cities—where primary care services are in most need of improvement.

In February 2001, the Department prioritised an initial six LIFT schemes, and in January 2002 a further 12 LIFT schemes were identified. We anticipate approving a third wave of schemes later this year.

The Department has earmarked a total of £195 million (over the current spending review period) to support localities develop their LIFT schemes. All LIFT localities will receive significant levels of financial assistance. The level of this funding is dependent on a number of local factors such as size of the scheme.

The Department is also providing technical assistance to help PCTs develop their investment proposals, and is confident that all localities will attract private partners offering affordable solutions.

Two of the first wave LIFT schemes (east London and the City and Camden and Islington) recently issued tender documentation. The value of the initial investment requirement in east London and the City is £62.5 million, and in Camden and Islington is £17 million.

Once fully established locally, LIFT will help deliver quicker across the piece solutions for primary care. The LIFT approach enables the needs of the whole locality to be considered in a systematic manner, and aims to deliver speedier solutions by using a standardised approach to procurement.

Riding for the Disabled Association

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the timetable for finalising agreement with the Epsom Riding for the Disabled Association for the sale of land in Epsom. [50689]

Ms Blears: I am pleased to be able to advise that the terms discussed between the district valuer and the Epsom Riding for the Disabled Group have been approved and a draft contract for sale is being prepared.

Health Care International

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients of English health authorities were treated in the last year at Health Care International at Clydebank. [52558]

Mr. Hutton: We are aware that a number of national health service patients from the west midlands and north-west of England have been treated in the last year at the Health Care International medical centre in Clydebank, but we do not hold comprehensive information centrally on the number of NHS patients treated at this, or any other, independent sector hospital in the UK.

Consultants

Clive Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to publish performance statistics for individual consultants for work carried out in *(a)* the NHS and *(b)* the private sector; and if he will make a statement. [52911]

Ms Blears: The Government agreed with the Bristol inquiry recommendation that patients and the public must be able to obtain information as to the relative performance of the trust and the services and the consultant units within the trust (recommendation 155 of the report of the public inquiry into children's heart surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary 1984–1995).

The Government made a further commitment that the Department would publish information on individual consultants. As a first step the Department will be publishing outcomes from coronary artery bypass graft operations by individual surgeon. Data collection started on 1 April 2002 and the first set of data will be published in 2004.

The Department is working with the medical profession to extend the number and range of specialities where

robust, rigorous and risk-adjusted information on both the consultant's and the unit's comparative performance can be published.

On 1 April this year, the National Care Standards Commission took over responsibility for the regulation of independent health care providers, including private hospitals. Data on key clinical indicators that are a reflection on the quality of care received by a patient will be collected by inspection teams, and this will continue when the Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection takes over the regulatory system. The approaches to data collection will be tested to ensure that it is robust before publishing the results. It is likely that in due course, data on clinical performance will be published in line with that on national health service hospitals.

Devolution

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what meetings he has initiated with Health Ministers from devolved Administrations in the last two years. [52476]

Ms Blears: Ministers at the Department have met Ministers from the devolved Administrations on a number of occasions over the past two years. The full Joint Ministerial Committee on Health first met in April 2000 and met a further three times that year and once in 2001. There are also other multilateral meetings held regularly both at ministerial and official level, such as the Four Ways meeting of Health Ministers which last took place in January of this year.

NHS Direct

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many out-of-hours services have opted out of NHS Direct in the past 12 months. [53227]

Ms Blears: No out-of-hours providers have opted out of NHS Direct in the past 12 months.

Intensive Care Beds

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many intensive care beds were counted in the critical care census in each census since it began in 1999; and whether these beds were recorded as staffed and in use. [53416]

Ms Blears: I would refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on 23 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 244W. The number of critical care beds reported on each of the census days is the number staffed and available for the use of critically ill patients, or are actually being used, by critically ill patients on that day.

MLX 282 Consultation Document

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many responses were received by the Medicines Control Agency in response to the MLX 282 consultation document issued on 13 February; what percentage were in favour of the measures proposed; and how many and what percentage were from pharmaceutical companies. [53351]

Ms Blears: MLX 282 is a consultation document on proposals from the European Commission to amend the body of EC legislation that regulates medicinal products for human use. The proposals for reform are wide-ranging.

MLX 282 was issued on 13 February 2002 by the Medicines Control Agency (MCA), inviting views, to 247 recipients including trade associations representing the pharmaceutical and related industries, practitioners' representative bodies and patient groups. Individual pharmaceutical companies were not approached. The formal consultation period ended on 10 May 2002.

An advertisement placed in a national daily newspaper on Tuesday 23 April has generated a number of identical e-mail responses expressing reservations about a possible increase in the regulation of the natural health therapies sector at the EU and national level. In addition the MCA has so far received 12 formal responses to the consultation. 9 of those focused on and opposed the possible increase in the regulation of the natural health therapies sector.

Natural Health Therapies

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the adoption of EU Directive 2001/83/EC into UK law and its impact on the use of natural health therapies. [53350]

Ms Blears: The European Commission has proposed amendments to EU Directive 2001/83/EC which forms part of the body of EC legislation which regulates medicinal products for human use. The proposed amendments are currently being discussed by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. Once adopted by the Council of Ministers they will have to be transposed into UK law.

The medicines legislation currently applies only to licensed medicinal products. However, the Commission's proposed amendments, if adopted as drafted, will widen the definition of a medicine and bring more products within the scope of medicines legislation.

The UK is firmly opposed to this proposal and is resisting it strongly in the negotiations.

Maintenance Costs

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the backlog maintenance cost to each estate code B was in *(a)* England and *(b)* each NHS region in the most recent year for which figures are available indicating how much is attributable to (i) fire safety and (ii) other safety costs. [53684]

Ms Blears: Backlog maintenance costs to achieve estate code condition B for fire safety and health and safety is collected annually via the estate returns information collection system managed by National Health Service Estates.

The following table, based on best available data, shows total backlog maintenance costs for fire safety and health and safety reported by NHS trusts in England for the most recent year, 2000–01, broken down by NHS regions.

2000–01

£000

Region	*Cost to achieve fire safety estate code condition B*	*Cost to achieve health and safety estate code condition B*
Northern and Yorkshire	33,333	38,412
Trent	45,781	35,317
Eastern	15,506	23,925
London	70,683	110,878
South-eastern	24,688	47,928
South-west	9,155	26,844
West midlands	18,098	38,857
North-west	27,963	40,508
Total for England	245,206	362,670

NHS Dentistry

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what incentives his Department offers to keep dentists in NHS practices. [53710]

Ms Blears: Over the last 18 months we have spent £100 million on modernising national health service dentistry. £10 million of this was for the dental care development fund and the dentistry action plan fund to support local plans to improve access. This money enables health authorities to assist dentists seeking to set up new practices and to expand and modernise existing ones. Furthermore, the £35 million modernisation fund provided grants for dentists to improve facilities.

Additionally, the commitment payment scheme, introduced from April 1999, provides incentive payments to dentists, depending on how much NHS work they undertake. From April 2002, the scheme was extended to include dentists who have five years or more service in the NHS. Officials continue to work with the profession to see how the scheme might be strengthened in the future. The Department is also undertaking work with the profession and other stakeholders through the modernising project "Options for Change", to test out new methods of providing NHS dentistry.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimates he has made of the leaving rate of dentists from NHS to private practices in the last three years. [53709]

Ms Blears: Very few dentists leave the general dental service (GDS) totally to practice privately. However, dentists in the GDS can vary their level of commitment to the GDS, for example by increasing the amount of their private work.

The number of dentists leaving the GDS is shown in the table for the years 1998–99 to 2000–01 for England together with the percentages of the number of dentists at the beginning of the year.

The number of leavers covers all reasons for leaving the GDS including retirement from dental work and dentists taking career breaks. These figures are inflated by the transfer of some dentists from the GDS to some personal dental service pilots.

General dental service (GDS): number of dentists who left the GDS and percentage of principal and total dentists from 1998–99 to 2000–01

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Number of leavers			
Principals	761	780	875
Assistants	106	157	181
Vocational dental practitioners	105	95	136
All dentists	972	1,032	1,192
Leavers as percentage of dentist number at beginning of year (per cent.)			
Principals	5	5	5
All dentists	6	6	7

Carson Report

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the recommendations of the Carson report will be implemented by 2004; and if he will make a statement. [54269]

Mr. Hutton: The Government accepted the recommendations of the Carson Report—"Raising Standards for Patients. New partnerships in Out-of-Hours Care"—which was published in October 2000. A comprehensive work programme is in place to implement these by 2004 in line with the commitments set out in the NHS Plan.

Alcohol (Women)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of women were recorded as being dependent on alcohol in each of the last five years. [54115]

Ms Blears: The Office for National Statistics estimated that in Great Britain in 2000, 2.9 per cent. of women aged 16 to 74 had some degree of dependence on alcohol: mild or severe dependence was found in 1.0 per cent. (Psychiatric Morbidity Among Adults Living in Private Households, 2000, published by the Stationery Office, London, 2001, ISBN 0 11 621480 5). The prevalence of alcohol dependence in the six months before interview was assessed using the Severity of Alcohol Dependence questionnaire (SAD-Q). Further information is given in the published report, which can be found at www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme-health/psychmorb.pdf.

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the percentage of women aged between 16 and 24 years who drank more than the recommended daily benchmarks in *(a)* the most recent year for which figures are available and *(b)* each of the last five years. [54114]

Ms Blears: The information available is given in the table:

Alcohol consumption last week, by women aged 16 to 24—Great Britain, 1998, 2000

	1998	*2000*
Percentage who drank more than 3 units on at least one day last week	42	42
Base	809	814

Notes:
1. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole figure.
2. The percentages are based on weighted data; the bases are unweighted numbers.

Source:
Office for National Statistics General Household Survey

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the percentage of women who *(a)* drank more than the recommended daily benchmarks at least once a week and *(b)* drank more than twice the recommended daily benchmarks at least once a week in each of the last five years, including the most recent year for which figures are available. [54113]

Ms Blears: The information available is shown in the table:

Women aged 16 by the maximum daily amount drunk last week—Great Britain, 1998, 2000

Year	1998	2000
More than 3 up to 6 units	21	23
More than 6 units	8	10
Base	7,821	7,491

Notes:
1. The percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole figure.
Source:
Office for National Statistics General Household Survey

Alcohol

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many persons died primarily as a result of the use of alcohol in the last year for which figures are available. [54214]

Ms Blears: Information collected centrally about the cause of deaths does not systematically record whether a death is attributable to alcohol misuse. A number of health and lifestyle factors can contribute to diseases such as cancer, stroke and coronary heart disease, and it can be difficult to isolate alcohol consumption as the most important of these factors.

A research review commissioned by the Department in 1997 concluded that between 5,000 and 40,000 deaths are attributable to alcohol misuse each year in England and Wales.

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have been treated by the NHS for alcohol-related illness in *(a)* England and *(b)* each region in each of the last five years. [54215]

Ms Blears: The number of admissions for alcohol-related illnesses in England and the regions are shown in the table.

Admissions for alcohol-related disorders (ICD10 codes F10, K70, T51) by regional office of treatment, NHS hospitals, England 1996–97 to 2000–01

Regional office	Number
1996–97	
Northern and Yorkshire	7,286
Trent	3,860
Anglia and Oxford	2,712
North Thames	4,561
South Thames	5,437
South and West	4,594
West Midlands	5,519
North-west	8,697
Total	42,665
1997–98	
Northern and Yorkshire	7,234
Trent	4,707
Anglia and Oxford	3,025
North Thames	5,516
South Thames	6,240
South and West	4,742
West Midlands	5,710
North-west	8,547
Not known	7
Total	45,727
1998–99	
Northern and Yorkshire	7,023
Trent	4,263
Anglia and Oxford	2,916
North Thames	5,394
South Thames	5,842
South and West	4,918
West Midlands	5,160
North-west	7,813
Total	43,329
1999–2000	
Northern and Yorkshire	7,006
Trent	4,134
West Midlands	5,200
North-west	8,100
Eastern	3,110
London	7,666
South-east	5,433
South-west	3,764
Total	44,412
2000–01	
Northern and Yorkshire	6,413
Trent	3,850
West Midlands	4,671
North-west	7,810
Eastern	2,812
London	5,358
South-east	4,918
South-west	3,268
Total	39,100

Notes:
Data in this table are adjusted for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data, except for 2000–01 which are not yet adjusted for shortfalls.
Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics (HES), Department of Health

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the cost to the NHS of treating alcohol-related illness in each of the last five years. [54191]

Ms Blears: The information available is shown in the table.

Estimated cost of alcohol misuse to the NHS in England and Wales, 1999

	£ million
In-patient costs—direct alcohol diagnosis	52
In-patient costs—other alcohol related diagnosis	152
General practice costs	4
Total	207

Source:
Godfrey, C., Harman, G.: Changing the social costs of alcohol. Final report to the AERC. York: Centre for Health Economics, university of York, 1994 (updated by Department of Health (EOR)).

Portsmouth Hospital Trust

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the new system of management at Portsmouth hospital trust will be in place; what other assistance the Department is giving to the trust; and if he will make a statement. [54250]

Ms Blears: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 8 May 2002 that the franchise for Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust had been awarded to Mr. Alan Bedford. The Department is supporting the trust through the franchising process.

Operating Theatres

Alistair Burt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to require existing hospitals with only one operating theatre to upgrade by the addition of extra theatres; and if he will make a statement. [54809]

Mr. Hutton: We have no plans to require all national health service hospitals with only one operating theatre to purchase additional theatre space. Capacity planning is a matter for local resolution.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many complaints he has received in the latest 12 months for which figures are available from medically qualified NHS personnel concerning the cleanliness of operating theatres; and if he will make a statement. [51305]

Ms Blears: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Consultant Surgeons

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the position of consultant surgeons on 10/11 contracts with the NHS; and what the average time is they spend personally undertaking operations and supervising others in undertaking this work. [54713]

Mr. Hutton: Currently a consultant on a maximum part-time contract foregoes one eleventh of national health service salary in return for the lifting of restriction on private practice earnings.

The Department does not collect data on the amount of time consultants spend undertaking operations or supervising others in doing that work. The annual job planning review provides the basis for the framework of contractual obligations. Job plans cover all aspects of a consultant's practice in the NHS and set out clearly the consultant's time and service commitments. Within the consultant contract negotiations we are seeking to provide a clearer framework in which decisions can be made and agreement reached between consultants and employers about the time to be spent on different categories of activity.

Treatment Abroad

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have been treated overseas at the expense of the NHS in the past six months. [54895]

Mr. Hutton: 190 national health service patients have travelled overseas to receive treatment since January 18 under the pilot scheme to refer NHS patients overseas.

Between 1 November 2001 and 30 April 2002, 534 applications were approved for referral of patients specifically for treatment in another European Economic Area member state of pre-existing conditions under the E112 arrangements contained in regulation (EEC) 1408/71. This regulation also allows treatments to be provided in other member states at UK expense in other circumstances, e.g. immediately necessary care for temporary visitors. Numbers of treatments so provided are not available but the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), gave information on costs in her reply to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on 25 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 966W.

Correspondence

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Wiggin) will receive a response to his letter of 24 January, about the distribution of funds raised from the sale of surplus hospital sites. [54582]

Ms Blears: The Department has no record of receiving this correspondence. The Department's ministerial correspondence unit has contacted the hon. Member's office for a copy of this correspondence.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter of 24 October 2001 from the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) concerning Mr. Stubbins and pneumococcal vaccination (ref: POH (3)5499/13); when he received *(a)* a second copy of the correspondence which was faxed to his Department on 17 January and *(b)* a reminder letter which was sent to his Department on 28 March; and if he will make a statement as to the cause of the delay. [56496]

Yvette Cooper: A reply was sent on 15 May. In my letter to the hon. Member, I apologised for the delay in responding. The delay was affected by clarification that I had asked from officials on the timing of consideration by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

Criminal Offences

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many criminal offences have been *(a)* created and *(b)* abolished by his Department since 1997. [55422]

Ms Blears: In relation to countering fraud in the national health service, section 39 of the Health Act 1999 introduced a new specific criminal offence for evasion of NHS charges. The offence attracts a fine, on conviction of up to £2,500. This is the first time that legislation has been introduced to create a criminal offence for people who fail to pay any amount in respect of NHS charges or receive a payment or benefit towards the cost of NHS charges or services to which they are not entitled.

No offences in relation to countering fraud in the NHS have been abolished.

Hepatitis C

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients received drug therapy on the NHS for infection with hepatitis C in each of the last five years. [56333]

Yvette Cooper: The Department does not hold information centrally on the number of patients who have received treatment for hepatitis C infection.

Care Homes

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has commissioned into the *(a)* short, *(b)* medium and *(c)* long-term future of (i) the residential care home sector, (ii) the nursing home sector and (iii) dual registered care homes. [56591]

Jacqui Smith: The Department has commissioned the personal social services research unit to carry out research into the future of the care home sector. Emerging findings from this work can be found on the website of the University of Kent at Canterbury (www.ukc.ac.uk/PSSRU).

Anti-psychotic Drugs

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the oral statement by the Secretary of State for Health of 13 February 2002, *Official Report*, column 112WH, if he has completed consideration of research on anti-psychotic drugs in different care settings and the recommendation to ask the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to produce guidance on the use of such drugs for older people. [56631]

Jacqui Smith: Outline proposals for research to support the development of the national service framework for older people and older people's treatment and care, including research proposals on prescribing of anti-psychotic medication, were received in March 2002. Those proposals are currently being short-listed prior to a call for full research proposals being requested. These will be peer reviewed before final decisions which are expected later this year.

Consideration is still being given to the inclusion of a clinical guideline on the management of dementia, including the use of anti-psychotic medication in older people within the National Institute for Clinical Excellence's work programme.

Children's Diets

Mr. Hendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent research his Department has carried out into potential links between ADHD in children and food supplements, food colouring and mineral deficiencies; [55046]

(2) what recent research his Department has carried out into potential links between behavioural problems among children at school and food supplements, food colouring and mineral deficiencies. [55047]

Yvette Cooper: This is a matter for the Food Standards Agency (FSA). The FSA is aware of consumers' concerns about the possible effects of colours and other additives in food on some children. The FSA spends about £800,000 a year looking at the general area of food intolerance. This includes a project on food additives and child behaviour that has been submitted for publication and is currently undergoing peer review. In July 2000, the Independent Expert Committee, the committee on toxicity which advises the FSA, published its review of the scientific evidence on adverse reactions to food. It concluded that most adverse reactions are to natural foods rather than synthetic additives. It noted that there has been weak but conflicting evidence for an association between particular food additives and a specific condition known as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children. The committee concluded that in general

> "some dietary changes, not necessarily the same for all children, could reduce problem behaviour in at least a few children with ADHD".

Independent experts agree that the link between food additives and adverse effects on behaviour is not conclusive and that a lot more research is required in this area. The FSA will review new information on the subject of ADHD and any links it may have with food supplements, food colouring and mineral deficiencies.

Mr. Hendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children were diagnosed with ADHD in each of the past 10 years. [55049]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not collected centrally. The prevalence of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder of all types is estimated at around 5 per cent. of school-aged children, approximately 345,000 six to 16-year-olds in England.

General Practitioners

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if it is his policy under the Government's new proposals for out-of-hours medical cover that general practitioners will be able to conduct their own out-of-hours cover if they so wish. [55050]

Mr. Hutton: Yes.

Temporary Staff

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost to his Department was of employing staff in *(a)* London and *(b)* the south east from employment agencies in each year since 1997. [56511]

Ms Blears: The table shows the cost of employing agency staff in the Department. The figures are for the total spend for each financial year as we are unable to extract the London and south east spend from the total.

£

	Contract/agency staff	*Labour supply contract*
2001–02	6,596,040.33	576,360.04
2000–01	5,524,667.11	640,851.49
1999–00	6,811,808.23	558,832.73
1998–99	6,198,276.97	430,882.97
1997–98	1,726,246.57	492,827.22

Mobile Phone Masts

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will next consider proposals for research projects on mobile phone masts. [57096]

Yvette Cooper: The independent expert group on mobile phones (the Stewart Group) was set up to investigate the public health implications of mobile phone technologies. Their report was published in May 2000 and included a recommendation to set up a substantial research programme. This programme, jointly funded by government and industry, was announced in December 2000 and was launched at a public meeting in February 2001. The research is being undertaken under the direction of an independent programme management committee under the chairmanship of Sir William Stewart. The selection and management of studies is solely in the hands of this committee with additional scientific advice from other experts in the relevant field.

There have been two invitations for research applications, in February and December 2001, and research is now under way in the first tranche of projects. Details of this research are given on the mobile telecommunications health research programme's (MTHR) website at www.mthr.org.uk Shortlisted proposals submitted to the second invitation are currently under consideration by the programme management committee.

The aim of the second call was to extend the range of research being carried out under the aegis of the MTHR programme and some of the proposals are of direct relevance to exposures to radio frequency (RF) radiation from mobile phone masts. However the emphasis of the research, both funded and submitted, has been on mobile phone handsets rather than masts because localised exposures of people using phones are in general appreciably higher than exposures to the whole body from masts. In practice many of the experimental studies on hand sets will also be valuable in providing evidence on any possible effects on people of exposures to RF radiation from masts.

Anglo-Italian Meetings

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on how many occasions in the last six months *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have met their Italian counterparts; and what subjects were discussed. [56893]

Ms Blears: There have been no such meetings with Ministers or any record of meetings with officials.

Shellfish Hygiene

Richard Younger-Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to meet the European Commission's Health and Consumer Protection Directorate when it visits the United Kingdom to discuss shellfish hygiene. [55118]

Yvette Cooper: I have no plans to meet the inspection team. Officials of the Food Standards Agency will co-ordinate the visit.

Mount Vernon Hospital

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to establish a diagnostic and treatment centre at Mount Vernon Hospital; [48896]

(2) what plans he has to modernise the *(a)* in-patient and *(b)* out-patient facilities at Mount Vernon Hospital; [48895]

(3) what plans he has to develop new services at the Mount Vernon Hospital site. [48903]

Mr. Hutton: The Hillingdon Hospital Trust has recently submitted a strategic outline case for modernising the Mount Vernon site to the Directorate of Health and Social Care—London for London and the case is currently under evaluation. The development would provide a new ambulatory diagnostic and treatment centre with strong community links. In planning the diagnostic and treatment centre, the trust aims to work with Hillingdon Primary Care Trust in order to determine what additional services could be provided on the site but as yet these have not been firmly established.

Committee Mandates

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the mandate of the Advisory Committee on Medical Devices is; how many times it has met over the last 12 months; what the UK representation on it is; what the annual cost of its work is to public funds; if he will list the items currently under its consideration; if he will take steps to increase its accountability and transparency to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [55357]

Ms Blears: The terms of reference of the committee on the safety of devices (CSD) is

"To give advice on a wide range of device-related initiatives in order to support the work of Ministers and the Medical Devices Agency (MDA) and in particular the agency's objectives in helping health care professionals deliver high standards of care to patients in relation to medical devices".

The committee has met three times since it was established in April 2001, consisting of:

Mr. John Williams OBE, Chairman, Consultant Maxillofacial Surgeon, St Richard's Hospital, Chichester

Professor Peter Bell, Professor of Surgery, University of Leicester

Dr. Anna-Maria Belli, Consultant Radiologist, St George's Hospital, Tooting

Mr. Peter Burdett-Smith, Consultant Emergency Physician, Royal Liverpool University Hospital

Dr. Thomas Clutton-Brock, Senior Lecturer in Anaesthesia and Intensive Care, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham

Mrs. Gurdashan Gill, Lay Member, Wolverhampton

Dr. Helen Grant, University Lecturer, Bioengineering Unit, Strathclyde University, Glasgow

Ms Karen Harper, Nurse Manager, Birmingham Children's Hospital

Dr. Julie Kent, Lay Member, Bath

Dr. Imad Al-Khawaja, Consultant in Rehabilitation Medicine, Sussex Rehabilitation Centre

Mrs. Maxine Kinder, Practice Nurse Manager, Queensway Surgery, Southend-on-Sea

Dr. Julian Minns, Consultant Clinical Scientist, Dryburn Hospital, Durham

Professor James Nixon, Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery, Queen's University, Belfast

Mr. Peter O'Donovan, Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, Bradford Royal Infirmary

Dr. John Perrins, Consultant Cardiologist, Leeds General Infirmary

Dr. Geoffrey Ridgway, Consultant Microbiologist, University College London Hospitals

Professor Elizabeth Russell CBE, Emeritus Professor of Social Medicine, University of Aberdeen

Dr. Charles Sears, General Practitioner, Grove House Surgery, Wiltshire

Professor David Sharpe, Professor of Plastic Surgery, University of Bradford

Mr. Arvind Singh, Consultant Eye Surgeon and Clinical Director, Ayr Hospital

Miss Carol Stopp, Senior Nurse, Great Ormond Street, London

Dr. Gary Thorpe, Biochemistry Director, Wolfson Applied Technology Laboratory, University of Birmingham

Dr. John Turney, Consultant Physician, Leeds General Infirmary

Mr. David Watkins, Dental Practitioner, Norfolk

Professor David Whitney, Chief Executive of Central Sheffield University Hospital Trust.

Observers from the devolved administrations also attend the meetings.

Items which have been considered are included in the minutes of the CSD meetings which are held on the Medical Devices Agency's website www medical-devices.gov.uk.

Two sub-committees have been established. One to consider the format and content of MDA's advisory notices. The other to audit MDA's clinical investigation system. There is also a series of liaison meetings with the Association for British Health Care Industries.

Members are paid travel and subsistence expenses only. The total cost of these since the Committee's establishment is £10,208.35

An annual report of the committee's work will be included in the annual report and accounts of the MDA, which will be presented to Parliament. To comply with the Freedom of Information Act a CSD publication scheme will be in place by November 2002. This will be available on MDA's web-site.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 385**

SESSION 2001–2002

7th May—16th May 2002

Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

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Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
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- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
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- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
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Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
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Guidance on headings

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- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
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  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
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  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
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